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Federal Hill House: Its Place in Providence and the Settlement Movement

J. ELLYN DES JARDINS

In 1917 settlement worker Grace Sherwood recounted the story of an Italian couple, Annunzia and Pietro, who had just come to Providence from southern Italy:

In a measure Annunzia was satisfied, busy with the problems of adapting American foodstuffs for Pietro's meals, crocheting eternally in the spare moments, harking to the old wives tales, and dreaming her dreams of the Madonna. . . . She was not unhappy, but outside the narrow circle of those who had come from her home province she knew no one. And these Americans! Who are they? Why did they not speak to her?

Luckily for Annunzia, said Sherwood, a "friendly visitor" from Federal Hill House, Ada Hartzell, came to the tenement to teach Annunzia's friend Mariana how to cook American food, and soon Annunzia befriended Hartzell as well. Hartzell and others visited Annunzia regularly, advising her on how to clean her home and care for her baby. They showed her how to dress the infant so as not to constrict him, and they taught her how to prepare his meals. They invited her to get the milk they supplied at their settlement house, milk that was fresher than the milk she had been feeding her family. Annunzia appreciated the kindness of these women, but she remained perplexed. Why were they so kind to her?

—And why do you do all this?

—Because we want to be your friend and neighbor, and have you come to us whenever you do not understand the things we do in America.

. . . It was much feared that [Annunzia] kept Pietro awake half that night with her delight in the discovery of the new house and her new friends. . . .

—Whenever you do not understand, Pietro, go to the little house and my friend will tell you.

And she laughed softly for pure joy.¹

Sherwood's story is typical of those told among the growing ranks of settlement workers in American cities during the early years of the twentieth century. The American settlement movement had begun a generation earlier, when Jane Addams, Robert A. Woods, Mary Simkhovich, Vida Scudder, and other Americans observed the methods of workers at the Toynbee Hall settlement in London and theorized that similar methods might be attempted in large industrial cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York. The ideology of settlement work that these reformers advanced ran counter to the class-conscious "philanthropic" philosophies of nineteenth-century poor relief.² As the movement continued into the twentieth century, a second wave of settlement work occurred. Reformers in medium-sized industrial cities like Detroit, Hartford, and Providence began to take notice of the poverty suffered among their immigrant workers, and they established settlements in ethnic neighborhoods to rival those found in the larger urban centers. This study will examine the settlement

An immigrant mother and child at the refuse dump on West Exchange Street, Providence, circa 1903. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 18).

J. Ellyn Des Jardins is a doctoral candidate in history at Brown University.

work undertaken during this second wave in one such neighborhood, the Federal Hill section of Providence.

As elsewhere, settlement work in Providence followed, and sometimes overlapped, philanthropic and working girls' club movements for the working poor. These movements all shared certain distinct similarities because of their common middle-class orientation, Protestant and often nativist outlooks that colored their assumptions about the poor. Nonetheless, significant changes did occur in Providence's poor-relief organizations as increasing numbers of immigrant poor caused old philosophies and methods to be questioned. These changes were not abrupt, nor did they all occur completely. At Federal Hill House, the focus of this study, change was a gradual, uneven process. Although 1916 may be taken as the approximate date when Federal Hill House embraced settlement philosophies, its workers referred to it as a settlement much earlier, and it retained residues of older philosophies and methods well beyond that time. Like other Providence institutions, Federal Hill House has commonly been called a settlement, without regard for the differences between the settlement concept and other kinds of social reform.³ This study will attempt to show how the ideology of the settlement movement, as developed by reformers in the larger American cities, can provide useful criteria for making such distinctions.



To understand the emergence of the settlement movement in Providence, it is necessary to consider the system of middle-class philanthropy against which it reacted. Like most medium-sized cities at the end of the nineteenth century, Providence had its share of philanthropic organizations. Some of these were organized through religious institutions, others by ethnic groups; some championed particular causes, such as the Charitable Fuel Society or the Home for Aged Women.⁴ In all, Providence philanthropists created hundreds of organizations with dozens of different objectives, and it is therefore difficult to characterize philanthropy at the turn of the century in comprehensive terms. Nevertheless, it is clear that some of the basic tenets of poor relief reflected distinctively middle-class assumptions about poverty, and that these assumptions shaped the ways that poverty was combated.

As John Gilkeson has shown in his *Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940*, philanthropy in nineteenth-century Providence—as in nineteenth-century America generally—grew largely out of middle-class benevolence work and was designed to aid working-class people of lesser means and, presumably, lesser virtue. The city's philanthropists believed that poverty resulted from flaws in an individual's moral character, and that these flaws could be corrected through adherence to middle-class moral lessons in propriety, temperance, and the Protestant work ethic. The "friendly visitors" who canvassed poor areas for organizations like the Providence Aid Society determined who was morally redeemable, and thus among the "deserving poor"; visiting the homes of relief seekers, they scrutinized living conditions and habits and granted relief accordingly.⁵ The middle-class view that destitution was a symptom of idleness or deficient morality also resulted in an insistence that relief be granted only in exchange for labor. The destitute men who were assisted at the Providence Charity Building, for example, were required to perform work for the city. "Very few bummers or vagrants have been fed," the city's Poor Department reported in 1878, "the idea of labor

evidently having deterred them.”⁶ In 1909 Mary Conyngton of Brown University maintained that “continuous help is given [by the city] only in cases of families where the natural breadwinner is dead or permanently disabled.”⁷

This insistence on helping only deserving poor created a heated debate about “outside” relief, the aid given by individuals or independent groups without being funneled through the poorhouses and other charitable institutions of the city.⁸ In 1892 the Providence Society for Organizing Charity was formed to coordinate the relief efforts of the city’s charities, benevolent societies, churches, and synagogues and to minimize the possibility of organizations duplicating one another’s work.⁹ In centralizing Providence poor relief, philanthropists not only created an instrument for limiting relief to worthy poor but also turned poor relief into a massive, citywide undertaking.

Perceiving themselves as judges of good character, middle-class philanthropists saw themselves as authoritative voices of morality as well. While spreading alms, charity workers preached middle-class notions of cleanliness, industriousness, nutrition, and propriety. “Require of each beneficiary abstinence from intoxicating liquors,” the Providence Aid Society instructed its visitors. When providing food for the needy, visitors selected items from one of two menus, basing their choices on the presumed nutritional needs of their beneficiaries, without any regard for the beneficiaries’ preferences.¹⁰ Throughout the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth, the vast majority of philanthropic field-workers were married women, who, in their class-assigned domestic roles, were likely to have grown accustomed to their duties as moral guardians. For these women, charity work may well have seemed a natural extension of their roles as middle-class mothers. “Providence seems to have ordained woman as a messenger of kindness and a dispenser of charity,” a philanthropist declared in a local newspaper in 1877.¹¹ This view was typified by the Bethany Home, a “temporary home for respectable women,” which directed the matrons on its staff “to establish and maintain a healthful physical, social, and spiritual home life” for the women who boarded there.¹²

Although middle-class married women did not ordinarily work outside the home, the nature of philanthropic work allowed it to fit neatly into the more acceptable category of “volunteer” or “nonprofessional” benevolence work. Thus the Rhode Island Nursery Association for Homeless Infants was directed completely by women, and twenty-seven of the thirty directors on its board in 1893 were married.¹³ Because volunteerism of this sort was considered an extension of women’s natural benevolence and nurturing, work training was rarely offered. As well-to-do volunteers, few required wages for their work; the only women who were paid were those who took up residence as nurses or matrons. Compared to what her few male counterparts were paid, a matron’s wages were meager. In 1896 the live-in matron at the Rhode Island Nursery received an annual salary of \$178.25, which could not have covered her expenses had she lived on her own.¹⁴

Philanthropic work in Providence during the early years of the twentieth century had changed little from what it had been during the nineteenth century, except in one major way: new strategies of poor relief had been devised to deal with the increasing population of immigrants who were settling in the city. The immigration of southern and eastern Europeans—most notably southern Italians—would cause the Society for Organizing Charity to develop new methods of

relief tailored to the needs of these newcomers. The Immigrant Education Bureau, founded by the Union for Christian Work in 1911, dedicated its efforts specifically to this new surge of immigrants in Providence. Recognizing that these immigrants needed assistance almost immediately, bureau workers met them at dockside. According to a 1913 report,

Providence presents the problem of being a port of entry without an immigrant station. . . . Among those released after examination by government officials, we frequently found large families with small children, while waiting for their baggage to be examined, subjected to inclement weather and kept without food for many hours, in a large open shed, which at first had neither heating nor lighting. . . . Circulars of information in the foreign languages have been distributed, telling the immigrants of our willingness to direct them to their proper destinations.¹⁵

Having tended to the immigrants' immediate needs at the port of entry, bureau workers set about preaching the importance of middle-class standards of virtue and industry, couching their lessons in terms of "good citizenship" and "mandatory Americanization." According to these exhortations, good citizenship required adherence to a middle-class work ethic and standard of propriety. Immigrants were inundated with information about American schools and other institutions, and they were urged to attend evening school to learn the English language and American culture. They were also warned that the law required them to enroll their children in school. Carrying out a bureau-created program called "children tracing," volunteers recorded the names of all children disembarking at the port of Providence, and checks were later made to ascertain that these children had been enrolled in American schools and were "under the proper influences." In pursuit of its mission, the bureau supported a library, from which "emanate[d] a wholesome and educational influence of great benefit to the community," and it sponsored lectures on such topics as "Opportunities in the U.S.," "Abraham Lincoln," and "Our Political Institutions and the Duties of the Citizen," all with the intention of developing a working-class version of model citizenship.¹⁶

Other programs of the bureau—such as lectures on contagious diseases, infant care, and the intricacies of workmen's compensation—sought to satisfy the immigrants' more direct needs. But these undertakings paled in comparison to the attempts to "Americanize" immigrants with class-distinct notions of good citizenship. In Providence, Americanization remained a unidirectional process of cultural influence; friendly visitors came to the tenements and demonstrated "American" housecleaning, child care, and cookery, without giving much thought to whether immigrant men and women had valuable lessons to teach in return.



Throughout the country, philanthropists attributed poverty, licentiousness, and intemperance more and more to the rise of industrialization. Believing that the morality of a whole class of urban industrial workers needed reforming, they approached this task from several directions. As early as 1883, Unitarian ministers in Providence were attempting to provide more "uplifting" alternative leisure activities to working-class men who customarily sought diversion in saloons and gambling halls.¹⁷ Middle-class women attacked the moral laxity of the working class from directly inside the home, where mothers could instill more industrious "American" values into their children. Volunteers attempted to inculcate

this working-class version of republican motherhood through a network of “working girls’ clubs,” organizations that originated in the largest industrial cities and eventually made their way to medium-sized cities like Providence. In many ways these clubs resembled the philanthropic efforts of the nineteenth century; like the earlier undertakings, the clubs were staffed by middle-class women who tried to make the behavior and values of working women resemble their own. Modeled after the women’s clubs of the middle class, the working girls’ clubs encouraged emulation of the activities and decorum of the more privileged volunteers. For a minimal monthly fee, members had access to a library, classes in household management, and wholesome entertainment, all of which were designed to impart middle-class ideals of feminine citizenship.¹⁸

In 1887 Alida Sprague gathered middle-class volunteers and twenty-three working girls and women and organized the Mount Pleasant Working Girls’ Club in Providence. Sprague served as president and Harriet Richards as vice president for the club’s first thirteen years. Most of the volunteers were women who resided on the affluent East Side of town; only one woman—the head worker—lived on the premises at 7 Armington Avenue.¹⁹ As women “who had many opportunities and some leisure,” the volunteers felt a moral obligation to “meet with those of their sisters who passed busier days in closer contact with the hardships of life,” according to an early club report.²⁰ By 1890 the Mount Pleasant club had raised funds to send two delegates to the New York Convention of Working Girls’ Clubs, thus formally joining the reform movement that was already thriving in the nation’s larger cities. By then the club had a hundred working-class members.

Like the clubs in larger cities, the Mount Pleasant club offered a library, classes in domestic science, and wholesome leisure activities. Its programs, originally oriented toward women, soon shifted focus to provide recreation for the whole family. In 1907 the club—now renamed Sprague House after its founder and honorary president—

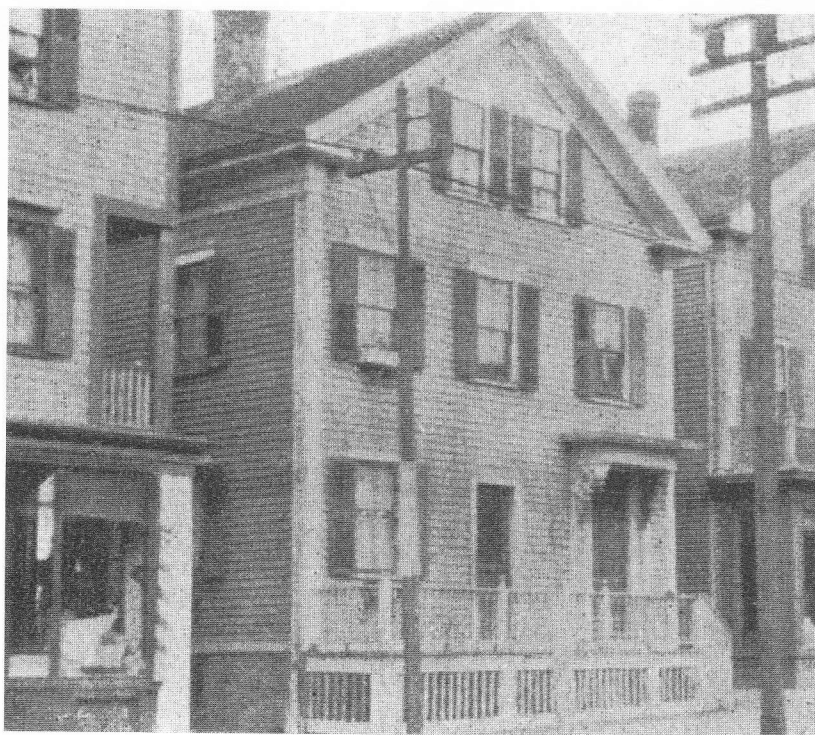
was conducting sewing, dramatic, and gymnastic classes for girls and a debating society for boys. Women were urged to attend meetings of the Women’s Progressive Club, while men were encouraged to congregate in the house’s smoking room or library as an alternative to the saloon. On Sundays the house held “smoke talks” for men or a “serious lecture” on “civics, or some kindred subject” for both sexes.²¹ Like the Immigrant Education Bureau, Sprague House designed its programs to promote middle-class ideals of citizenship among working-class families.

In addition to their commitment to working-class men and women in Mount Pleasant, Alida Sprague and others soon recognized an even greater need for their services among the growing colony of immigrants in the neighboring district of Federal Hill. The years between 1890 and 1920 brought an influx of southern Italian immigrants to Providence, the majority of whom settled within Federal Hill’s 1½-square-mile area. By 1905 eighteen thousand Italian-born immigrants resided there; by 1916 that number had grown to more than forty thousand.²² Many of these residents lived in severely unhealthy conditions, sus-



The Mount Pleasant Working Girls’ Club—later renamed Sprague House—was organized in 1887. It moved into its newly built “Club House” at 7 Armington Avenue two years later. Halftone in Report of Sprague House Association and Federal Hill House Association, 1914. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8591).

ceptible to malnutrition and the contagious diseases that swept through their cramped tenements. Moreover, in the eyes of local philanthropists, the immigrants were facing serious difficulties of another kind as well, for they lacked the cultural resources required for enjoying the benefits of an "American" way of life. Believing that programs could be organized that would help to assimilate the Italian immigrants into American society as productive and upstanding citizens, in 1910 the directors of Sprague House founded an Italian Department which began servicing Federal Hill's growing Italian population from a five-room apartment at 417 Atwells Avenue.²³



In response to the growing population of Italian immigrants on Federal Hill, Sprague House established an Italian Department at 417 Atwells Avenue in 1910. Federal Hill House was formally incorporated at that location in 1914. Halftone in Report of Sprague House Association and Federal Hill House Association, 1914. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8592).

The Italian Department's programs were of two types: those for immediate health needs, and longer-term programs of Americanization. Italians in Federal Hill enthusiastically embraced the health programs, creating enough demand for their expansion. In 1912 a Babies Consultation Clinic was opened at the Atwells Avenue location, with certified nurses and doctors to advise mothers on proper child care for well babies.²⁴ But the objective of the clinic changed when it became clear that almost all the babies being brought there were not well and required medical attention. By 1915 the clinic reported that fifteen hundred sick babies had been registered to receive immediate care with thirty-five to forty mothers awaiting assistance at any given time. When the clinic determined that spoiled milk was responsible for many of the infants' ailments, a milk station was established at the Atwells Avenue site.²⁵ Residents who grew up in Federal Hill recalled the babies clinic and milk station fondly. Tony Marrocco declared that he would "never forget the days when free milk was distributed to everyone who was in need."²⁶ Ugo Gasbarrini remembered the lines of children waiting for milk at the station and recalled that "the people [Sprague workers]

were very nice to us."²⁷ The popularity of the health programs offered by the Italian Department attested to the desperate need for immediate and unconditional medical care in Federal Hill.

In contrast to the health programs' popularity, the programs in Americanization met more ambiguous and mixed reactions. Although the larger objectives of these programs were not explicitly stated to immigrants, Elizabeth Haight, the Italian Department's head worker, asserted in her reports that the recreational activities and domestic instruction offered to residents were designed to nurture high standards of citizenship. Haight saw the work of the department as patriotic service rendered for a greater national cause, and she described her middle-class volunteers as true patriots.²⁸ To Haight, the Americanization of immigrants was a necessary nationwide objective, both to maintain the standards of middle-class American life and to improve the immigrant's own standard of living. Although sensitive to the hardships and inadequacies of the immigrant's life, she felt that only through Americanization could they be remedied:

We are forced to admit that in this place and time the foreigner is getting the worst of it. He lives in the worst houses in the city. Coming as he does with hopes of democracy and America, he is given the most corrupt ward politics in place of civic duty. Education itself is often ill adapted to his industrial future and his amuse-

ments are cheapest and most objectionable. Worst of all he never glimpses an American home nor associates with a gentleman. . . . The Melting Pot cannot melt without the heat of mixing.²⁹

Alice W. Cooper, the Italian Department's secretary, put the argument for Americanization bluntly: "This is America, and life is not the same here as in sunny Italy. We have different standards of living and a different social attitude."³⁰

The Italian Department's programs for men and boys were created to mold ideal male American citizens; they served as alternatives to popular leisure pursuits, which Haight believed bred "ignorance, brutality, and venality." "Most . . . new arrivals [to the Italian colony on Federal Hill] find only saloons, pool rooms and the street," she lamented. "A chance to read, to know a good man, to be a social being is what thousands of these men need to make them good citizens." Thus the Atwells Avenue apartment had a small library and offered its facilities to groups of men or boys who wished to congregate for dinners, singing, or social gatherings. In Haight's mind such alternatives were better influences upon the foreign-born than the picture show or dance hall.³¹ Haight argued that idleness in boys caused the proliferation of neighborhood "hang-outs," gambling, riots, and arrests, and she insisted upon the need for boys' athletic and social clubs. The house offered a Saturday morning music club and a weekly evening club for boys in its attempt to keep them off the streets. Annual reports reveal that these activities were popular and brought the same boys back to the house regularly. Nevertheless, sensing the apprehension of many parents in letting their sons participate in such programs, Haight and her workers found it necessary to hold "a mass meeting for the purpose of explaining to parents and others the objects of the house, the problems of youth and ways of meeting them." "Our own boys' club though small is a brilliant contrast to the other neighborhood clubs, many of which are thoroughly objectionable," she argued. "Our boys make their own rules against swearing and rough conduct and they are growing rapidly in responsibility and character."³²

The Italian Department offered women and girls "industrial" classes in home economy and housekeeping to provide the skills necessary for meeting "American" standards of living in the tenements. In 1912 Cooper spoke with satisfaction of the classes and their instruction in middle-class domesticity:

The industrial classes at the house were . . . most successful. These included the sewing, mending and darning, and housekeeping classes. These housekeeping lessons covered elementary cleaning work to all parts of the house, with advanced work in cooking and management. Two supper classes were conducted in this connection. One group was given a course in personal hygiene with the "bedroom course."³³

"We have given a large number of cooking and dress-making lessons to young brides and young mothers," Haight reported in 1913. The following year she announced that "the work with young mothers in cooking, sewing and the care of infants is intermittent but most gratifying. We hope to interest the Italian mothers in other things as well."³⁴

Adolescent girls attended classes that taught them how to be ideal American housewives and mothers. Hosting teas for their own mothers at the Atwells Avenue tenement on Saturday afternoons, they came early to arrange flowers, fold napkins, and be instructed on the "proper" ways to entertain. A few younger girls were selected by public school officials and the Italian Department to attend "diet" (nutrition and hygiene) classes. Chosen because they were

undernourished, these girls went to the house during school lunch hours to wash and brush their teeth, and eat a well-balanced American lunch. The improvements in their health were charted weekly, and workers regularly visited their homes to make sure they continued their diets of standard American food.³⁵

Although many women took advantage of the programs offered by the Italian Department, others remained unaware of these offerings. To reach these women, department workers made "friendly visits" to the tenements. The department's secretary reported that in 1912 over four hundred calls had been made by the head worker and her assistant to families on Federal Hill, and that "door-step visiting" to mothers and children had been directed that summer by Elizabeth Whitman of the Women's College at Brown University.³⁶ Grace Sherwood's story of Annunzia and Pietro described a friendly visit and the gratitude it evoked:

And sure enough, a certain American woman did come to the kitchen of Mariana. Her name was Miss Ada C. Hartzell, and her own voice was friendly and her heart of a great sympathy and understanding. She brought with her a bag of cooking utensils and samples of this and that, and she asked permission of Mariana to show her how the foods in America could be made to take the place of those very things Annunzia had not been able to procure any longer. She mixed for them and seasoned and cooked and of a verity Annunzia was full of excitement and could hardly wait to tell Pietro of her new discovery. . . . Together they went to the big market and bought of the strange foods.³⁷



Although it is possible that Sherwood added some fictional embellishments to her account, it is clear that she saw Sprague House's Italian Department as an invaluable service, and the middle-class visitor as the immigrants' trusted and appreciated friend. In fact, residents did embrace the department programs geared toward health care and immediate subsistence needs. Nonetheless, some of the goals of the department met substantial resistance in the community. Many residents remained suspicious of the middle-class volunteers and their intentions, especially since the instruction in housekeeping, nutrition, and citizenship often seemed to conflict with deeply rooted cultural beliefs from the Old World. According to Janet Mastronardi, a woman with family roots in Federal Hill, the community remained suspicious of influences that came from outside the family unit and were contrary to traditional Italian culture.³⁸ The reluctance to trust the intervention of Americanizing institutions and friendly visitors caused many Federal Hill residents to rely more heavily on support from Italian fraternal societies, mutual benefit societies, and their own families in times of need.

Cultural tensions developed in reaction to the settlement workers' prescriptions for schooling and domestic life. Joel Perlmann maintains that Italians in Providence valued manual work far more than formal education. This value system was transplanted from the Old World, where skilled hands were the most practical means for subsistence. Providence Italians resented compulsory schooling and the Sprague House Italian Department's educational programs, which diverted their children's energies from contributing to the family income. But resentment was not limited to economic concerns, Perlmann contends; parents also resented American educators who undermined other Old World values.³⁹ The friendly visitors from the settlement, who insisted that American methods of keeping house and cooking were superior to Old World methods, became a source of such resentments. Remembering the lessons she had been

taught, Carmela Mastronardi expressed frustration. "Why should I go to a house-keeping class? Nobody has to tell me how to keep my house."⁴⁰

The settlement's preoccupation with American diet also may have led to cultural strains. In August 1914 hundreds of residents in Federal Hill protested the rise in prices of foodstuffs essential to the Italian diet. Tony Marrocco recalled how the rioters stormed Ventrone's Grocery "because Ventrone's went up on the price of macaroni, cheese, salami, capocollo, and anything that was in sight."⁴¹ A reporter for the *Providence Journal* astutely recognized that the riot had not been caused merely by the rise in macaroni prices; it may have resulted from deeper resentments as well.⁴² Studying similar food riots that took place at the same time in New York City, historian Elizabeth Ewen believes that those riots did in fact mean something more: with food having become a point of cultural contention between immigrants and reformers, the riots served as an expression not only of frustration about higher prices but of cultural resentments against reformers who disparaged ethnic cooking and sought to replace it with American cuisine.⁴³ Like the food riots on New York's Lower East Side, the "Macaroni Riots" on Federal Hill may have revealed strong resentments against cultural indoctrination, a plea for Old World culture to be validated.

Traditional male breadwinners believed that the activities offered at the Atwells Avenue tenement were inappropriate for women and adolescent girls. When married immigrant women came to Providence, they continued to stay at home as they had done in southern Italy, leaving their homes only to buy foodstuffs or attend mass, or on special occasions. If married women contributed to the family income, it was through piecework done at home; very rarely did they work in factories. According to statistics from the 1905 census, the vast majority of Federal Hill women working outside the home were young and single. In 1915 only 4 percent of Italian mothers in Providence worked; families relied, rather, on their adolescent children to add to the family income.⁴⁴ The retention of patriarchal gender roles in Federal Hill made it difficult for the settlement to attract large numbers of married women or adolescent girls to its programs.

Considering the friendly visitors intruders into the realm of the traditional patriarchal family, conservative Italian men bitterly resented the Americanizing lessons these visitors brought, and they insisted that wives and daughters rebuff those lessons. Oscar Handlin points out the Italian immigrant's reluctance to discuss family issues with friendly visitors, whose judgments were based on their own cultural standards.⁴⁵ Janet Mastronardi cites the resentment of Federal Hill men when their wives were advised by visitors to settle marital disputes through the American courts.⁴⁶ The attempt to persuade Italian women to adopt American methods for mediating family problems bred hostility in husbands who refused to surrender their patriarchal authority.

The family unit remained of utmost importance to the southern Italians in Federal Hill, where parental authority and strict codes of association kept the family structure intact. Judith Smith attributes these strong family ties to the similar kinship and family work-group patterns prevalent in the rural towns from which the majority of Federal Hill residents emigrated. In times of financial hardship, the Italian immigrant turned first to his kin. The family served as a primary and insular economic unit, and survival depended upon the family's income. Familial ties induced immigrants to settle in close proximity to previously arrived blood relatives; in 1915 three of every four Italians in Providence

lived within a block of kin, and 94 percent lived within walking distance. Similarly, immigrants settled near others from the same Old World province, forming additional connections between households.⁴⁷ As a result, Federal Hill appeared to outsiders to be an insular, self-reliant ethnic community, resistant to American assimilationists.

A variety of fraternal organizations and mutual benefit societies operated on Federal Hill, and residents turned to these before they would consider receiving outside assistance. Many of these organizations were transplanted from southern Italy, while others were organized in America along provincial lines.⁴⁸ Beginning in 1882, with the founding of the Unione e Benevolenza Society of Providence, Italian assistance groups provided immigrants with insurance, sick benefits, and burial funds, with no threat to familial bonds or Old World culture. Mutual benefit societies found work for newcomers and translated the ways of the New World into something more recognizable and unthreatening. Maintaining that "cultural historical patrimony and the tradition of the [Old World] civilization constitute the greatest contribution to the progress of America," the Sons of Italy fostered appreciation for Old World ceremonies and holidays.⁴⁹ Fraternal organizations like the Young Italian Imperial Club (1902) and the Frosolonese Club (1913) vowed to "alleviate the distress of those who suffer" and to keep "alive in youth the spiritual worship for the lands of their fathers."⁵⁰ These provincial groups served as an extension of the family unit, providing for orphans and widows, the sick and the unemployed, while also making it possible for Federal Hill to insulate itself from the Americanizing efforts of outside influences.

Elizabeth Haight's 1912 and 1913 reports reveal frustration with the cultural strains that followed efforts to Americanize the immigrants. Haight had slowly come to realize that the settlement would never play an essential role in the district if it could not mediate the cultural differences between Federal Hill residents and middle-class volunteers. Along with her developing respect for cultural differences, Haight had come to recognize the immigrants' yearning for self-expression, and she felt that the creativity they had shown in the Old World had now been suppressed. "If given an outlet," she believed, their artistic creativity "would contribute to the welfare of the community."⁵¹ But most important, Haight confessed to the settlement's class-distinct ideals of Americanization, and she suggested that her organization would be most helpful to residents if its volunteers were perceived as neighbors of equal status. The neighborhood work of the house should continue, she concluded, in order to give assistance "to individuals about any matter that a friend or neighbor would give."⁵²

Haight's reports suggest that she may have been influenced by the new methods of assimilation advocated by settlement workers in the nation's larger industrial cities. A strong impetus for settlement work had come to Providence when nationally recognized housing reformer Carol Aronovici transformed the Men's Club of the Union for Christian Work into Union Settlement in 1908. (A quasi-settlement project had already grown from a parish mission in 1904, and another would develop from a girls' club in Olneyville in 1917.)⁵³ Haight's use of the discourse of neighborhood organization and cultural pluralism in place of the discourse of Americanization presaged the transformation that would take place at her settlement. The ideal of unidirectional assimilation was beginning to be reconceived to more closely match the ideologies of assimilation promoted by the large-city settlement reformers. By 1914 Haight and the directors

of the Sprague House Association “came to see the splendid possibilities for settlement work in the Federal Hill section,” and they set about securing a plot on which to build an ideal settlement house.⁵⁴ Raising over \$25,000, the organization drew up plans for a new facility and assumed a new commitment to the settlement concept.



Federal Hill House, at 417 Atwells Avenue, was formally incorporated under the laws of the state in February 1914. In June, while the settlement was pursuing its plans to build a larger facility, with industrial rooms, assembly hall, and gymnasium, just down the street, the Sprague House Association deeded its old Armington Avenue home as a gift to the Providence Public Library, which had maintained a branch there since 1906, and “merg[ed] its interests in Federal Hill House Association.”⁵⁵

Honorary president Alida Sprague Whitmarsh gave the new settlement house her blessing: “I pray that it may have a long existence in order for it to act as a link of brotherhood between Italian and English speaking people of Providence.”⁵⁶ The housewarming activities at 400 Atwells Avenue in December 1916 represented a major transition for the settlement; not only were its facilities improved, but a new settlement ideology, passed on from its shapers in the country’s larger cities, pervaded the festivities. Mary Simkhovich, from New York’s Greenwich House, and Eva White, from Boston’s Elizabeth Peabody House, spoke to a group of enthusiastic workers in the assembly room. Simkhovich referred to the settlement “as a yeastcake, stimulating different groups in the community and bringing to light unknown talents and interests.” White spoke of “the scope and power of the settlement movement and the way in which the work was personified in the lives of the boys and girls who go out from the settlement house.”⁵⁷ But most crucial to the changes at Federal Hill House was the hiring of a new head worker, Treby Moore, who already had strong links to the national settlement movement through her previous work in Hartford, New York City, and the South. Federal Hill House would be affiliated with the National Conference of Social Work and the National Federation of Settlements during her four years as head resident.⁵⁸ Once isolated from the influences of the national settlement movement, the workers in Federal Hill could now rely on the experiences of Moore, Aronovici, and a network of other nationally active reformers.

Like settlements elsewhere, Federal Hill House did not completely shed its middle-class outlook.⁵⁹ It continued Sprague House’s programs in American conditioning, such as “Little Housekeepers,” “Little Mothers,” supper classes, library hours, domestic classes, and a men’s society. Activities like the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, a drama club, and a dance class were added to cultivate both higher standards of American citizenship and an appreciation for more refined leisure pursuits. Continuing to view commercial establishments like dance halls and movie houses with disdain, workers saw their programs as providing a more wholesome influence for immigrant adolescents. Reports issued by Federal Hill House indicate that it also continued to work in conjunction with the Immigrant Education Bureau to coordinate programs in Americanization.⁶⁰ These reports, however, may be more reflective of the desire of the settlement’s wealthy supporters to maintain Americanization programs than of the convictions and priorities of the head worker and her volunteers. Like the patrons of

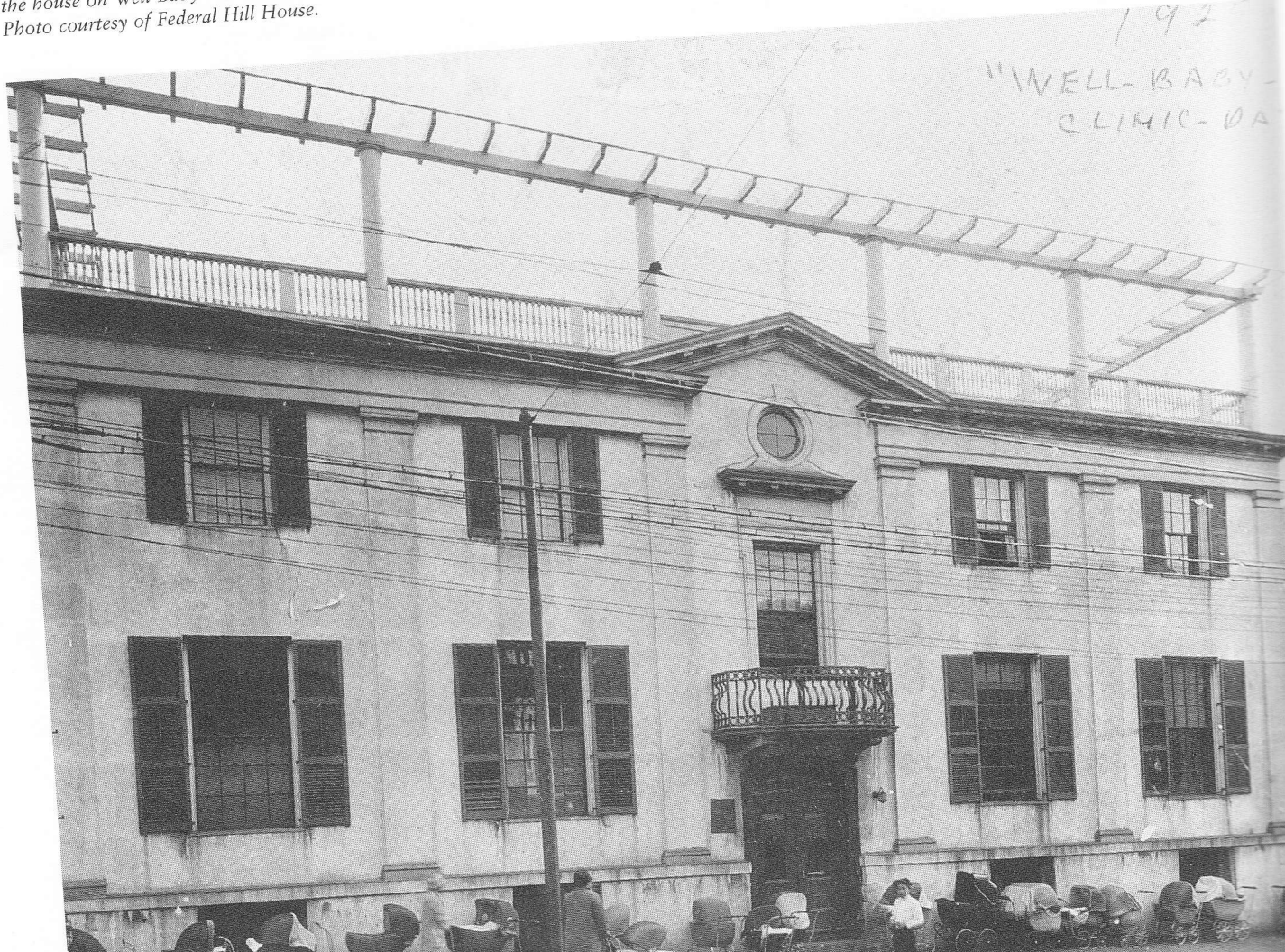


Alida Sprague Whitmarsh, founder of the Mount Pleasant Working Girls’ Club. Halftone in Fifty-fifth Annual Report of Federal Hill House, 1942. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8593).

settlement houses in other cities, Federal Hill House's supporters (many of whom had helped to fund the Mount Pleasant Working Girls' Club and Sprague House) generally retained class-distinct notions about poor relief rather than accepting the ideas of the new settlement movement. Since the reports were used as public promotional material, their rhetoric of "Americanization" and programming to foster "good citizenship" may have served to appease all those in the Providence community who saw the "immigrant problem" as one of assimilation rather than of socioeconomic inequality.⁶¹

Nevertheless, workers reevaluated many of their Americanization programs, spoke with members of the community, and devised a fuller schedule of activities for better meeting residents' immediate needs and wants. The attendance at the babies' clinic and milk station proved that the community needed and wanted more health programs. With residents avoiding hospitals because of their cost, distance, and institutional coldness,⁶² Federal Hill House opened a lying-in hospital clinic for women and a "Providence City Hospital" clinic for men and women, offered free vaccinations and bathing for children, and retained the sick babies' clinic, well babies' weighing clinic, and milk station. Pending adequate funding, the Federal Hill Dental Association took steps toward establishing a clinic at the house.⁶³ All these health services were staffed by doctors, nurses, and workers sensitive to the culture and needs of the Italian immigrants. In response to the lack of open space for children's play, the house organized athletic clubs for boys and girls and offered its basement gym and rooftop playground to children on a daily basis. Boys formed a polo and basketball league;

In 1916 Federal Hill House moved to new and larger quarters at 400 Atwells Avenue. This is the house on Well-Baby Clinic Day in 1925. Photo courtesy of Federal Hill House.



girls played basketball and attended dance class. For younger boys and girls there was a kindergarten and morning play sessions, while mothers were given opportunities to socialize with other women in the rooftop garden.⁶⁴

Residents of Federal Hill expressed enthusiasm for the new settlement house, but it was not the new and larger facilities alone that sparked their interest. "In less than two years, by earnest, helpful effort, never obtrusive and yet always intensive, they [the workers at Federal Hill House] won their way into the confidence of their neighbors on the Hill," the *Providence Journal* declared.⁶⁵ The 1918 report of the women's needlework department echoed this view, claiming that women who used to avoid the house had started to frequent it often to "talk over home problems"; there was, said the report, "a steadily increasing confidence in the managers of the department."⁶⁶ Reports of the babies' clinic announced "a great change both in mothers and babies." "Mothers no longer refuse to undress and weigh their babies. They are more willing than they used to be . . . to follow directions, and to make changes in dress and feeding."⁶⁷

In return for the trust of Federal Hill residents, house workers entrusted them with new responsibilities. The nine athletic clubs were permitted to use the gym unsupervised, so long as they respected basic ground rules. Workers reported that "in every case the boys have met in self-governing groups, paying their rent promptly, having the key to the gym, showers, etc., and taking the responsibility of letting in and out their own members." One night the resident on duty let four boys use the house facilities, despite not having the penny required for admission. Later the boys returned soaking wet and shivering to pay what they owed, appreciative of the trust afforded them.⁶⁸ These and other incidents reveal a budding relationship of mutual trust.

It is important to recognize that by the time Federal Hill House opened its doors, there were more second-generation and better-assimilated first-generation immigrants in the neighborhood than there had been in the decade earlier. The programs that Federal Hill House retained from Sprague House were still aimed at Americanizing immigrants, but these better-assimilated residents looked upon such programs with less suspicion. Settlement workers, in turn, earned trust as they grew more open-minded toward Italian culture. Efforts at moral instruction often gave way to a less class-conscious form of friendly neighborhood assistance, in which immigrants and settlement workers associated with each other on equal terms. Most thoroughly formulated by Jane Addams at Hull House in Chicago, this settlement brand of cultural pluralism did not reject assimilation, but it fostered creative self-expression and mutual cultural respect between worker and immigrant.⁶⁹ A belief in the value of cultural cross-fertilization motivated New York settlement worker Mary Simkhovich to learn Yiddish; she was convinced that a knowledge of Jewish culture could enrich both her own life and American society in general.⁷⁰ Similarly, Jane Addams offered Hull House as a place where the Society of Young Italy could convene and where Italian national holidays could be observed. Neighborhood residents proudly displayed their artwork in the Hull House Labor Museum, which Addams created to "build a bridge between European and American experiences."⁷¹

Such cultural expression was also embraced by the Industrial Department at Federal Hill House. Boys participated in pottery classes and mothers taught their daughters needlework. Weaving and embroidery departments allowed women to exhibit their handicraft skills, socialize with other women during the



Pottery making was one of the classes offered to boys at Federal Hill House in 1923. Halftone in Report, Federal Hill House, Providence, 1923. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8594).

day, and take pride in their cultural heritage. Many of the works created on Federal Hill were displayed at the Rhode Island School of Design, where they could be appreciated by other members of the Providence community.⁷² Both the *Providence Journal* and Federal Hill House reports praised the work for its “beauty and usefulness” and spoke of its increasing popularity.⁷³ Identified as stitched or patterned in “*fiori*,” “*campondi*,” or “*punto in aria*,” works were displayed and sold every Wednesday at the settlement.⁷⁴ The industrial classes served the practical purpose of supplying raw materials from which women could make linens and needlework for profit. According to the Industrial Department’s manager, even women who worked only part-time could average four to five dollars a week making linens. Often women would bring their babies to Federal Hill House so that they could hold and feed them while they worked. Others picked up embroidery materials on Friday afternoons and worked at home.⁷⁵ This arrangement accommodated women who observed the restrictions of the traditional gender codes, an example of the settlement’s new sensitivity to Old World culture.

Neighborhood residents saw Federal Hill House as less and less threatening to their traditional culture as the settlement began including elements of that culture in other programs beyond those of its Industrial Department. Whereas Sprague House workers had encouraged women to purchase and cook American foods, Federal Hill House workers incorporated “foods dear to Italians” into their daily nutrition courses. One of the most popular exhibits at the house was the food exhibit, which displayed nutritious foods that had long been a part of the Italian diet.⁷⁶ Instead of competing with Italian national groups, the settle-

ment served as the meeting place for discussions, lectures, and concerts of the Garibaldi Club, the Sons of Italy, the Loggia Gloria (a women's society), and the Circolo Dante Alighieri.⁷⁷ In these and other ways it replaced the unidirectional assimilation tactics of Sprague House and the Immigrant Education Bureau with the settlement ideal of cultural mutualism. Perceived as essential to the community's well-being, Old World culture flourished at Federal Hill House.

As part of her vision of cultural pluralism, Jane Addams advocated the eradication of class distinctions between settlement workers and their clients. Formerly, philanthropic and working girls' club volunteers established a distance between themselves and the poor; although they traveled to impoverished areas of the city, they did not live in them or establish themselves as part of the community there. Feeling themselves morally and socially superior to the poor, they believed that self-improvement for their clients meant becoming more like themselves. Settlement workers, on the other hand, believed that urban poverty was as much their problem as the immigrants', for both had inherited and belonged to the same society and were mutually responsible for its ills.⁷⁸ Thus these workers moved into impoverished neighborhoods and assumed equal status with their immigrant neighbors. Unlike the earlier philanthropists who had attempted to centralize the relief efforts of the city, settlement reformers believed that only the neighborhood "is small enough to be a comprehensible and manageable community unit," as Robert A. Woods of South End House in Boston put it, and they scaled down their efforts into individual neighborhoods.⁷⁹ Reformers were convinced that the exploitation and atomization of the industrial city were hostile to the kind of personalized service they wished to provide, but they believed that neighborhoods remained bastions of healthy individualism and intimacy.⁸⁰

In one sense Federal Hill House did not completely promote the settlement movement's ideal of the neighborhood. As at Sprague House, only the head worker lived on the premises, and thus the other workers never became true Federal Hill resident neighbors. Nevertheless, Treby Moore and her group of volunteers strove to give the house a neighborly, inviting, homelike feel. Committing themselves to neighborhood service, the workers were determined that the house would always be open to offer advice on "family, social, civic, educational and health questions" and to render first aid "in case of near-by accidents."⁸¹ Upon inaugurating its new facility at 400 Atwells Avenue, Federal Hill House adopted a new slogan and a statement of its objectives reflecting the settlement idea that in serving their neighborhoods, good neighbors benefited their city and their nation as well.

A Neighbor among other good neighbors

It aims to be a good neighbor in its own neighborhood.

It desires to be a good citizen in its own city, to interpret its own community life in terms best fitted to make for a better Providence and a better America.

It offers the most modern facilities for club, class, industrial, and social activities of the neighborhood.⁸²

The house itself was designed to radiate friendliness and neighborliness. The main entrance led to a reception hall with a fireplace and comfortable chairs for guests and neighbors. The babies' clinic, assembly room, domestic science room, and head resident's office were built to receive floods of natural sunlight and warmth, and the gymnasium offered bright, well-ventilated space for sports and play. There was a dining room large enough to accommodate the parties and other gatherings of clubs and classes, and a kitchen that could be used by

groups to cook meals on special occasions. According to Treby Moore, "To be in the house is the only way by which one can learn to develop into a good neighbor," and thus half of the second floor served as her personal apartment. The facility was described in a 1922 *Providence Journal* article:

It is a pleasant white, green-trimmed building, hospitable with its long windows and cheerful lights, to the passerby. Countless small boys are seen pressing their noses to the window pane . . . a district nurse comes out with her bag in her hand, a policeman passing by touches his hat to a person barely seen through the window pane. . . . Everyone seems welcome and at home, familiarly as in the home of a neighbor.⁸⁴

And in fact many of the settlement's workers did come to be considered trusted neighbors by Federal Hill residents. The *Journal* article reported that workers were coming to the tenements, not as "friendly visitors" to inspect living conditions, but as friends to visit mothers and their newborns, or as neighbors to offer advice for dealing with unruly children. The head resident was given small gifts and invitations to meals, suggesting that the people living on Federal Hill appreciated her neighborly friendship.⁸⁵



Seeing themselves as reformers, settlement workers believed that they could be effective observers of an ethnic community until they had earned a position as trusted neighbors in that community. In accord with the principles of the settlement movement, they did not (unlike the friendly visitors of the Providence Aid Society) observe others in order to make moral judgments. Viewing poverty as a consequence of environment, they instead filled their notebooks with "scientific" data, to be used to draw broad sociological conclusions about urban poverty and social structure. The social science of settlement work was developed in response to traditional relief efforts that appeared intermittent and random and thus inefficient and ineffectual. Social observation and analysis, on the other hand, could provide information that would allow efforts to be precisely tailored toward projects likely to yield the greatest results. As methods of study became increasingly scientific, so too did the lessons offered to immigrant residents, for whom reformers developed classes in scientific child-rearing, housekeeping, and cooking.⁸⁶ The scientific orientation of settlement work also extended into the design of neighborhood recreational facilities; thus data were collected to determine how and where to build playgrounds and parks so that they would best provide wholesome leisure activities for the working class.⁸⁷ Reformers like Robert A. Woods considered settlements to be the "laboratories in social science" and he and others in the settlement movement helped stimulate the growing academic interest in sociological fieldwork throughout the country. Sociologists at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, for example, relied respectively on Hull House and Northwestern Settlement in their work.⁸⁸

In Providence the scientific ideal was exemplified by Union Settlement, which operated a house at 31 Chestnut Street. That organization not only provided neighbors with instruction in "domestic science" and "economy" but also collected data in support of petitions for legislative action. Union Settlement was organized "upon a scientific basis" by Carol Aronovici to serve as "the sociological laboratory of Brown University." Sociologists at the university worked in cooperation with Union Settlement to gather data and to provide fieldwork for students. In 1908 the settlement helped carry out a university investigation

of the living conditions of over twelve hundred homes in the neighborhood it serviced.⁸⁹ Experts from the New York Teachers' College and Brown University gave lectures to immigrants on food values, house sanitation, and practical cooking. As an organization that supported the playground and fresh-air movements, Union Settlement raised funds to secure a plot for its own playground, a facility "for clean play and protection against street evils." Children and mothers in need of fresh air and exercise could attend the settlement's outings to the country.⁹⁰ To promote "concerted effort where there is community of interest," and to extend knowledge of social science to others in the field, Aronovici established the Social Workers' Association of Providence. That he kept abreast of current sociological research was indicated by a series of lectures he sponsored for the city's social workers in 1908; topics included "The Field of the Settlement," "The Girl Delinquent," "The Settlement and Organized Charity," "The Philosophy of Settlement Work," "Ethnic Factors in Social Work," "Survey of Providence Social Problems," "The Male Delinquent and His Home," "The Problem of Home Investigation," "Safeguarding the Health of a City," "Children's Libraries," and "The Street Boy."⁹¹

The scientific methods evident at Union Settlement did not successfully filter down to Federal Hill House, where workers adhered more closely to Jane Addams's vision of settlement priorities. Although Hull House did support scientific observation, Addams did not believe, as Woods did, that the main purpose of settlement work was to provide empirical sociological data for academic research. Addams believed that society was most effectively reformed not through analytic observation but through immediate interaction with individuals.⁹² Unlike Aronovici and the Union settlers, Federal Hill workers concentrated on personal service rather than on data collection. Federal Hill House does not seem to have pursued improved tenement legislation, let alone gathered any statistical data on housing conditions in the district. Despite its affiliations with national settlement and social work networks, its reports continued to emphasize the personal-service aspect of its work; workers made neighborhood visits, but they provided no observational analysis afterward. Whereas the annual reports of Union Settlement explicitly described the work of that institution as "scientific" and "observational," Federal Hill House characterized its work as "neighborly" and devoted to "character building." It did support the playground and fresh-air movements, building a rooftop garden above the soot and dust of the street, and it sponsored daylong picnics in the country and encouraged its scouting troops to take excursions away from the city.⁹³ But these efforts paled in comparison to those at Union and other settlements, at which scientific procedures and fresh-air programs were not only implemented but formulated. In this regard Federal Hill House did not follow the methods and objectives current in larger cities, where leading sociologists and professional workers sought sociological data for broad social change.

As a result of the increased training and education required to perform settlement work in the larger cities, settlers there came to think of themselves as professionals. Whereas the nineteenth-century philanthropist volunteered her services as an extension of her domestic duties, the modern social worker took up settlement work as a vocation that removed her from the domestic sphere. She generally held a college degree, and as a professional in her field she kept abreast of the larger settlement movement in America and abroad. Usually unmarried, she worked alongside male social workers whose training and duties were simi-

lar to her own.⁹⁴ Most important, however, she was given room and board and a salary (though typically a small one) for her work, whereas philanthropists performed their benevolence work without compensation.

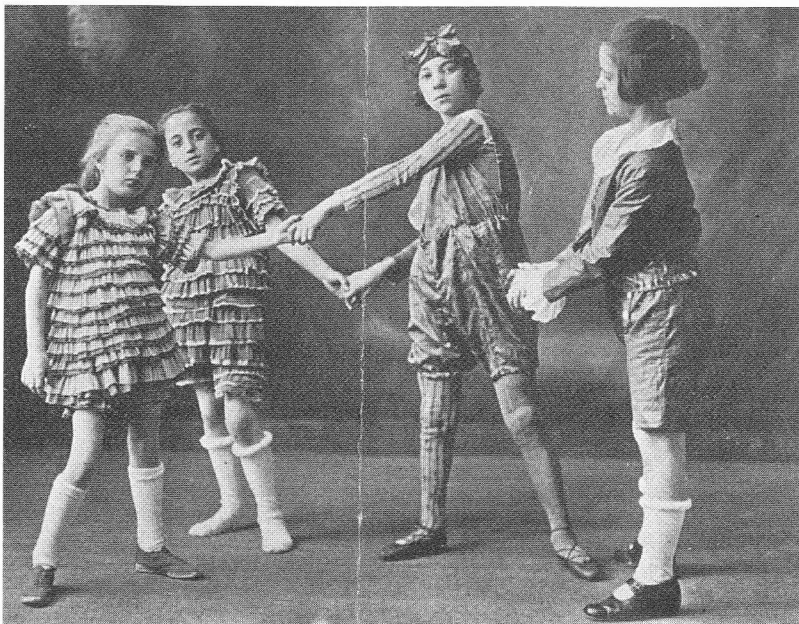
Attempts had been made to professionalize poor relief in Providence earlier, before Federal Hill House had even opened its doors, but these efforts left little lasting influence. The Providence Society for Organizing Charity had begun to hire trained experts to replace well-intentioned but ill-qualified volunteers. Philanthropic Providence clubwomen had developed systematic methods of data collection and increasingly considered themselves experts in social investigation.⁹⁵ As a professional reformer and head resident of Union Settlement, Carol Aronovici was paid a salary of over \$1,341 in 1908.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, most settlement work in Providence was not characterized by professionalism at this time. Lacking the idealistic, schooled, and well-traveled reformers of the larger cities, settlement work in Providence—and at Federal Hill House in particular—remained local in its scope and influence.⁹⁷ Except for head residents, few workers had formally trained in the social sciences or earned college degrees, and the city's settlements continued to be staffed largely by volunteers who traveled to their work from their homes in the affluent East Side. The head worker and some assistants at Federal Hill House did receive salaries, but their compensation was considerably less than that of male head residents elsewhere.⁹⁸

Unlike Union Settlement, where Aronovici provided consistent leadership and broad knowledge about current sociological methods and efforts at reform, Federal Hill House generally retained a locally influenced leadership that never actively participated in the national settlement movement. Records indicate that many members of its board of directors had also served as directors of the Mount Pleasant Working Girls' Club and Sprague House, organizations that employed methods of moral uplift, not scientific observation. The settlement tenet of personal service was embraced by former house patrons, but only to facilitate traditional notions of moral assimilation. Alida Sprague and other longtime supporters praised the neighborly efforts of Federal Hill House workers as long as those efforts seemed to be molding the settlement's clients to a middle-class cast. Treby Moore provided a more informed leadership, but her four-year term

as head resident proved too short for the settlement to establish strong connections to local reformers like Aronovici or to academic institutions that could promote and fund sociological fieldwork.

Federal Hill House records reveal that more single women took up responsibilities at the house as time went on, a trend that prevailed at large-city settlements as well. In 1916 Federal Hill House's board of directors included many more married than single women. However, by 1923 single women outnumbered married women on the settlement's board and staff by almost four to one.⁹⁹ Perhaps the professionalization of women workers was finally beginning at Federal Hill House. By this time, however, the settlement movement itself was losing momentum in the larger cities, where its dynamic originators had left and had never been adequately replaced. Reformers had become divided on the fundamental premises of settlement work and could hardly provide

A children's dramatic presentation at Federal Hill House. Halftone in Federal Hill House, 1923. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8596).



strong guidance while embroiled in their own controversies over purpose and methodology.¹⁰⁰ As a city that received the settlement movement in its second wave, Providence did not attract workers from among the initial surge of trained and idealistic settlers, and thus the personnel at Federal Hill House, though increasingly consisting of single women, never achieved predominantly professional status.

Federal Hill House's failure to contribute to social science or to professionalize its staff reflected the institution's relatively localized scope. Settlers like Jane Addams and Robert A. Woods may have sought change on a neighborhood level, but through their documentation of settlement life, their scholarly writing, and their attendance at national conferences they made larger contributions to social science and urban policy as well.¹⁰¹ Reformers like Robert Hunter, Florence Kelley, Lillian Wald, and Cornelia Bradford served their communities as social workers, but they also lobbied for legislation on child labor and tenement and working conditions. These reformers believed that conditions in a given neighborhood could not be significantly improved unless legislative bodies played a role in the endeavor.¹⁰² For these reformers settlement work necessarily became political; and through passage of the legislation they advocated, improvements brought about in one neighborhood could extend to a larger urban community.

In contrast, workers in Federal Hill did not visualize their efforts on such an expansive scale. The strength of Federal Hill House remained its ability to provide immediate relief and advice for neighbors in the proximate area. The work at the house remained largely apolitical, as its leadership continued to view the solution to the "immigrant problem" as one of citizenship and moral assimilation rather than broad social change. In essence, Federal Hill House never completely made the transition between the ideology of the working girls' club and that of the settlement; the immigrant's ills continued to be partially perceived as a symptom of moral degradation rather than the product of an inequitable social structure. Thus settlers assisted neighborhood residents in securing employment, but they did little to better conditions on the job, let alone in the tenement.¹⁰³ Although Federal Hill House embraced many of the ideals of the national settlement movement, it failed to politicize its efforts to create a higher standard of life in Federal Hill. Because of its lack of vision, it remained a homegrown, localized enterprise involved in work earning no more than local recognition.



Although the opening of Federal Hill House was attended by influential national reformers, in the end its workers remained insulated from national settlement trends. The existence of Union Settlement suggests that Providence was not inherently insular; but Union Settlement was founded in 1908, when national reformers were still enthusiastically seeking locations in which to set up settlement experiments, and it had the consistent leadership and academic affiliations necessary for a successful "scientific" settlement. Circumstances were different at Federal Hill House. Although Treby Moore had affiliated Federal Hill House with the national settlement movement by the time she left her position as head worker in 1920, by then the faltering movement had little inspiration to offer. Perhaps principally because of its previous existence as a working girls' club, Federal Hill House lacked sociologically trained and

nationally connected personnel, and despite the intentions of many of its fieldworkers, it could never completely rid itself of moralistic, middle-class assumptions about its clients. Along with the settlement's neighborly promotion of cultural pluralism, it simultaneously perpetuated the moral suasionist lessons of former years.

This is not to conclude that Federal Hill House was a failure. On a local level it provided leisure activities and essential health services that enriched the lives of hundreds of neighborhood residents during the years covered in this study, and today it continues to function as a community center for the far more heterogeneous population of Federal Hill. In its initial years workers recognized cultural tensions between residents and themselves and implemented measures to deal with those tensions. The trust that developed between workers and residents testifies to the process of cultural mutualism that took place. But the existence of Federal Hill House forces us to reexamine the generic term *settlement house* and to question whether a settlement in name necessarily embodied all the beliefs and methods advanced by the progressive theorists of the American settlement movement. In the purest sense of the term, settlements may have existed only in the large cities to which the initial wave of settlement visionaries and college-trained idealists gravitated, and where methodology most closely followed the prevalent ideology.



Notes continued

23. *Report of Sprague House Association*, 1912 (Providence, 1912), 7.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Report of Federal Hill House Association*, 1915 (Providence, 1915), 6, 9.
26. Tony Marrocco, "The Federal Hill Story: The Hill House," *Echo*, 6 Mar. 1975.
27. Janet Mastronardi, "Southern Italians in Federal Hill: A Study in Cultural Persistence" (honors thesis, Harvard University, 1982), 61.
28. *Report of Sprague House Association and Federal Hill House Association*, 1914 (Providence, 1914), 19, 21.
29. *Ibid.*, 19.
30. *Ibid.*, 8.
31. *Report of Sprague House Association*, 1913 (Providence, 1913), 10-11.
32. *Sprague House Association and Federal Hill House Association*, 1914, p. 20.
33. *Sprague House Association*, 1912, p. 9.
34. *Ibid.*, 1913, p. 11; *Sprague House Association and Federal Hill House Association*, 1914, p. 21.
35. *Sprague House Association*, 1912, pp. 10-11, 8-9.
36. *Ibid.*, 9-10.
37. "Reviving Italian Handicraft."
38. Mastronardi, "Southern Italians in Federal Hill," 56.
39. Joel Perlmann, *Ethnic Differences: Schooling and Social Structure among the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Blacks in an American City, 1880-1935* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 84, 85.
40. Mastronardi, "Southern Italians in Federal Hill," 63.
41. Tony Marrocco, "The Federal Hill Story," *Echo*, 23 Aug. 1973.
42. "18 Hurt in Riot on Federal Hill," *Providence Journal*, 31 Aug. 1914.
43. Ewen, *Immigrant Women*, 173, 176.
44. Perlmann, *Ethnic Differences*, 88; Mastronardi, "Southern Italians in Federal Hill," 12.
45. Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1953), 283.
46. Mastronardi, "Southern Italians in Federal Hill," 64.
47. Judith Smith, "Our Own Kind: Family and Community Networks in Providence," in *A Heritage of Her Own*, ed. Nancy Cott and Elizabeth Pleck (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 395, 399.
48. *Ibid.*, 403; Carmela Santoro, *The Italians in Rhode Island: The Age of Exploration to the Present, 1524-1989* (Providence: Rhode Island Heritage Commission and Rhode Island Publications Society, 1990), 26; "Active Fraternal Life of 'Little Italy,'" *Providence Sunday Journal*, 21 Dec. 1919, sec. 5; Nicholas Ruggieri, "Provincial Italian Societies on Wane but Still Survive," *Providence Evening Bulletin*, 4 Mar. 1936. General information on Italian benefit societies appears in Robert E. Park and Herbert A. Miller, *Old World Traits Transplanted* (New York: Harper, 1921; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 129.
49. Ubaldo Pesaturo, *The Italo-Americans in Rhode Island: Their Contributions and Their Achievements* (Providence, 1936), 172.
50. *Ibid.*, 170-71; program of the Supreme Convention of the Order Sons of Italy in America, Providence, October 1923.
51. *Sprague House Association*, 1912, p. 14.
52. "Reviving Italian Handicraft."
53. Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence*, 249-50; Conyngton, "Philanthropy," 309-11.
54. "New Body Assumes Settlement Work," *Providence Daily Journal*, 18 Nov. 1914.
55. *Sprague House Association and Federal Hill House Association*, 1914, pp. 6-7.
56. Joseph Muratore, "The Landmarks of Federal Hill," *Echo*, 19 July 1979.
57. "Scores at Federal Hill House Opening," *Providence Journal*, 12 Dec. 1916; "A Neighbor among Other Neighbors," *Providence Sunday Journal*, 10 Dec. 1916, sec. 5.
58. "For Federal Hill House: Plans Being Made for Benefit of Association on Monday," *Providence Journal*, 21 Sept. 1916; *Report, Federal Hill House*, Providence, 1923 (n.p., n.d.), n. pag.
59. The persistence of middle-class values in settlement work is discussed in Rivka Shpak Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 22-23, and Ewen, *Immigrant Women*, 79-80, 91. Middle-class notions of Americanization and morality continued to inform the reports of Federal Hill House between 1916 and 1925. In this regard these reports do not differ from the 1908 report of Union Settlement, in which Carol Aronovici stated that his goal to improve the morality of the settlement's neighbors through middle-class recreational reform. *Union Settlement Annual Report of the Head Worker* 1908 (Providence, n.d.), 7, 11, 12.
60. *Federal Hill House*, 1923, n. pag.; R. Whitcomb, "Life at Federal Hill House," *Providence Sunday Journal*, 14 May 1922, sec. 5. For similar examples of middle-class consciousness and criticism of commercial, working-class leisure activities, see *Union Settlement*, 1908, 7, 12; "Federal Hill House Meeting," *Providence Journal*, 30 Mar. 1917; and Mina Carson, *Settlement Folk: Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 197.
61. Class consciousness among the financial supporters of settlement work is discussed in Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 197. Carson suggests that the middle-class elitism of patrons of settlements like Hull House was often reflected in the programming of those institutions. Americanization rhetoric continued to pervade Federal Hill House reports well after 1916. A 1918 report, for example, states that "Americanization is a process of development of the mind and spirit, not the filling out of citizenship papers. It is the work at Federal Hill House to assist in making good citizens." *Federal Hill House Report*, 1918 (Providence, 1918), n. pag.
62. *Federal Hill House*, 1923, n. pag.
63. *Federal Hill House Association*, 1915.
64. *Federal Hill House Report*, 1921 (n.p., n.d.), n. pag.
65. "A Neighbor among Other Neighbors."
66. *Federal Hill House*, 1918, n. pag.
67. *Federal Hill House Association*, 1915.
68. Whitcomb, "Life at Federal Hill House."
69. Jane Addams's anecdotes about the women and their handicrafts at Hull House are remarkably similar, even identical, to the anecdotes about the Italian women and their work at Federal Hill House. See "Reviving Italian Handicraft" and Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan, 1910). For Addams's cultural pluralism, see

- Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* and "A Function of the Social Settlement" (paper submitted to the American Academy of Political and Social Science, no. 251, 16 May 1899); Carson, *Settlement Folk*; and Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives*.
70. Ewen, *Immigrant Women*, 80-81.
 71. Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 258, 235.
 72. "Federal Hill House Exhibit Shown at School of Design," *Providence Daily Journal*, 17 Feb. 1918.
 73. Whitcomb, "Life at Federal Hill House"; *Federal Hill House*, 1923, n. pag.
 74. "Reviving Italian Handicraft."
 75. *Federal Hill House*, 1918, n. pag.; "Reviving Italian Handicraft."
 76. Whitcomb, "Life at Federal Hill House."
 77. *Federal Hill House*, 1923, n. pag.
 78. The ideal of a classless neighborhood is discussed in Jane Addams's *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 116-25, and "Function of the Social Settlement," 55; Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives*, 13-14; and Mina Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 67.
 79. For discussions about the settlement concept of neighborhood, see Robert A. Woods, *The Neighborhood in Nation Building* (New York: Arno Press, 1970); Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 101; and Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence*, 248.
 80. Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence*, 248.
 81. *Federal Hill House*, 1918, n. pag.
 82. *Report of Federal Hill House*, 1916 (Providence, 1916), n. pag.
 83. "A Neighbor among Other Neighbors."
 84. Whitcomb, "Life at Federal Hill House."
 85. *Ibid.*
 86. The scientificization of the settlement movement is discussed in Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 65-66; Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives*, 7; and Ewen, *Immigrant Women*, 81, 85 (which deals specifically with friendly visiting and scientific housekeeping).
 87. Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence*, 11. According to Gilkeson, recreational reform in Providence expressed the ideals of a "classless, homogenous society" while also aiming at social control of the working class. See also Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
 88. Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 65; Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives*, 6.
 89. *Union Settlement*, 1908, pp. 3, 5, 12.
 90. *Ibid.*, 7, 11, 14-15.
 91. *Ibid.*, 13-14.
 92. Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 126; Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 106.
 93. "A Neighbor among Other Neighbors."
 94. Descriptions of the typical American settlement worker appear in Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 119-20; Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 87; and Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives*, 21.
 95. Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence*, 273-77.
 96. *Union Settlement*, 1908, 18.
 97. Gilkeson characterizes settlement work in Providence as work that "never seemed to have involved substantial numbers of idealistic college graduates residing as middle-class culture among the poor. Perhaps the city was too small for this to be contemplated." *Middle-Class Providence*, 248.
 98. For example, in 1915 the salaries of the head worker and all her assistants at Federal Hill House totaled \$1,546, which was only about \$200 more than Aronovici alone earned seven years earlier. By 1918, however, the settlement's salaries had increased to \$2,621.76, suggesting a higher degree of professionalization among the "helpers" and head resident. See the treasurer's reports in *Federal Hill House Association*, 1915, p. 10, and *Federal Hill House*, 1918, n. pag.
 99. *Federal Hill House*, 1916, n. pag.; 1923, n. pag.
 100. Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 196.
 101. Addams wrote of her participation in campaigns to better the living and working conditions of the poor through legislative reform. "We have attempted to compel by law, that the manufacturer provide proper work rooms for his sweaters' victims, and were surprised to find ourselves holding a mass meeting in order to urge a federal measure upon Congress." Addams, "Function of the Social Settlement," 52. She and her settlement colleagues Ellen Starr, Julia Lathrop, and Florence Kelley dedicated themselves to legislative reform that went beyond the Hull House neighborhood. Robert A. Wood theorized about the neighborhood and its role in larger-scale social reform in *The Neighborhood in Nation Building*.
 102. For the settlement movement's relationship to legislative and social reform, see Allen Davis, *Spearheads For Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), viii; Jane Addams, "Function of the Social Settlement," 52; and Carson, *Settlement Folk*, 110.
 103. The evidence is not plentiful, but several records do suggest that workers helped in finding employment for Italian men and in supplying embroidery work for women. That no specific details about this assistance are given further supports the argument that larger reforms outside the neighborhood never became a focus for Federal Hill House workers. See *Federal Hill House Association*, 1915, p. 9, and the report on the Weaving Department in *Federal Hill House*, 1918, n. pag.



The International Institute of Rhode Island was organized by the Providence YWCA in 1921 as a membership organization for immigrant women. Photo, 1929, YWCA Graphics Collection. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8584).

The International Institute of Rhode Island

JOAN RETSINAS

The snapshots are fuzzy, the hairdos stiff, the expressions stiffer. Early twentieth-century immigrants look not pioneering but dazed. They were entering a land of opportunity, but one that welcomed them with ambivalence. For many, the International Institute was an anchor. Today it remains an anchor, in a land that remains ambivalent.

At the turn of the century, when Theodore Dreiser was romanticizing Sister Carrie into a tragic heroine, the Young Women's Christian Association was helping real-life Sister Carries—women crowded into rooming houses, working in factories, friendless in cities. In 1912, as an experiment, the YWCA opened a New York City branch for foreign-born women. Under Edith Terry Bremer the International Institute for Young Women offered the same recreational clubs offered by the YWCA, as well as English classes and home visits.

The experiment was radical. Bremer saw the institute not as a social welfare organization but as an organization with a participatory membership, where volunteers would supplement a small staff and where the membership would control the group. The Protestant volunteers would not try to convert Catholic and Orthodox immigrants, nor would they "Americanize" them. Multilingual nationality workers ("cultured women of foreign birth," according to an article in the *Providence Journal*) would make up the staff.¹

Philosophically, the staff believed that ethnicity was central to a woman's persona ("a foreign community is a psychological unity," said Bremer).² To maintain women's ethnic ties, the institute would establish "nationality" clubs rather than clubs that crossed ethnic lines. Earlier the YWCA had mixed business and industrial girls in the same clubs, but those clubs had failed. Since the YWCA sponsored "colored girls" clubs, the nationality clubs—Polish, Armenian, German, and others—seemed a natural development.³

Not all Americans shared Bremer's thinking. World War I sparked a burst of xenophobia; "As industries closed and unemployment rose," Bremer said later, "immigrants [were] seen as a burden." Pseudoscientists voiced eugenic concerns, fearing "race-fusion" and the "over population" of America. Bremer hoped that when postwar industries reopened, "patience, tolerance, and kindly interest, the natural attitude of America toward immigrants, would replace the old suspicion."⁴

When women left New York City for Lawrence, Lowell, Philadelphia, or Providence, the International Institute forwarded their names to local YWCAs, some of which started their own International Institutes. The second was opened in Trenton, New Jersey. By 1915 six institutes had been established, three were in the study stage, and thirty YWCAs were interested. Two years later the National War Work Council gave money to the institutes, and that same year the YWCA held the first conference on immigration and the International

Institutes' work. When the War Work Council money stopped, the YWCAs sought local funding. By 1923 there were International Institutes in forty-eight cities, with two more institutes planned.



In 1920 the Providence YWCA asked the association's national board to survey the city and its foreign-born residents, a first step toward the creation of an International Institute. An exhaustive survey was accordingly conducted. Of Providence's total population, 29 percent were found to be foreign-born; 73 percent were foreign-born or of foreign-born parentage. Over 40 percent of the residents in Wards 3 and 9 were foreign-born. The majority of the immigrants were Italians, followed by Portuguese and Armenians. Married women rarely worked; unmarried women worked in declining industries in the city's mills (in Olneyville, the survey found, "most of the mills are either on part-time or closed. . . . there are over 10,000 out of employment"). None of the city's eight evening schools, serving 154 women, offered English classes for women of foreign birth. On the basis of this and other data (there were 8,391 foreign-language books in the Providence Public Library, nine public dance halls, fifty-one mills with minimal sanitary facilities), the establishment of an International Institute was found to be justified.⁵

The YWCA appointed a governing body for the new institute in 1921. The three-woman Committee of Management, led by Mrs. William W. Weeden, hired Agnes Holmes, who had headed the St. John's Settlement School in New York City, as executive director. An Armenian secretary and a Portuguese secretary rounded out the staff. Although the survey had discovered three communities of Italians—professionals, clustered around Atwells Avenue; "farmers" (mill workers who also tended backyard gardens), around Chalkstone Avenue; and laborers, in Silver Lake—the committee did not think the entrenched Italian community needed service.

The trio of staff members moved into two rooms at 37 Weybosset Street. According to a later report, their reaction to these quarters was mixed. "While the rooms were very attractive with a fireplace and beautiful hangings, the staff was very much annoyed by the creeping and crawling inhabitants that also resided at the same address."⁶

The early years of Providence's International Institute were dominated by case-work and group work. In 1921 the institute helped 498 people, 287 of them new arrivals. The Red Cross, which met incoming boats at the Providence pier, referred some of the newcomers; the national YWCA worker stationed at Ellis Island referred others. The institute found family members, translated, and intervened with landlords, employers, and government officials. Visiting in homes, institute workers (both staff and volunteer) brought a friendly voice. No case was typical, but two may be recounted here from case files.

In October 1923 the International Institute organized a bus trip for young men to meet the vessel *Canada* at the State Pier. On board were "picture brides," women who had become betrothed by correspondence. Clergymen performed weddings for these women and their bridegrooms back at the institute's Weybosset Street rooms that same day. One prospective bridegroom, Stefani, a young Greek restaurant worker from Clarksburg, West Virginia, asked for a Greek priest. By the time a staff worker brought the Reverend Peter Mihailides

from his Pine Street church, Stefani had fled. The would-be bride, Kiriaki, whose "heart was as blue as her dress,"⁷ was then whisked back to Boston by an immigration official. From there she would be returned to the Greek island of Chios—unless the International Institute could find either Stefani or her brother, who worked at a York, Pennsylvania, restaurant. The institute had two weeks to accomplish this task. The files, unfortunately, do not show whether it succeeded.

When Mrs. A., a nurse, came to the United States, she left two young daughters with the YWCA in Constantinople. At the State Pier the Red Cross referred her to the institute, which enrolled her in English classes, introduced her to the

Armenian community, and helped her find a job. To bring her daughters here, Mrs. A. had to become a citizen. The International Institute helped file the necessary papers. Then, after the national YWCA negotiated the immigration of her daughters, the institute helped the girls adjust to their new home.

The group work of the institute included English classes, nationality clubs, and social events. In 1921 the first English class enrolled ninety-one women. By 1925 the institute was conducting five English classes. Classes were staffed by Pembroke College volunteers until 1927, when the state agreed to staff the classes that the institute organized. In 1931 fifty



An institute-sponsored cooking class for Armenian women. Photo, 1929, YWCA Graphics Collection. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8583).

Portuguese women registered for institute classes at the Arnold Street School. To accommodate women who brought children with them, the institute arranged for baby-sitting with Pembroke students.

Among the nationality clubs created or nurtured by the institute were groups for Polish, Italian, Armenian, Russian, and Portuguese women. Twenty Portuguese girls working as housemaids met weekly at the International Institute on their day off. The institute not only organized its own clubs but also provided space for clubs that had been independently formed. By 1931 there were twelve clubs meeting at the institute.

At teas and socials, foreign- and native-born women mingled and shared refreshments, music, and news from their respective countries. Over eight hundred people attended a "homelands" exhibit in 1927. In 1939 the institute held its first ball, featuring ethnic entertainment and food. Each year the entertainment grew more varied. The second ball, in 1940, featured Armenian, Italian, Greek, Portuguese, and American dances (square dances were demonstrated by Brown students), as well as Harfa, a Polish choral group. German, Chinese, and Mexican dances were added the next year. Many dancers wore costumes they had brought from their native lands.

The institute added a Russian secretary to its staff in 1924 and an Italian secretary in 1930. The first executive director, Agnes Holmes, left in 1926 and was replaced by Gertrude Saunders. As the institute expanded its activities, it quickly outgrew its two Weybosset Street rooms. To hold classes for Russian women, in



The Cape Verde Women's Club, one of the "nationality" clubs created or supported by International House, celebrated its first anniversary with a banquet on 27 September 1939. Photo by Paramount Studio of Providence, courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.



Soon after the institute's 1921 founding, the YWCA (which was also underwriting Travelers Aid, an outreach program operating in bus and train stations) began chafing at the expense of supporting the new organization. Consequently, in 1926 the institute sought financial support directly from the Providence Community Fund. This proved to be the first step toward the eventual separation of Providence's International Institute from the YWCA. By the 1930s International Institutes all across the country were pondering such separation.

Several factors contributed to the movement toward disaffiliation. The American Federation of International Institutes was seeking a more powerful national voice, one less hampered by affiliation with the YWCA, and the Providence institute supported that effort. Moreover, institute membership in Providence (as elsewhere) had changed. The Great Depression all but halted immigration to the country: whereas there were 5,700,000 immigrants from 1911 to 1920 and 4,100,000 from 1921 to 1930, from 1931 to 1940 only 500,000 arrived. Some immigrants returned home; in 1932 Providence received 309 immigrants but 332 of the city's foreign-born residents—some of whom had lived in the United States for as long as twenty years—left the country (though most intended to return). By government edict, the importation of "picture brides" stopped in 1931.

The needs of the institute's members had also changed. Immigrants needed jobs, not recreation or friendly visits. "People we have known as members of our clubs and classes now turn to us to help them solve the problem of unemployment," said a 1937 report.⁹ Noncitizens were barred from government jobs. Native-born widows could collect a Mothers' Aid pension after living in Providence for only three years, but foreign-born widows needed ten years of residence to qualify for that assistance.

Meanwhile, social work was emerging as a profession, with an emphasis on training and expertise for its practitioners. Begun as a membership organization, the institute was becoming a social welfare organization instead. Staff no

1924 it bought a supplementary center, the North End House, at 49 Orange Street, where it provided space for a Russian school to hold its own classes as well. In 1925—a "banner year," according to a later report⁸—the institute moved to three large rooms at 141 Weybosset Street and renovated its North End House to include a classroom, a club room, and a kitchen. In 1928 the institute moved yet again; this time to 241 Weybosset Street, and in 1931 it leased additional space on Arnold Street as a center for serving Portuguese women. In 1939 it settled—together with its parent YWCA—at 58 Jackson Street, where it would remain until 1957.

longer focused exclusively on young women. "One could not meet the daughter unless one knew the mother, who must in turn introduce the father," said institute director Gertrude Saunders. "And so our work started by getting into the foreign home and thus in the foreign communities."¹⁰ Even the institute's orientation to Providence shifted; by 1938 the institute served sixty-six women in Cranston.

Dealing with the objection that disaffiliation from the YWCA would be detrimental to the concerns of immigrant women, the Providence institute's Committee of Management decided in 1940 that the "fear . . . of women's needs within the nationality groupings being lost or submerged by [the institute's] seeking cooperation of men in [its] leadership was not . . . serious."¹¹ The committee then voted to separate the institute from the YWCA.

Judge Ellis Yatman, the husband of Marion Yatman, a committee member, was chosen president of the eighteen-member board, which represented six nationalities. Louisa Neumann, executive secretary of the institute before its disaffiliation, continued in that position. Other staff included a full-time activities director, an Armenian secretary, an Italian secretary, a Portuguese secretary, a Slavic secretary, an office secretary-bookkeeper, and a receptionist. Altogether the staff could speak ten languages. Twenty-six active volunteers supplemented the paid staff.

The institute drew members through word-of-mouth invitations. Attendees at institute meetings could propose prospective members, to be approved first by the Membership Committee and then by the board. The dues for individuals were fifty cents. Growing steadily, always through personal outreach, membership reached 130 after one year. "No general campaign has been undertaken," Neumann explained in 1942, "because it was believed that membership should mean active belief and participation in the agency's place in the community."¹²



Launched just before the United States entered World War II, the institute soon reduced its facilities and staff. Between December 1940 and December 1941 the number of clubs meeting at the institute dropped from twenty-two to thirteen; some clubs moved into members' homes and others disbanded. In 1942 the Orms Street center was sold to a nationality group. By 1943 the institute had no full-time activities director, and its bookkeeper was a volunteer.

Activities during this time revolved around the war. The institute advised immigrants with relatives stranded in Europe or with children fighting there. Staff members wrote letters to servicemen on behalf of non-English-speaking parents. As the war bolstered the economy, more immigrants sought to become citizens; "People who used to ask for help with relief agencies, now want help with citizenship," Louisa Neumann observed in 1943.¹³ Many of these people were Italians. At the start of the war all noncitizens who had come from countries now part of the Axis were required to register. When President Roosevelt announced in October 1943 that Italian residents were no longer considered enemy aliens, many Italians in Rhode Island came to the International Institute for help in filling out citizenship papers.

Such services were provided without charge. The Providence Community Fund continued to fund the institute, contributing \$14,295 of the institute's \$15,054 income in 1942. During that year the institute earned \$44 by translating for



The International Institute helped many displaced persons from war-torn Europe, including those shown here, in the years after World War II. Photo courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.

companies and organizations. Its fifty-cents-a-year dues yielded \$117 from individuals and clubs, and the rental of the Orms Street center, before its sale, brought \$485. For the six rooms it occupied on Jackson Street, the institute paid the YWCA \$42 monthly rent.

After the war the institute's staff concentrated on casework—settling displaced persons, bringing over war brides, blocking the deportation of aliens. The Displaced Persons Act of 1946 allowed admission of 205,000 persons over two years, with a special commission established to certify their eligibility. International Institutes helped file the necessary “assurances.” When the first ship carrying displaced persons docked in New York on 30 October 1946, Katherine Lawless, who had been hired as the Providence institute's director in 1944, joined other International Institute staff from across the country in meeting the 800 newcomers. Eventually the Providence institute filed assurances for 255 people. Seventy-five displaced persons were guests at the institute's 1948 ball. (In 1950 one of Providence's displaced persons was an Armenian actress who had left Italy with her husband and toddler daughter. Twenty-six years later this woman—Nelly Ayvasian—became the institute's director.)

War brides needed a sheaf of notarized documents guaranteeing that they would not become public charges. “Some days it seemed as if the entire Army and Navy were at our doors” petitioning to bring their brides here, Lawless remarked.¹⁴ The Community Fund acknowledged that the institute needed a full-time caseworker to greet the influx of brides referred by the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization.

As for deportations, the institute helped people maneuver through a regulatory maze. The United States did not deport aliens during the war. Afterward, potential deportees could go to Canada and then solicit a visa from the United States consul to reenter the country. The institute helped prepare the necessary documents. An institute report noted an ironic element in the deportations: “It seems as if our government was sending help to those war torn countries in such dire need of food, clothing and shelter and at the same time deporting to those same countries people who have lived in the United States for a number of years, many married to American citizens and who have American born children. These people would only add to the number already needing relief from our government.”¹⁵

In 1945 the institute's staff had to deal with a severe lack of space. “She [Lawless] still has no office and the YWCA is using their room more and more so that we have no good place for interviews,” secretary pro tem Mrs. John Wells reported in her minutes of a board meeting. “It is very hard to keep up the morale of the staff under these conditions.”¹⁶ A few weeks later Lawless noted that “conditions at the present headquarters have not improved. The hooked rug classes are larger than ever; they work longer and are proportionately more vocal and bustling.”¹⁷ The institute could not purchase new quarters without the approval of the Providence Community Fund, which would have to subsidize such a purchase or allow the institute to raise money independently. The institute's board could only seek better rental quarters. Committee members investigated first a house on Thomas Street, then the Fresh Air School on Meeting Street. For special events like the institute's Christmas party, the Rhode Island Republican Club across the street lent space.

After a special committee of the Providence Council of Social Agencies conducted a study of the International Institute in 1946, the Community Fund decided that "new housing is not indicated at this time"; instead, it recommended that the institute make fuller use of the space it had on Jackson Street.¹⁸ The council's report challenged certain basic premises of the institute, challenges that would be repeated throughout the 1950s. On the basis of that report, the Community Fund discounted the institute's group work and clubs, claiming that they should be only "incidental" and "a byproduct of case work." The clubs were seen as tangential, if not harmful, a "bridge" to Americanization rather than the psychologically essential experience that Edith Bremer had conceived. "They should be purposely limited to those individuals who need a nationality group experience before they can be assembled into the community," said the report.¹⁹

In 1946 the institute added an assistant in charge of casework to its staff. Conceding that "it no longer seems possible to find Nationality Secretaries with language skills who are willing to come to us at the low rate of pay we are able to offer," it reluctantly chose a native-born applicant for this position.²⁰



During the 1950s xenophobia was not just ethnic; it was political as well. Fearing Communist infiltration, a congressional committee proposed transferring jurisdiction of immigration and naturalization from the House Judiciary Committee to a newly formed Committee on Internal Security, an outgrowth of the House Un-American Activities Committee. (Speaker Sam Rayburn killed the measure.) The quota system imposed by the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act, based on the 1920 census, favored northern Europeans, not the southern and eastern Europeans most eager to come. Some countries quickly filled their yearly quotas, while the quotas of other countries went unfilled. John Foster Dulles characterized the system as "offensive to American traditions and harmful to our country's foreign relations."²¹

Nevertheless, in spite of Dulles's warnings and President Eisenhower's strong opposition, Congressman Francis Walter blocked revision of the quotas. "Our country, if it is to remain strong, cannot be flooded with selfish nationality groups, swelled by new arrivals imbued with ideologies hostile to our way of life and our social and political system," he declared.²² The American Federation of International Institutes—along with Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran Refugee Service, American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, and American Relief for Chinese Intellectuals, among other organizations—lobbied for revision; the Daughters of the American Revolution called these opponents Communist fronts, created to weaken the nation's stringent quota system. The House Un-American Activities Committee labeled the American Committee for Protection of the Foreign Born "the chief instrument of the Communist Party in its efforts to destroy the Walter-McCarran Act."²³

Even refugees from Communism were not to be trusted in their commitment to their new country. Lieutenant General Joseph Swing, the commissioner of immigration and naturalization, warned the International Institutes of the possibility of redefection: "To counteract the positive and active campaigns . . . set up by Communist countries to encourage redefection . . . —publications sent to their 'nationals' in the United States, special contacts by 'agents'—it is essential for the agencies throughout the United States to be constantly on the alert and



The institute continued to bring families together during the 1950s and 1960s. Here Mrs. Agnes Rogers (left) greets her sister and brother from Greece. Photo, circa 1950, by Joseph R. Marcello, courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.

to advise the Immigration Service immediately of any indication" that an immigrant was planning to return to his Communist homeland.²⁴

The temper of the times was such that not even Hungarian freedom fighters gained easy access to the country. The United States readily admitted them after the 1956 revolution, but it did not readily authorize the visas that would allow them to settle here. At Camp Kilmer, where he was visiting refugees who "had been in the forefront in the fight for freedom," Vice President Nixon maintained that "the countries which accept [them] will find that rather than having assumed a liability they have acquired a valuable national asset."²⁵ Still, legislation to reform the immigration system lagged.

The national mood affected attitudes toward the International Institutes. In a study of Boston's International Institute by the United Fund—a report shared with the Providence Community Fund—Harvard researchers questioned nationality clubs as potentially subversive, and probably counterproductive.²⁶ Meanwhile, as institutes struggled to find "nationality workers," foreign-born and multilingual, for their staffs, many institutes felt pressured to hire graduates of American schools. In response, Mary Hurlbutt, a personnel consultant at the American Federation of International Institutes, called for the hiring of "professionally educated Europeans and Asiatics." "No International Institute should be pressured by lack of understanding of community chests or other social agencies . . . into trying to build up a staff solely composed of native American school graduates," she wrote, "even if these have linguistic skills and have taken courses in social and cultural sciences. This may be a controversial point of view. . . . It may be a point which takes courage to maintain."²⁷

Providence institute director Katherine Lawless faced severe challenges during the early 1950s. The space at 58 Jackson Street was cramped. In 1952 two staff members, including the activities director, resigned; and because the Community Chest (the former Providence Community Fund) could not meet its 1952 budget, it cut the institute's allocation, and there was no money to fill the vacancies. Requests like that made in 1952 by the pastors of St. Vartanantz Armenian Apostolic Church and SS. Sahag and Mesrob Armenian Church, who asked the institute to hire an Armenian-speaking secretary, could not be granted.²⁸ Reluctantly the institute closed "a considerable number" of its cases. An executive secretary's report called 1954 "a gloomy year."²⁹

Though the situation did not quickly improve, the institute tried to do what it could for those who needed its help. When the owner of a nearby Chinese laundry wanted to bring his son to America from Hong Kong, the institute helped cut through the red tape. And when, later in the decade, a bill sponsored by Rhode Island senator John Pastore allowed emergency visas for victims of an earthquake in the Azores, the institute helped resettle the new immigrants.

The International Institute finally moved in 1957, when the YWCA was to raz[e] the Jackson Street building. The institute's board had looked into renting space at the Rhode Island Republican Club, but that ultimately proved impossible, and it had no money to buy a building. Fortunately the United Fund (formerly the Community Chest) allowed the board to undertake the necessary fund-raising, though the permission was hedged with restrictions: the board could ask "only friends interested in the work of the Institute and with no publicity, no campaign, and within a limited time, so that it would not interfere with the campaign of the United Fund."³⁰ Board members successfully raised "the mira-

cle dollar” from late July to September 1957 and settled on a building at 104 Princeton Avenue, a carriage house-stable that a physician had converted to offices. It was “a quaint little place,” wrote the executive secretary, “setting some 50 or more feet back from the street, with its cupola and its weather vane which has forecast many a wind and could tell some secrets of all it has weathered, the gales for many summers and winters of the past and will still tell us the winds’ course for years to come.”³¹

Late in 1959 Katherine Lawless asked volunteer Nelly Ayvasian to join the institute’s staff. Three months later, at a conference in New York, Lawless died. Sharon Hatch, who had been director of the International Institute in Milwaukee, succeeded her as the Providence institute’s director and remained in that position until 1962, then left to head the International Institute in Philadelphia. Nelly Ayvasian served as acting director until Raymond O’Dowd, a social worker at Bradley Hospital, took over.



The years that followed were an upbeat time for the institute, a time of balls and cabarets and teas. The distinctive character of these years came about largely as a result of the nation’s restrictive immigration policies, which favored the educated. According to a 1962 Department of Labor study, 16 percent of the immigrants from 1947 to 1961 worked in “professional” or “technical” fields, compared to 9 percent of the nation’s overall labor force.³² During the 1950s fourteen thousand physicians and twenty-eight thousand nurses came to the country. Of the forty Americans who won the Nobel Prize in chemistry or physics by 1962, fifteen were foreign-born, and six had received degrees before immigrating.

The immigrants of these years wanted sociability, and the institute responded with teas, film festivals, travelogues, open houses, cabarets, and picnics—events featured in the society pages of the *Providence Journal*. As always, the institute highlighted the cuisine, the languages, and the native costumes of its members. In 1961 it resumed staging its ethnic balls, which became regular events. It reached out to foreign-born physicians, interns, and medical students, and it held a reception for foreign-born lawyers. It began hosting a weekly Sunday afternoon radio show.

In 1963 the influx of foreign students, often with spouses, spurred the establishment of another organization promoting sociability—International House, modeled after International House in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Located on Stimson Avenue on the East Side of Providence, International House gave foreign students a friendly base, with chances to perfect their conversational English. Unlike the International Institute, it did not advise on immigration, family unification, or major domestic problems. The two “International” organizations clearly differed, and O’Dowd regretted that International House had not included “Students” in its name to avoid confusion.³³

The institute’s membership soared during the 1960s. From 85 members (of whom 21 were board members) in 1960, it grew to 530 in 1964, 634 in 1966, and 709 in 1967. Annual dues were \$2.00 for an individual, \$3.00 for a couple, and \$3.50 for a family. The United Fund continued to finance most (87 percent) of the institute’s budget, which by 1960 had increased to \$31,000. In 1963 the budget rose to \$45,000, with \$41,000 supplied by the United Fund.

In the early 1960s the institute was serving people of fifty-eight nationalities. In 1967 it had a Cuban Advisory Council, assisting 245 Cuban Rhode Islanders. When the state needed multiple translations of newly passed Medicare regulations in 1965, the International Institute provided them without charge.

Enjoying this kind of growth, the institute was soon facing a familiar problem: a need for more space. "We try to overcome the lack of proper physical facilities by using imagination and being flexible," O'Dowd told the board in 1968. These efforts included using the local library and renting other space.³⁴ In 1969 the institute was able to alleviate the problem by purchasing the adjoining property at 99 Moore Street.

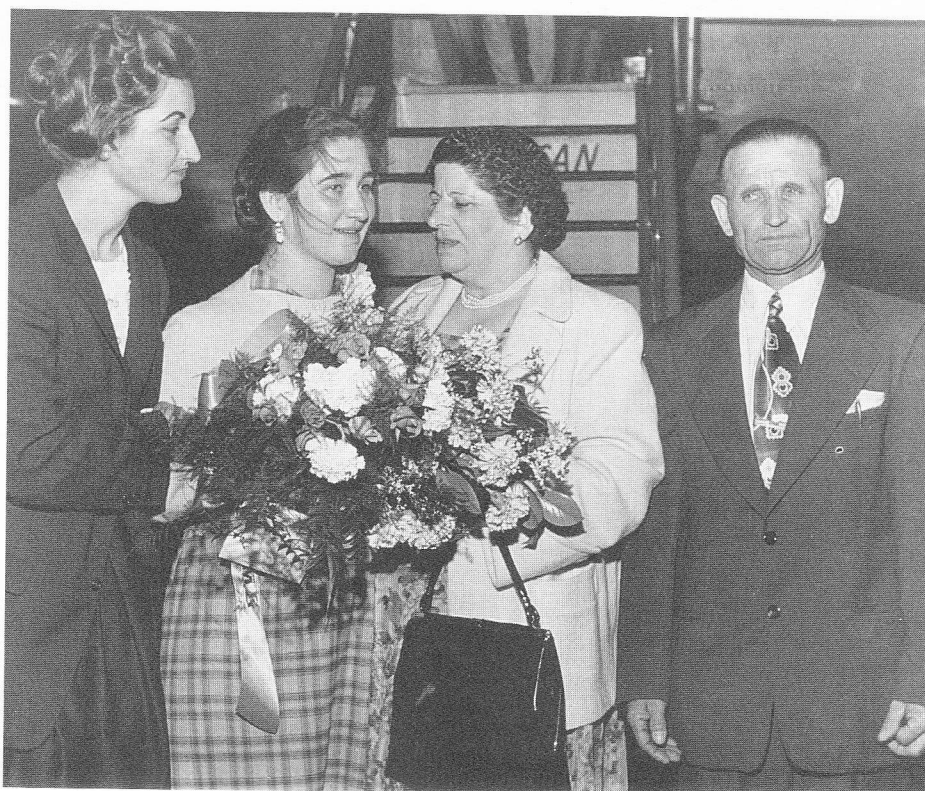
During this era the institute feted a number of naturalized citizens. Some examples: Larry Egavian (honored in 1961) came to the United States from Armenia when he was thirteen years old, became a product engineer with the navy, and with his brother, founded an electronics business. Joseph Jamas (1963), who left Poland as a teenager, became a probate judge in Central Falls, president of the Polish Relief Committee in Rhode Island, and a prewar representative of the General Consulate of the Republic of Poland. Jacob Hohenemser (1963) was cantor in Munich's Great Synagogue until 1938, became cantor at Providence Temple Emanuel. Manuel DaSilva (1973), a Portuguese-born Bristol physician, wrote the historical study *Portuguese Pilgrims and Dighton Rock*. Charles Foran (1974), of Cape Verdean descent, spearheaded a private community action agency called the Providence Corporation.

The institute also reunited families. Two of its more publicized successes involved the Kwongs and the Salyks. For seven years Mrs. Luke, a board member, struggled to bring her parents and younger brother to the United States. The Kwongs had escaped from Canton to Hong Kong, but without visas they could not come to America. In 1963 the International Institute, Samuel Friedman (also a board member), and Senator Claiborne Pell successfully interceded with the immigration officials and brought about the family's reunion.

With the help of the institute, in 1961 the Salyks were reunited with the daughter they had been separated from twenty-one years earlier. In 1940 the Nazis

had forced Mr. and Mrs. Salyk to leave Poland for a work-farm in Germany. The Salyks took their six-month-old daughter Eugenia but left her sickly twin, Stefania, with a grandmother. First the war, then the Iron Curtain, precluded contact between the Salyks and Stefania. Now in America, the family came to the International Institute in 1957 for help. Four years later, after numerous pleas to the Red Cross, the State Department, and even Premier Khrushchev, Stefania, then living in a Ukrainian village, was directed to report to Moscow. From there she began her trek to Providence. The persistent Nelly Ayvasian, who had be-

With the help of Nelly Ayvasian (left), Stefania Salyk was reunited with her parents in 1961 after a separation of twenty-one years. Photo by Al Joyal, courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.



overseeing the institute's efforts in pursuing the case, joined the Salyks in greeting their daughter at the airport in New York.

Although the government hatched a bevy of social programs throughout the 1960s—Medicare, Medicaid, Model Cities, and Community Action, among others—the institute had only minimal involvement in these programs. It was the United Fund, not the government, that underwrote the institute, and the Bureau of Immigration required that “sponsors” oversee the well-being of new immigrants and help keep them off welfare.



If the Vietnam War changed the psyche of America, its end changed the International Institute. After Saigon fell, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees streamed into the United States. Unlike earlier refugees, these came at the invitation of our government, which pledged resettlement for people who had supported United States troops—people like the Hmong clansmen whom the CIA had recruited as a “secret guerrilla army.” The stream of immigrants

was steady; by 1980 there were 2,200 Southeast Asians living in Rhode Island, with 1,200 Hmong clustered in Elmwood and South Providence.

To aid the immigrants until they could receive state assistance, the federal government paid an initial resettlement stipend of \$200 to \$250, and it reimbursed 100 percent of the state's welfare costs. By 1980 there were 1,160 Southeast Asians on Rhode Island's welfare rolls. In addition, the Office of Refugee Resettlement contracted for English classes and job-training sessions with community organizations, including the Opportunities Industrialization Center, Project Persona, Urban Education, and the International Institute.

All the Southeast Asian immigrants had organizational sponsors. These sponsors included Catholic Charities, a group of Protestant churches, and the International Institute, whose

parent organization was designated an official sponsor by the federal government. Sponsors agreed to find the newcomers jobs, housing, food, clothing, and medical care. The number of institute-sponsored refugees grew yearly. In 1978 the institute sponsored 66 Southeast Asian families; in 1979, 449.

The problems faced by these immigrants dwarfed those of earlier refugees. The Southeast Asians had no ties to America, and often no inkling of culture, climate, or language. Hmong tribesmen had had a written language only since the 1960s, when westerners transcribed the vocabulary into a Roman alphabet. When the first plane loads of immigrants arrived via resettlement camps, there

The International Institute helped to resettle refugees from Southeast Asia after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Photo courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.



were no relatives who could be called upon for assistance. And the institute—staff and its members—knew little about these newcomers.

Nonetheless, the institute's staff served as the refugees' link to Providence and to American culture, registering children at school, taking people to dentists, scheduling driver's exams, explaining American gadgets. Staff members negotiated with landlords and utilities and furniture stores. The institute even acted as a bank, loaning money to refugees.

But resettlement did not go smoothly. Local institutions encountered problems as they struggled to accommodate their new clients. For instance, Providence regulations required medical exams for all children starting school, yet the health clinic had a weeks-long backlog of appointments. Until the Providence school system received a \$97,000 federal grant to hire four teachers and three aides, the schools had no personnel familiar with Southeast Asian children. Everybody needed English classes, yet the Office of Refugee Resettlement did not pay for enough classes for those wanting to enroll in them. Contracts for job training were short-term and hampered by rigid regulations. Federally funded mental health workers, stationed in Boston, spent only two days a week in Providence. Services were so scattered that in 1979 the Council of Community Services published a service guidebook for sponsors.³⁵

Worst of all, though, was the abrupt transition from Thai camp to South Providence tenement, a transition that left many refugees distraught and frightened of new neighbors, new laws, new homes filled with unfamiliar televisions and toasters and doorbells. And there was no simple solution for their anguish.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement wanted sponsors to settle newcomers into housing, jobs, and school quickly. The more quickly immigrants were settled, however, the less time they had for the English lessons, job training, and acculturation that would ease their transition. Early bureaucratic reports praised Rhode Island sponsors for resettling their clients expeditiously; later reports noted that refugees who were more slowly resettled used the extra time to good advantage.

The immigrants were ripe for exploitation. Not only did they not know English; they did not know their rights or how to insist on them, and they feared reprisals for speaking out. Some landlords crowded families into overpriced tenements; some factory owners severely overworked their new employees. Racial animosity erupted into violence, and the refugee-victims did not complain. Critics blamed the people who abused the refugees, but they also blamed the refugees' putative protector-sponsors—organizations like the International Institute.³⁶

Continuing to adapt, by 1979 the Institute had three Southeast Asians on its staff to help the refugees. Though acculturation was difficult, over time the immigrants began to grow more acclimated to their new home, and clans and families were reunited when Southeast Asians came to Providence from other cities.



In 1976, when the task of resettling Southeast Asian immigrants was beginning, Nelly Ayvasian became the new director of the institute following the death of Raymond O'Dowd, who had served as director for fifteen years. Ayvasian had come to the institute in 1954, when she had been invited to dance at its Flag

Day festival. It was an invitation she had initially refused. She had been working for four years as a dressmaker in Providence when she got the invitation, which had a red feather in the corner to represent the Red Feather Community Fund. But the juxtaposition of a red feather beside the word *International* connoted Communists to her. "International to me meant the organized Communist party and the red feather on the stationery scared me."³⁷ Only after a Russian friend at Brown University assured her that the institute was not a Communist front did she agree to dance. Subsequently she volunteered as a tutor and a translator for the many languages she spoke. In 1959, the year she became an American citizen, she joined the staff as a social worker, and later she became the institute's supervisor of immigration and naturalization services. For a few months in 1962 she served as acting director. The position she stepped into in 1976 seemed made for her, in an organization whose history was intertwined with her own.

In 1979 the institute moved again, leaving the carriage house-stable that Raymond O'Dowd had deemed inadequate years earlier. Initially the United Way (the former United Fund) did not approve a capital campaign to purchase a new building, but after observing the numbers of people streaming into and out of the Princeton Avenue facility, it gave its consent. Thanks in large measure to Providence's mayor Vincent Cianci, who pledged support from the Office of Community Development's Block Grant Fund, the institute bought the Dr. Edmund D. Chesebro House, a 2½-story mansion dating from 1900, at 421 Elmwood Avenue. Fittingly, the institute's former Princeton Avenue headquarters were later occupied by the Southeast Asian Women's Cooperative, a group of forty-five women marketing the colorful hand-quilted squares (*pa ndau*) that hang today in Rhode Island offices and homes.

In 1980 the budget of the International Institute reached \$625,000, much of it funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. The institute was no longer dependent solely on the United Way, though that organization remained a key financial supporter (in 1982 it allocated \$147,000 to the institute). As a United Way agency, the institute followed a long-established procedure: it presented its budget to the United Way, which reviewed the request, along with competing requests, before dividing money among its member agencies. Barring major program revisions or United Way campaign shortfalls, agencies generally received roughly the same allocation from year to year.

In the early 1980s the institute learned that government funding was less reliable. In 1980 President Reagan promised to reduce spending by the federal government; two years later that promise halved the institute's budget to \$325,000. Other programs focusing on refugee resettlement fell to the same federal ax. The institute reduced the size of its staff, but not the number of clients that it served.



Spurred by relaxed immigration regulations and by poverty and persecution in their homelands, substantial numbers of refugees from Central and South America were arriving in the United States by the early 1970s. As many as 6,000 lived in Rhode Island in 1970, and their number would grow to some 33,000 by 1982. While most immigrants gravitated to the International

Institute, if only to bring relatives here or to apply for citizenship, many Latin Americans did not. Some had come illegally, or on temporary visas. Some planned to stay only a few years, earning money to send home, and then return home themselves. When President Carter offered conditional amnesty to illegal immigrants, many did not pursue it.

Yet the Latin American newcomers needed basic services, primarily English lessons. In response, an organization born of 1960s idealism and governmental largess sprang up: Project Persona. Its founder was Judy Murphy. Working in Providence's Model Cities Program in 1971, Murphy complained that English classes for foreigners were not geared to the Spanish-speaking immigrants, who instead needed instruction in "Survival English," offered at convenient times and in convenient places. Besides, the established centers for instruction—the Opportunities Industrialization Center, the Urban Education Center of Rhode Island College, the Providence Adult Basic Education Center, the International Institute—were turning people away from oversubscribed classes.

She had an idea: with supplies donated by the Providence Public Library and with volunteer tutors recruited from Brown University, she could offer Survival English in local churches and immigrants' homes. Soon the program, officially called Providing English Referral and Social Opportunities, established a base at the Knight Memorial branch library on Elmwood Avenue. As the program's sole full-time staff member, Murphy recruited volunteers from Brown, the Teachers' Corps, Vista, and the local community. All she asked was enthusiasm. "It might help if the speakers know a little Spanish," she said, "but it isn't necessary."³⁸

In addition to Survival English classes, Project Persona offered discussions on topics as varied as sex education, child care, politics, and grocery shopping—

Staff members of Project Persona, 1982. Photo courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.



whatever people were interested in. It conducted high school equivalency preparations, spurred production of a film, took people on a bus tour to Red Cross headquarters, ran a children's story hour. Volunteers tutored people in their homes. Because it gave people the help they wanted, the program thrived, with word-of-mouth praise spreading throughout the refugee community.

Murphy parlayed the work of Project Persona into money—from government, from the United Way, from foundations, from businesses. In 1971 the project received \$12,000 from the library. By 1974 its budget had grown to \$56,000, half underwritten by the Office of Economic Opportunity and half by the United Way, with additional contributions from local businesses. The library donated space and managerial help. Still drawing funds from governmental poverty programs, Project Persona became an affiliate of the United Way in 1977. The following year, when it moved to the Central Providence YMCA, the organization had a staff of twenty full- and part-time workers.

In 1980 Murphy was succeeded as director by William Shuey, who had taught English in Turkey with the Peace Corps and in Providence with the Opportunities Industrialization Center. That year, with a budget of \$225,000 (\$58,000 from the United Way), the program expanded beyond the Hispanic community. A class designed just for Indo-Chinese refugees quickly filled its seventy-five slots, and fifty people had to be turned away. Local Hmong clansmen were invited to enroll in a special six-hour-a-day language class, with the promise of a \$3-an-hour stipend from CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) money. In 1981 six hundred students of twenty-five different nationalities were attending the program's language classes on an average day, and the Survival English approach was winning national recognition. By then the project's personnel comprised thirty ESL (English as a second language) professionals, a volunteer community board, and several dozen volunteer tutors. When the organization felt the omnipresent federal ax in 1983, the United Way gave it an additional \$40,000 emergency grant. In 1984 Project Persona's budget reached \$450,000.

Two refugee-assistance organizations were now operating along parallel tracks. The established and venerable International Institute had been offering its expertise in immigration, language classes, and social work to immigrants from over fifty countries for some sixty years; the eleven-year-old grassroots endeavor Project Persona was conducting a statewide program built around its classes in Survival English, a program originally designed for Latin American immigrants but since expanded to include other groups as well. The two organizations were clearly performing complementary services for much the same people. Moreover, both organizations were drawing from the same pool of dollars, competing for dwindling federal grants and for money from the same local foundations and businesses.

The resolution of this situation was difficult but obvious. In June 1984 the two organizations' boards of directors merged, and Project Persona became a division of the International Institute. At that time the institute also acquired a new director. Having decided to retire, Ayvasian had been interviewing prospective replacements referred by the national organization, but she had found none that she thought could—or should—head the institute. Instead, she chose William Shuey, the director of Project Persona, as her successor.



With Immigrants continuing to seek out the International Institute, by 1988 it had outgrown the Chesebro mansion. Once again the board began the search-and-bid process, looking for a building large enough to accommodate oversubscribed programs, yet cheap enough for a strained budget. Mayor Cianci, the grandchild of immigrants, again pledged public dollars.

The board finally settled on a foreclosed property at 645 Elmwood Avenue, a few blocks down the street. The building had been constructed by the Elks in 1967, then sold in 1985 to a nonprofit group that sought to “incubate” small businesses. The institute purchased the building for \$290,000 and moved in during the summer of 1993.

Edith Terry Bremer, the founder of the first International Institute, would not recognize the Providence institute’s new home. People fill its three floors of classrooms, meeting rooms, and offices, space that previous directors would never have imagined. Indeed, one unsubstantiated yet plausible anecdote holds that when Ellis Yatman and his friends were quietly raising “the miracle dollar” for the carriage house at 104 Princeton Avenue in 1957, they could have raised

enough to buy the larger main house, but they believed that neither the community or the United Way would accept such a commodious facility for assisting foreigners.³⁹

Bremer would laud the Providence institute’s broad community funding. Service fees and tuition now provide 42 percent of the institute’s \$1.6 million budget, and government contracts supply another 25 percent. The United Way, providing 13 percent of the budget, remains important, but it is no longer the institute’s sole funder or controlling voice.

Yet the institute is not just buildings and budgets but an idea, first formulated by Bremer in the early part of the century. Bremer envisioned the organization as an ethnic mosaic, one in which newcomers would be offered guidance, with full respect for their ethnic backgrounds, by “nationality workers.” Today, twenty of the thirty-five full-time staff at the Providence institute were born in other countries, including El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, China, Portugal, Cambodia, and

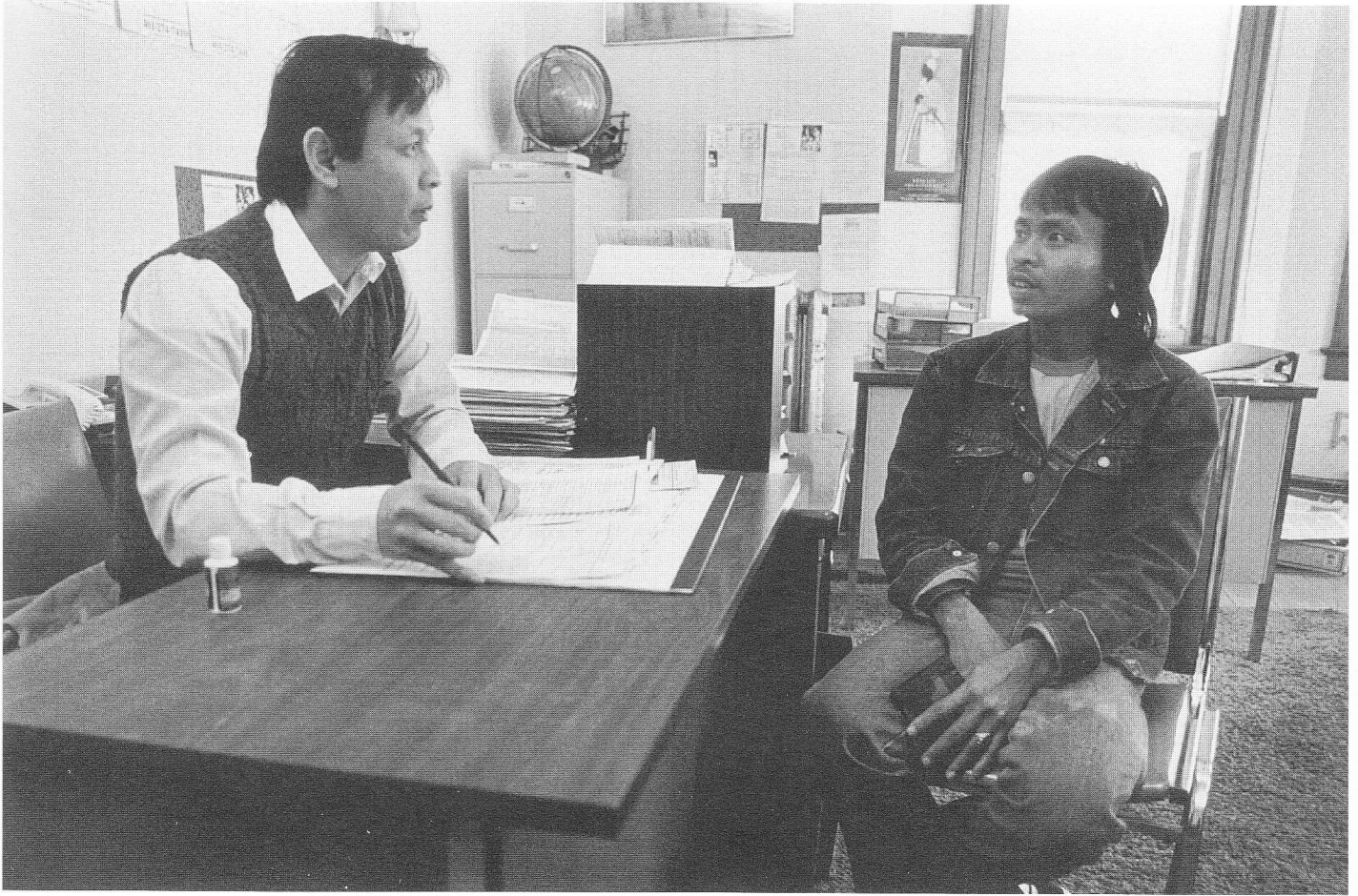
Bangladesh. Cambodian wall hangings and Latin American quilts line the walls, and there are Spanish-language newspapers scattered on tables in the front hall. Board members plan ethnic balls. Meanwhile, immigrants still learn English, fill out citizenship papers, and struggle to bring over relatives to join them in this country.

Since 1970 the number of immigrants to Rhode Island has almost doubled. A slowing influx of Southeast Asians has reduced their proportion among the institute’s clients from 50 percent in 1980 to 10 percent today; most clients now come from Latin America, though turmoil anywhere in the world has its reverberations here. Nearly one in five current residents of Providence was born outside the United States.

“We were all immigrants once,” an institute fund-raising appeal once declared. Even more to the point, we are all Americans now.



English classes remain a vital component of the International Institute’s mission. Photo, circa 1987, courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.



More than seventy years after its founding, the International Institute continues to help new generations of immigrants. Photo, circa 1986, by John Foraste, courtesy of the International Institute of Rhode Island.

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The International Institute of Rhode Island was founded in 1921 to provide assistance to Providence's substantial immigrant population. Photo, 1929, YWCA Graphics Collection. RIHS Collection (RHI X3 8584).



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Notes

1. "Reviving Italian Handicraft," *Providence Sunday Journal*, 23 Dec. 1917, sec. 5.
2. The adjective *philanthropic* is used in this study to refer to the voluntary, nonprofessional charity work of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, against whose assumptions and methods the reformers of the settlement movement were reacting.
3. John Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), refers to a generic settlement movement in Providence, a movement in which churches and other poor-relief groups participated. In a 1909 study of Providence philanthropy, Mary Conyngton defined settlement work as work taken on "by a group of people, necessarily possessing some degree of culture and some means, who [choose] to dwell in the poorer quarters of the city with the intention of sharing neighborhood life," but she noted that the work done by "church settlements, nursing settlements, musical, social, and educational settlements" had all come to be considered settlement work; "in fact," she added, "there are very few forms of social or friendly activity which are not called settlement work." Mary Conyngton, "Philanthropy," in *A Modern City: Providence, Rhode Island, and Its Activities*, ed. William Kirk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909), 309-10.
4. Listings and descriptions of Providence charities appear in E. H. Hall, "What Christian Women in Providence Have Done," *Providence Evening Press*, 18 June 1877, and Conyngton, "Philanthropy," 290.
5. Middle-class assumptions about "deserving poor" and poverty as a moral symptom are discussed in Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Equality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 261, and Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 78.
6. Providence Poor Department, "Report of the Overseer of the Poor Relating to the Charity Building," 1878, City Document no. 20, pp. 2-3. See also *Manual of the Providence Aid Society*, 1855 (Providence, 1857), 10-16, and Hall, "Christian Women in Providence."
7. Conyngton, "Philanthropy," 288.
8. "Outside charity" is discussed in Zunz, *Changing Face of Equality*, 261. For a discussion specific to Providence, see Conyngton, "Philanthropy," 310-11.
9. Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence*, 271-73; Conyngton, "Philanthropy," 295.
10. *Manual of the Providence Aid Society*, 17-20.
11. Hall, "Christian Women in Providence."
12. *Fourth Annual Report of the Bethany Home of Rhode Island, with Charter and By-Laws*, 1896 (Providence, 1896), 9.
13. *Fifth Annual Report of the Rhode Island Nursery Association for Homeless Infants*, 1893 (Providence, 1893), 3-4.
14. *Eighth Annual Report of the Rhode Island Nursery Association for Homeless Infants*, 1896 (Providence, 1896), 6.
15. *Report of the Immigrant Education Bureau*, [September 1911-January 1913] (Providence, 1913), 8.
16. *Ibid.*, 11-12, 14, 17-20; *Report for the Year Ending January 1914 of the Immigrant Education Bureau* (Providence, n.d.), 9-10.
17. Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence*, 213.
18. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 165-69.
19. *Reports of the Mount Pleasant Working Girls' Association, 1887-1902* (Providence, 1903), 3-6. The first resident head worker, Miss M. Emerett Coleman, lived in-house in 1900 and 1901 and was responsible for systematizing the organization's records and making the facilities more homelike. *Ibid.*, 6. Alida Sprague herself lived on Prospect Street on the East Side. The organization's 1912 and 1913 reports indicate that board members lived on Hope, Angell, Benefit, George, Cushing, Brown, Stimson, and other East Side streets; one member lived in Bristol, and all the others listed their faculty addresses at Brown University.
20. *Ibid.*, 3.
21. *Report of Sprague House Association*, 1907 (Providence, 1908), 6-7.
22. *Study Report: Federal Hill House* (Providence: Rhode Island Council of Community Services, 1965), 2:40; *The Federal Hill Area, Providence, Rhode Island* (Chicago: De Leuw, Cather & Co., 1964), 13.

