

# **Louisa Lee Schuyler: A Life Well-lived; A Legacy that Endures**



**Louise Skolnik, DSW, and Richard Skolnik, Ph.D.**

**March 2022**

**Dear Louisa,**

The year is 2022, and your legacy of advocacy, compassion, and leadership lives on in the organization you founded.

Today, we are the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, in your honor. Every day our team works for a more equitable and just New York State, where all children and families are supported.

We are proud to report that today's SCAA is a state and national leader in advocacy for public policies that center children and families impacted by poverty and other disadvantage. This probably doesn't surprise you—as we've learned more about your life and work, we've discovered the many ways that your vision for SCAA set us on our current path. Your attention to policies with evidence to back them up, and your belief in looking beyond “the way things have always been” created an organization built on the knowledge that government can and must do better for all.

While we no longer visit state institutions, we still seek out data and evidence to support the most effective policies. In partnership with like-minded organizations, we deliver that data and policy analysis to the Governor (a woman, you may be pleased to hear), the NYS Legislature, and colleagues across the state. The process and the policies have evolved since 1872, but the roots you planted in advocacy, compassion, and leadership remain strong.

As we celebrate SCAA's 150th anniversary, we are proud to continue your vision of tying compassion to active change, and achieving results.

Since you founded SCAA, the organization has had far-reaching impact. Historic successes include developing modern public health laws, spearheading major public health initiatives, actively working to eradicate tuberculosis and diphtheria, advancing child-centered child welfare reforms, securing more compassionate mental health care, and securing new attention and funding for young children and their families.

In 1875, you successfully advocated for passage of the first State law related to the treatment of children living in poverty. We share your belief in the power of effective legislation with appropriation. Today, our goals have gone beyond better treatment of those impacted by poverty to upstream solutions that meaningfully reduce child poverty, year over year. Perhaps our proudest recent accomplishment is spearheading the inception and passage of the Child Poverty Reduction Act, which sets a goal for New York State to reduce child poverty by half within the next decade.

Louisa, on days when we feel discouraged, we remember your tenacity. When we need inspiration, we remember your determination to fight for what is right, regardless of the barriers that must be overcome. And when the pace of government change seems too slow, we recall just how much reform and evolution has occurred since you first set out on your mission.

Every day we are grateful for your vision, your determination, and your belief in a better world. It is because of your goals and leadership that we are here today, and it will be through our goals and leadership that SCAA will continue to create change toward a more just world.

Thank you, Louisa. We are committed to carrying out your legacy for years to come.

Sincerely,

Kate Breslin, President and CEO  
with the Board of Trustees and Staff of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy

# Louisa Lee Schuyler: A Life Well-lived; A Legacy that Endures

In February 1926, the final year of her exceptional life, Louisa Lee Schuyler wrote to the Russell Sage Foundation suggesting that it consider the installation of rooftop gardens atop New York City docks as refuge from the summer heat for tenement house families. Here she is at age 89, ailing, her sight failing, yet she remains engaged, expresses concern, and advocates for an innovative solution. Little wonder then that the *New York Times*, in marking her passing later that year, included the headline “Friend of the Poor.” Still, “friend” was clearly insufficient, and did not convey all that she had done over the years for the people living in poverty, people living with physical and mental disabilities, the orphan, the forlorn, the forgotten, for her dedication to people far removed from her lofty world of privilege.

One historian places Schuyler squarely in the middle of the “remarkable transformation of philanthropy that took place in America between the Civil War and World War I.” In 1901, the *New York Times* observed that to say “Louisa Lee Schuyler was a humanitarian and a pioneer in social work would be an understatement.” Years later, that paper noted that, “No woman of her generation in New York did more in initiating and carrying forward constructive reforms in the public care of the sick of body or mind, the poor and the helpless.” These reforms, it added, have become “the commonplaces of modern philanthropy.”

## The Schuyler Family Influence

One could, perhaps, imagine that as a linear descendant of Alexander Hamilton, she had somehow inherited, as one observer noted, his creative mind unafraid to question conventional thinking. In a nation overwhelmingly agricultural, populated largely by farmers, Hamilton chose to champion commerce and promote industry. Unlike his contemporaries committed to limited government

Students of the period (1870 to 1926) agree that any list of outstanding leaders in the field of public welfare (namely Josephine Shaw Lowell, Lillian Wald, Jane Adams, Frances Perkins, Florence Kelly, Grace and Edith Abbott) must include Louisa Lee Schuyler. Certainly, in her day, she was widely known and acknowledged due to her numerous and significant contributions to the field.

Among Louisa’s greatest achievements was the founding of the State Charities Aid Association (SCAA) in 1872, in response to the abhorrent conditions she observed in hospitals and almshouses in New York City. The Association became the driving force behind major reforms, including changes in how children living in poverty were treated; establishing the first training school for nurses in the United States; passage of a modern Public Health law in New York State; and tuberculosis prevention campaigns. SCAA, now the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy in honor of its founder, remains an important voice for the underserved, a remarkable 150 years later.

Upon her death in 1926, the *New York Times* once again hailed her as “the last, as she was the greatest of that group of noble women who... transformed New York philanthropy.” Who, then, could doubt that Louisa Lee Schuyler had left an indelible mark?

and local decision-making, Hamilton proposed activism, along with deliberate systematic central planning to advance the general welfare. Like her great grandfather, Schuyler chose to challenge long-standing assumptions and propose new pathways and possibilities. That’s probably why she was drawn to fellow New Yorker Theodore Roosevelt—they corresponded with each other—whose “Square



*Theodore and Edith Roosevelt, who were friends of Louisa Lee Schuyler*

Deal” policies provided a bold roadmap for reform. The fact that Louisa and Roosevelt’s wife, Edith, were close friends no doubt accounts for some portion of her enthusiasm.

Family history assumes relevance as well when considering Alexander Hamilton’s widowed wife Elizabeth, who lived to the age of 97, and thus for many years entered the lives of her great grandchildren. Louisa’s younger sister Georgina remembered those special occasions and Eliza’s “perfectly sweet old face and the white hair under her cap as she used to sit in the hall” at Nevis, her son James’ estate in Westchester County where she and Louisa spent so much time in their youth. Doubtless Louisa was acquainted with Elizabeth’s long-term involvement with the New York Orphan Asylum (1806) and how she had devoted herself, in every which way, decade after decade, to maintaining and supporting that institution. Louisa’s own life-long concern for the well-being of children likely can be traced back to her awareness of Eliza’s legacy with the orphanage.

Moreover, Louisa’s father George was a generous supporter of the Children’s Aid Society, one of many organizations that would emerge in New York by the middle of the 19th century, devoted, in this instance, to assisting impoverished and often abandoned children of the city. Her mother also was active there, helping to supervise one of its industrial training schools for young women living in poverty. (Louisa would, over the years, express a keen interest in “industrial education,” a program in which the poor, taught practical skills, might eventually become self-supporting.) Her mother’s efforts here no doubt explain Louisa’s early involvement, albeit limited to conducting a sewing class for immigrant mothers.

Louisa’s early years offer little to suggest that she would one day assume an outsized role in reorganizing the philanthropic landscape in New York. Given her family’s social status, there’s little doubt she would comfortably occupy the upper reaches of New York society. (She would spend her last days at the summer home of J. P. Morgan.) In her societal position lay great opportunity if one could bridge the divide between “Old Wealth” and assured privilege, and those monied social climbers benefitting from the rapid expansion of the national economy. Once she turned to philanthropic activity, Louisa displayed great skill knitting together these “rivals” and directing their efforts and resources toward advancing her reform agenda. Clearly, she was well-positioned to do so: few were likely to refuse “Lou,” as she was known by her friends.

Louisa grew up in the company of her parents and two siblings: a slightly older brother, George, and Georgina, five years her junior. The family divided their time between a New York City residence and another in Westchester County. Louisa remembers spending much time at Nevis, located near Dobbs Ferry and named for the island in the West Indies where Alexander Hamilton was born. These were happy memories. “We loved that house,” she recalled. “[All] we young people cared for were the dances, the games, the merrymaking,” as well as riding, sailing, and swimming in summer, and skating, and coasting parties in the winter.

Along with other youth in her circle, Louisa enjoyed the benefits of private tutors. Also, there was the advantage of frequent visits of family friends, including a parade of notable New Yorkers. Visitors included celebrated writer Washington Irving; former New York mayor and leading citizen Philip Hone; and well-known lawyer and civic leader George Templeton Strong. Strong, the famous diarist, would describe Louisa as “certainly a most intelligent, energetic and diligent young damsel.”



Beginning in her early years, Louisa in the company of other family members would be an eager and frequent traveler, often to vacation destinations in the Northeast, as well as to Europe, Egypt and beyond. That she was worldly, there could be no doubt. When assessing her upbringing and formal education, one must also consider the diverse experiences and acquaintances encountered on her frequent

excursions. When residing in the city, the record indicates she enjoyed the entertainment of the day. We are informed about her attendance at dramatic performances by the famed Shakespearean actor Edwin Booth (brother of John Wilkes), and her presence at sermons delivered by such notable clerics as Henry Bellows and Henry Ward Beecher.

## The Schuyler Status

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What was it about Louisa, beyond her obvious talents and diligent work, that explains all that she achieved? One must reckon with who she was. Her family roots were embedded in the very foundation of the United States. She never openly capitalized upon this connection, but doubtless “people knew.” The fact that the Schuylers were associated with the colonial Dutch elite only added to family lustre. New York’s Social Register regularly included Louisa among its ranks, signifying her “upper crust” status. New York’s self-appointed arbiter of social taste, Ward McAllister, also had a list. In 1892 he issued a much-awaited compilation of the city’s “400,” a social ledger of those he deemed to be the movers and shakers of New York (not until 1898 did New York, i.e. Manhattan and the Bronx, join with Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island to form Greater New York—now five boroughs).

Louisa’s brother George, a figure well known within New York’s upper class circles, was included in that list, confirming the reputation of the Schuyler family.

Given her privileged position, Louisa was able to move easily among the city’s elites and recruit those of this class disposed toward “good works.” Most of them, it was acknowledged, harbored a distinct distaste for politics, preferring instead to assume leadership roles within New York’s cultural world (e.g., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York Public Library, New York Zoological Society), and especially in its philanthropic institutions. Beyond the upper class, there existed a growing cadre of wealthy individuals (newspapers occasionally published estimated numbers of New York’s “millionaires”) in a position to help fund philanthropic activities in the city.

## The Civil War Years

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In all likelihood, this pleasant unexceptional existence might have continued indefinitely had American society not come apart in 1861. The Civil War would alter the United States forever, and would mark a distinct change of direction for Schuyler. For Louisa, the years 1861 to 1865 would be extraordinarily eventful. She would commit herself to the struggle with unflagging devotion, working to the point of exhaustion to support the Union War effort. These years would test her to the limits and beyond, highlight an extraordinary range of

skills and an uncommon capacity for organization. She would associate with people beyond her usual restricted circles, individuals who she would later call upon to join her in projects. Her experiences in this period transformed her, instilling an unquestioned self-confidence and appreciation of the potential of concerted action.

Standard accounts of the Civil War have long focused upon endless battles, a parade of generals, President Abraham Lincoln, the Gettysburg



*Frederick Law Olmstead, friend and advisor of Louisa Lee Schuyler*

Address, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Recently, historians, re-examining the records, have revealed the struggle was far bloodier than once assumed. Losses from battles, wounds, disease and neglect were greater than those the United States would suffer in all its other wars combined. Louisa came to know this part of the struggle all too

well. “It is impossible,” she wrote of the battlefields, “to realize the terrible scenes there.” Soon after the outbreak of war, New Yorkers rallied to the Union, volunteering to fight, but also organizing in support of the war effort behind the front lines. This would involve raising money for supplies, training and providing nurses, staffing hospitals and transports, collecting foodstuffs, producing and purchasing clothing—in short mobilizing civilian aid across the North.

A call went out to this effect in New York City on April 29, 1861. The response was immediate and most reassuring, with thousands responding. They gathered together at a mass meeting at Cooper Union, the effort led by the Unitarian pastor Henry Bellow of All Souls Church, where Louisa belonged. Bellow realized that Louisa, though only 24 years old, possessed the capacity to oversee some portion of this ambitious project. He was right. She was placed on the Executive Committee of the new organization, the Women’s Central Association of Relief (WCAR). She was put in charge of coordinating the activities of hundreds of similar citizen groups around the country. Thanks to industrialist Peter Cooper (a friend of Pastor Bellow), the organization’s headquarters in

New York were on the second floor of the Peter Cooper Institute, the very place presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln had delivered a critical address prior to his election.

Meanwhile, the WCAR essentially merged with the United States Sanitary Commission, a private operation authorized by Congress to operate throughout the North in a manner similar to that undertaken by the WCAR. Henry Bellow, the spark behind New York’s effort, became President of the Sanitary Commission, while Louisa’s friend Frederick Law Olmstead (who with Calvin Vaux would later design Central Park and become an eminent landscape architect) served as executive secretary.

For the next several years, Louisa and her mostly female associates labored tirelessly in pursuit of their mission—mobilizing the civilian homefront in support of the Union war effort. Even during the bloody Draft Riots in New York (July 4-16, 1863), Louisa carried on. She remained a whirlwind of activity, often working punishing hours (10:00 a.m. until 3:00 or 4:00 a.m.) assembling and communicating with an ever-expanding network of local affiliates. There was no obvious blueprint; improvisation was the order of the day. Talents, hitherto latent, surfaced with creativity in abundance put on display. The task involved identifying potential local leaders and encouraging them to organize affiliates (whose numbers rose and waned depending upon the fortunes of Union armies.) Decisions had to be reached about where to dispatch nurses; Louisa was in receipt of a letter from Louisa May Alcott, who was serving with the Sanitary Commission, advising that, “No young ladies should be sent at all.” Whether to encourage home production of clothing, or to purchase ready-made garments from manufacturers was also a consideration. Continuous shipments of supplies, carefully boxed, including foodstuffs, were directed to where needed most. There could be no let-up; at the battle front, supplies often made the difference.

Without reservation, Louisa threw herself into the task; saw herself as part of a monumental undertaking requiring total dedication. One author familiar with the war effort noted that Louisa displayed “a veritable passion for efficacy, discipline, and unsentimental hard work.” Another, reviewing her voluminous correspondence, concluded that her letters were “masterpieces of praise, admiration, suggestion and veiled reproof.” She travelled extensively and lectured local audiences about supporting the war. She urged colleagues on as well. One of them, away on vacation, received a parcel from Louisa containing WCAR stationery, along with a firm request that correspondence to local organizations not be interrupted.

No slackening of effort should take place, she implored. “There seems,” she wrote, “to be a growing feeling among the people that the government is doing so much now that the work of the commission is nearly at an end. Our work is to last as long as the War does, and probably longer.” When the South surrendered and the WCAR closed its doors, Louisa sounded a triumphant note, tinged with sadness and regret, as when referring to the “dear old rooms where so many busy, happy hours have been spent.” Upon returning briefly to her Peter Cooper office for the last time she remarked that, “I haven’t gotten used to the passive tense yet.” Parting with her wartime associates did not come easily. “I couldn’t bear,” she wrote, “to have the dear old people disperse and go away without fixing some time for meeting again somewhere.”

As we shall discover, Louisa—in the years following—would repeatedly invoke and draw inspiration from her wartime experiences. Entering the war as a capable, but untested young woman, she emerged as an exceptionally self-confident and skilled administrator and leader. She came to understand the value of organized effort, and that maintaining a network of often distant affiliates required patience, persistence and personal attention to detail.

She sent hundreds upon hundreds of handwritten letters recruiting potential members, keeping them informed and providing information to anxious soldier families.

She devised, distributed, and analyzed surveys allowing her to keep abreast of local sentiment and needs. She came to appreciate the vital and often unrecognized role women played in the affairs of their communities, especially in wartime.

Attracting influential individuals was important to a cause, but Louisa was also a strong believer in the overriding value of organization. Her experience during the Civil War convinced her that organized endeavor held the key to success. Individual exertion could perhaps provide the initiative as well as initial funding, but it was only when greater numbers joined in, formally combined, and coordinated their efforts that significant progress followed. Louisa consistently preached the virtues of organization. “The efficiency of all associated efforts,” she insisted, “depends largely on good organization and the enforcement of discipline.” She spoke of an “esprit de Corps,” “obedience to rules,” and other “soldierly qualities so essential to volunteer work which may be developed by firm discipline and an earnest interest in a common cause.” A well-run organization could mobilize large numbers of supporters, influence public opinion, develop expertise, and pursue long-term projects and goals. Schuyler, however, did not discount the advantages of enlisting the “right people” to support her efforts and met with great success in this regard throughout her life and work.

The Sanitary Commission, she wrote, “was a great educator to the women of the day.” By the war’s end Louisa had become an impressive leader, well equipped for whatever challenges lay ahead.

Alas, while the war revealed exceptional strength, it also exposed her vulnerability. Totally devoted to the cause, working long hours day after day left her exhausted, completely depleted, and by the middle of 1865, barely able to function, unable to read for more than ten minutes or walk beyond a few steps.

## A Call to Action

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It would all begin again in 1871. That is when Louisa took up the first of many causes that would establish her reputation in the field of social welfare. Even as she did, it was not as a “professional reformer,” single-mindedly devoted to the eradication of social evils. Although sympathetic, she had not joined the ranks of the Abolitionists before the Civil War. And though highly supportive of women afterwards, she’d not become a suffragette. Great would be her accomplishments over the years, but she would not be consumed by her “crusades”. Instead, she would pursue a balanced life in the company of friends, enjoying the companionship of her sister Georgina.

Georgina, with whom she lived for eighty years, was also active in reform circles: she was a friend of poetess Emma Lazarus, and was largely responsible for having her poem “The New Colossus” engraved on a plaque and placed on the Statue of Liberty in 1903. Georgina and Louisa traveled extensively overseas and vacationed at exclusive resorts in Newport, Rhode Island; Lenox, Massachusetts; and Mount Desert, Maine. A facile writer, Georgina was comfortable at professional conferences, at ease before a lectern, and at home at New York’s Colony Club (an exclusive facility for women), or at the theater, or concert hall.



Homer Folks, Executive Director of SCAA from 1893 to 1947

The prescription was a lengthy period of recuperation. For Louisa, travel to Europe and elsewhere would serve that purpose. It would be many years before she would return. When she did, the next and most noteworthy phase of her life would get underway.

Louisa fit in easily whatever the surroundings, even as she worked at her own pace to alter the social landscape in New York. What might have drawn her along this path? She was not inclined toward philosophic reflections, nor ideological inspiration. Nevertheless, one must consider the long accepted “responsibilities” of the Schuylers’ class to serve, a *noblesse oblige* that would draw other patricians to her side. They were, according to her associate Elizabeth Hobson, “the very best of our citizens of enlightened views,” people of “benevolence, experience, wealth and social position.” This might also have been her response to the “Social Gospel,” actively advanced in this period by Protestant clerics’ teachings that spoke of a higher form of Christianity, and emphasized the need to follow Christ’s example in relieving the burden borne by the poor and needy.

Above all, she was most inspired to respond by what she observed and experienced firsthand. Homer Folks, who would become the long-time Executive Director of SCAA, agreed that her impulses were best understood “by what she did [more] than what she said... She was a woman of action... a valiant soldier, fighting hard for noble causes.” That action was guided by close analysis. Folks observed that Louisa “could think of more questions than anybody else I ever knew.” “There was,” he added, “no turning Miss Schuyler away with any halfway business.” A newspaper editorial in 1926 confirmed this assessment. “She had a brilliant mind of untiring activity joined to a heart of unbounded sympathy.”



## The Time was Right: Social Welfare Movements in the U.S. and Abroad

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In view of her background and talents, Louisa was well prepared to make a difference. Also operating in her favor were a series of shifting attitudes and perceptions regarding the “social problem” as it was then known across sections of American society. Indeed, Schuyler in some instances would anticipate some of them, as well as hasten their acceptance. That was in part because the problems she would address were emerging for the first time from the shadows. Abstract theory and moral judgments would be questioned once direct observation and analysis came to the fore.

Robert Bremner, in his groundbreaking book From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty, reminds us that starting in the late 19th century, the lives and living conditions of society’s poor came under close scrutiny and were revealed in books, studies, and surveys by those who were “eager to discover, reveal and be guided by the truths of actual life.” Furthermore, the emerging profession of social work encouraged work with and among the poor in settlement houses within slum districts, where social workers came to recognize the complex causes of poverty and dependence.

In 1890, journalist Jacob Riis in his landmark volume How the Other Half Lives, provided graphic photographic evidence of the squalid conditions of life within New York’s tenement house districts even as Congress authorized a study of slums in four American cities around the same time. Then there was the sensation when *New York World* reporter Nelly Bly published “Ten Days in a Madhouse” after she managed to have herself committed to an insane asylum on Blackwell’s Island (now Roosevelt Island), and revealed the inhumane conditions at that facility. Bear in mind, Schuyler’s initial entry into reform (1871) began when she personally investigated and revealed conditions within a Westchester County poor house, followed by her work to redress serious deficiencies and introduce long-term reforms.

*“Perhaps Miss Schuyler’s greatest characteristic was that of complete readiness to undertake the thing that needed to be done when convinced that was what was needed to be done, wholly irrespective of the difficulties that seemed to be in the way.”*

—Homer Folks, SCAA Executive Director

This was years before others would undertake such in-person visitations and calls for change.

These and other related developments were, at the same time, occurring in Europe as well, especially in England. Members of America’s upper classes maintained close ties with prominent personages there, often crossing the Atlantic for extended stays. One author notes that American tourists, visiting England, expressed interest in the social reforms under way there and during their travels were “often keen to see progressive social initiatives.”

Florence Nightingale’s innovative methods in nursing and hospital care at St. Thomas Hospital in London inspired similar developments at New York’s Bellevue Hospital, most notably SCAA’s training school for nurses. Louisa was impressed with the work of Octavia Hill in England, and her efforts to improve housing conditions for the poor.

Schuyler was responsible for the publication in the United States of Hill’s book on housing reforms (“Homes of the London Poor,” 1875). In her introduction to the book, Schuyler concedes that while conditions of poverty in the US and England may differ, “the broad truths of humanity are the same everywhere.” She then offers us a most revealing statement about what will motivate her over the years. That is: “Helping the poor towards self-support and self-respect; bringing to their aid an unwearied patience, a true sympathy and a large hope; loving them and trusting them; above all, realizing that they and we are children of one Father.”

Publications from Germany, then a leader in the fields of science and medicine, were also frequently referenced in SCAA materials. There was a sense, therefore, that the tide was turning, new and enlightened methods were gaining attention across a broad front.

And so they were. For several decades in the late 19th and early 20th century, the United States entered what historians term the

Progressive Era, a period of institutional reform. Though Schuyler never formally joined their ranks (political labels would not have suited her “nonpartisan” persona), she spoke their language and pursued many of the same objectives. Like the Progressives, Louisa believed good government informed by experts, buttressed by data, and supported by an enlightened public held the key to reform.

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## A New Philanthropy Emerges

We should not overlook the fact that while industrial advance served to enrich many Americans, some recognized that their immense wealth brought responsibilities and so determined to give back in constructive ways. In Andrew Carnegie’s 1889 book, *Gospel of Wealth*, he urged the recently rich to commit their “surplus wealth” in ways that would reduce the growing inequality of wealth in America. Carnegie called for systematic philanthropy to replace the haphazard and “unscientific” charity giving, long practiced. In 1905 the Carnegie Foundation was established followed two years later by the Russell Sage Foundation; in 1913 the Rockefeller Foundation was created and soon after the Rosenwald Fund. All were committed to using their abundant resources to support initiatives that would improve and expand existing social programs. Louisa’s efforts at SCAA and elsewhere would likewise re-examine assumptions, expose existing deficiencies, and consider new approaches



*John D. Rockefeller, Sr. founded the Rockefeller Foundation as part of a movement toward systematic philanthropy*

with the goal of improving the delivery of services to those most in need.

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## Roadblocks to Reform

Despite an environment and a set of emerging ideas conducive to reform, efforts to change the existing system, to expose its shortcomings and propose a new set of arrangements inevitably encountered resistance. This would not surprise Louisa. She could, for example, recall how, at the start of the Civil War, the Union Army at first opposed the involvement of Sanitary Commission civilians and that doctors objected to the arrival

of female nurses. Louisa was nothing if not practical, patient and politically shrewd. She understood when to exert pressure and when to compromise, saying, “We never fight unless necessary.”

In New York City, Louisa would need to tread cautiously when dealing with the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The church was influential and had organized its own charities and

institutions for the needy. It also was suspicious, some Catholics fearing an organization like SCAA was, in reality, an arm of the Protestant church intent upon attracting Catholics, especially when caring for Catholic infants and children. Coming to the assistance of New Yorkers would therefore mean accommodating Catholic institutions and their charitable outreach efforts.

Even more influential than the Catholic Church was Tammany Hall, representing the Democratic Party in the city. Organized with

its block captains down into the local precincts, Tammany was a formidable presence. Even when Tammany wasn't directly involved, politically connected individuals who operated local charity and welfare facilities opposed outside intervention. They feared the loss of reliable sources of income if, for example, SCAA recommended they be closed, or that state funds be allocated elsewhere. SCAA regularly encountered these obstacles but understood that delays, setbacks and resistance eventually could be overcome.

## Organizing for Change: The Founding of SCAA

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The stage was set for social reform, and in 1871 Louisa Schuyler had returned to the United State after an absence of several years which she characterized as “six years of health hunting.” It is from this point on that we date her entry into the field of social welfare reform. Why she chose this path is not entirely clear, but it may simply be her reaction to a report issued by the New York State Commission of Charities (later known as the State Board of Charities), which described deplorable conditions within facilities housing the indigent.

Galvanized by these revelations and ready to get to work, Louisa was determined to conduct her own investigation. “I had never been in a poor house,” she noted as she and her sister Georgina set out to see conditions firsthand. What she would observe confirmed what she'd read.

She chose a facility located between Tarrytown and White Plains, some five to six miles from her summer home. Those in charge, while surprised, did not object to her visit. Schuyler offered no description about how she was received by the residents. One can only imagine two society ladies circulating amongst the residents. She reports on her visit: “We saw sick people, very sick people without a nurse to take care of them. The nurse in charge, old Hannah, was herself a pauper, too stiff from rheumatism to easily rise from her chair. Desperately ill and dying people, with no resident physician. We found the insane in cells, suffering from cold and hunger. Vagrants, abandoned women—no separation of the sexes.” These residents, she lamented, “cannot defend themselves... whose suffering we do not see, whose cries we cannot hear.”

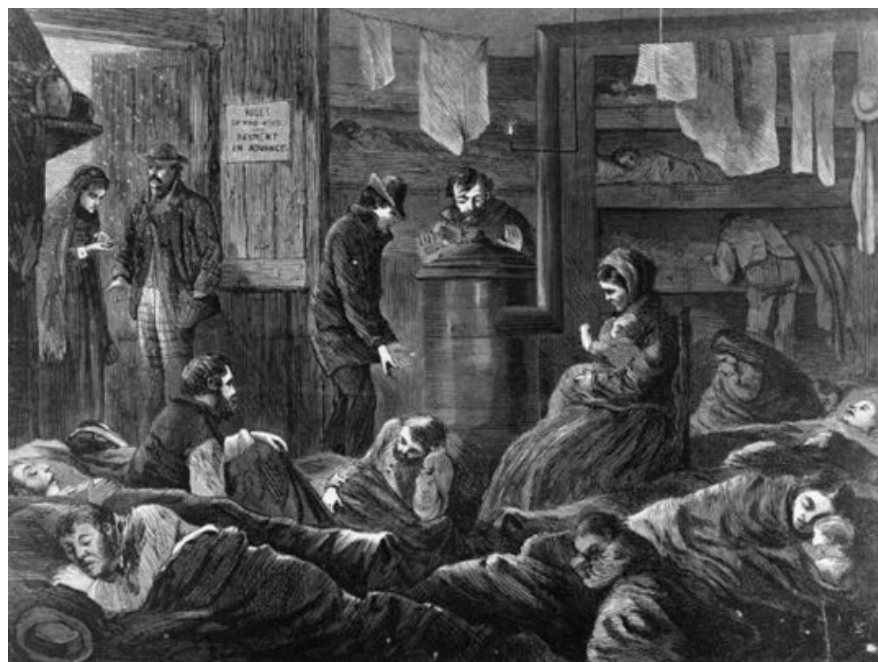
## A Plan Takes Shape

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For Louisa, this experience proved to be the beginning of a long journey to transform what obviously was an abusive system. It may well be that she considered it time once again to get to work.

She devised a plan of intervention and presented it in detail to her friend Frederick

Law Olmstead. Here is her description of Olmstead's reaction as recorded in her October 1871 diary: “And then he put me through a cross-examination of several hours, rigorous searching, imagining all sorts of contingencies, It was delightfully exciting, and I feel like my old self again—brain alive and responsive. But not a word of commendation. I feel it was



*Middleton People, New York Poorhouse, 1875-1915 – this painting depicts the “deplorable conditions” Louisa and the Visiting Committees described encountering on their visits to poorhouses around the state*

alright, but I did not know, not until midnight, when my sister came into our room and Mr. Olmstead turned to her, “I have been trying to pick flaws in your sister’s plan all evening, but without success.”

Her plan was the establishment of the State Charities Aid Association (SCAA) in response to the deplorable conditions she observed in hospitals and almshouses. SCAA would organize committees of visitors that would visit and report on the conditions and abuses within the county poorhouses. SCAA would then issue reports and recommendations for improving conditions, securing the moral and physical welfare of the “inmates” and raising institutional standards of care. A bold plan, but Louisa was ready to organize and act.

There is also reason to assume she embarked upon this mission having missed the action and sense of accomplishment associated with her Civil War years. What she now planned would not, she confessed, be nearly as exciting, but it would, as during the war, involve providing aid and comfort to those in need. There is little question that what she brought into existence

harkened back to lessons gained from her war years. Indeed, she would, on many an occasion, invoke those efforts, hoping that “now, in time of peace, our public charities need the cooperation of patriotic and benevolent private citizens, both men and women, to make these charities what they intended to do... i.e., systematic and organized work.”

Armed with her plan, Louisa would move quickly to bring it to life. Conditions, as she discovered at the Westchester County poor house, were appalling (even as she was favorably impressed by the building’s outward appearance) and likely to exist elsewhere across the state.

The situation would require continuous monitoring by local volunteers, and accordingly, the initial goal of SCAA (whose constitution and by-laws she drew up) was to organize such an operation by marshalling local volunteers county by county across New York State. These volunteers would be tasked with inspecting facilities in their local area on a regular basis, and submitting reports to the Central Committee of SCAA, then located



## Selections from Louisa Lee Schuyler's Annual Reports to the State Board of Charities

### *Louisa's Compassion for the Sick, the Aged, the Mentally Ill*

Schuyler's compassion extended to groups often ignored by or hidden from society. This is seen in report two as she comments on hospitals and poorhouses that the public passes by but "who knows what goes on in those far-away great buildings.... There is a class of persons who, if abused cannot defend themselves—whose suffering we do not see, whose cries we do not hear...." (Schuyler, 1874, p.23) She also ponders the issue of the rights of taxpayers with regard to supporting public institutions for the needy. Her perspective on this is clear... "does not humanity demand it? Think of several hundred human beings, young and old and sick, left to the mercies of a brutal keeper, with no check from the lookers-on, for these lookers-on victims themselves are afraid to talk. Who cares for the human hopes and hearts that lie buried in that dust; for the cruelty and crime and suffering which these old walls cover? Who sees the children cowering in that deep, black shadow?" (Schuyler, 1874, p.20-21). The compassion for the ill served by Bellevue and other New York City public hospitals is apparent in almost every annual report she writes. In her first report, she reveals the visiting committee's finding that care is provided by "ten-day prisoners"; she refers to this as "immoral" and as impetus for immediate action to implement the visitors' recommendation that there be a "better class of women as nurses, educated and trained for their position" (Schuyler, 1873, p.13). In report 2, she refers to Bellevue as a "monument of bygone days of ignorance" (Schuyler, 1874, p.16), and those who seek care there "for some minor surgical operation, perhaps the amputation of a finger," will, "there die, poisoned to death by the poisoned wall of the building itself" (Schuyler, 1874, p.17). Her compassion for the poor who are ill lead to the swift "successful establishment in the Hospital of the Training School for Nurses" (Schuyler, 1874, p.10). Compassion fueled her advocacy for the building of a new Bellevue Hospital but, despite arduous efforts and even the provision of building plans designed for safer service delivery, this goal was not realized.

Compassionate care for those seen as insane was not a high priority in the 19th century. However, Louisa Schuyler in report three clearly demonstrates her compassion for the mentally ill, proposing that they be housed in cottages built near hospitals so that the "harmless" be within "immediate access to the neighboring hospital if "acute symptoms" render them "dangerous to themselves or others." She then envisions, "workshops" for those in the cottages as well as "farm and dairy work" "so that the chronic or harmless cases might, with great benefit to their health, aid in their own support" (Schuyler, 1875, p.20). Her concern for this population persists and three years later she comments that "we must also call attention to the inhuman delays which attend the commitment of insane persons, retaining them unnecessarily in the damp, ill-ventilated cells at Bellevue." She goes on to again express the vision for "country homes .... where they can both work and walk freely in the open air" (Schuyler, 1878, p.10). Her compassion-fueled creative recommendation is never realized but does foreshadow elements of reforms realized in the next century.

at 52 East 20th Street in New York City. This SCAA committee in turn, benefitting from the input of knowledgeable and influential members, provided advice, made recommendations, and distributed materials to local committees in order to better direct their efforts to upgrade conditions.

Schuyler used her social standing and keen organizational skills, honed by her war relief efforts, to enlist New York's most influential minds to serve on the Board, including Theodore Roosevelt, Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles Loring Brace, Professor Theodore Dwight, William Cullen Bryant, Grace Dodge, Joseph H. Choate, Josephine Shaw Lowell,

Gertrude Stevens Rice, and Mrs. Hamilton Fish. Some of SCAA's earliest financial benefactors were women, including Anna Harkness and Margaret Sage.

Schuyler moved quickly to develop an organizational network, surely reminiscent of what she had created and nurtured during the war. She was, moreover, confident she could attract many of the same people for SCAA because, as she noted, "for four years they stood shoulder to shoulder in the ranks of the Sanitary Commission. We believe they are ready to stand by us in memory of those old war days when we worked together for our soldiers and our country, ...I have a peculiar feeling about our old Sanitary Commission fellow workers and care very much indeed to have them working with me again in the work of today." She was right—many associates from her Civil War days, who had seen firsthand what she could do, responded when called upon to join her. Abby Hobson recalled that at the initial organizational meeting of SCAA, Louisa immediately called upon her to take notes. Hobson agreed, and continued to serve in that capacity for the next ten years!

As a shrewd judge of character and competence, she selected John Finley as the first Executive Secretary of SCAA in 1889. He later went on to a distinguished career as President of City College, New York State Education Commissioner, and associate editor of the *New York Times*. Afterward, Louisa and her close friend Mrs. William B. Rice chose Homer Folks

for that post. He remained in that position for 55 years and would gain national and international recognition in the field.

Men and women, all accomplished and prominent, accepted the invitation to staff committees of the organization. They welcomed her patience, willingness to listen to others, and above all her penetrating mind. To Homer Folks, she was an uncompromising "realist, always looking facts squarely in the face." A contemporary familiar with her efforts, similarly praised "the thoroughness with which she attacks each problem in the most minute detail."

Although Schuyler could enter the trenches, her strength as noted by one historian was "in strategic planning atop an organization; more an organizer of victory rather than a field command."

Furthermore, SCAA could boast among its supporters numerous individuals of considerable standing and reputation in the business, legal and philanthropic community—a virtual "who's who" of New York's influential decision makers. Among them were Theodore Roosevelt, Sr. and his son, future President Theodore Roosevelt, Joseph Choate, William Dodge, Jr., Mrs. William Astor, Mrs. William B. Rice, Mr. Alexander Hamilton, III, Mrs. Philip Schuyler. These individuals enjoyed the advantage of powerful connections in New York City and beyond. Their association with SCAA underscored its unique position and prominence in the field.

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## Effective Collaboration and Advocacy

**T**he idea of local citizens (usually characterized as "the better sort") gaining entry into public institutions like poor houses, hospitals, and jails might, to the modern eye, appear highly unusual. Still, in England the "better sort" had long visited prisons and asylums and gazed upon inmates, somehow regarding it as a form of entertainment. New York

charitable organizations, such as the Charities Organization Society (COS) had dispatched "friendly visitors" into the residences of the "deserving poor," in part to determine eligibility for assistance, but also to preach "uplift" and encourage progress toward self-sufficiency. So a model did exist for SCAA. Somewhat surprisingly, New York State officials gave SCAA their



Jacob Riis, "Children sleeping on Mulberry Street," 1890 – Riis' photography and journalism evidence of the squalid conditions encountered by New York's poor

blessings (misgivings about this would later surface) permitting "visitors" to enter state and county facilities and afterwards submit reports to appropriate officials. Such close cooperation was in part a function of overlapping membership between, for example, the State Board of Charities and SCAA.

Even so, and despite Schuyler's leadership, it was not always smooth sailing. Vested interests, whether local, partisan, or financial, found reasons to oppose or delay changes proposed by SCAA. Louisa proved a clever tactician: patient when necessary, forceful when required. When enabling legislation was needed, she did not hesitate to appeal to friendly legislators in Albany, as well as to marshal the support of prominent Board Members. For example, when in 1880 state officials declined to allow the entry of SCAA "visitors," Louisa turned to State Legislators for relief. It was granted in 1881, with SCAA officially receiving the power to "visit, inspect, and examine the county poorhouses, town poorhouses, city almshouses." The State Board of Charities, however, not SCAA, would inspect state run institutions.

One of Louisa's earliest campaigns involved removing children under the age of three from poor houses. In short order, the State Legislature in 1875 voted the proposal into law; a later bill in 1878 moved the age to two. Young children would no longer be housed in these facilities as long as supplement funding was made available to provide for placement with families or other settings deemed appropriate. Louisa understood the importance of this provision, noting that "a bill without an appropriation is like a mouth without teeth."

Schuyler truly believed SCAA "represents the people," and so, mobilizing public opinion was essential. Legislative victories often depended, she understood, upon the efforts of influential SCAA members with pull in Albany.



SCAA county fair tuberculosis education booth, 1920s

## SCAA Leads Hospital Reform Efforts

Efforts to improve conditions in poor-houses across the state would succeed, but only over time. SCAA's involvement with Bellevue Hospital, a municipal facility for the poor, would yield more immediate results. Louisa explained that her concern with hospital conditions could be traced back to a conversation she once had with an attending physician at Bellevue, who spoke of lonely and neglected patients he had seen there. She also was familiar with the pioneering work of Florence Nightingale in England. Accordingly, she did not hesitate when the State Board of Charities suggested that SCAA undertake an investigation of Bellevue similar to its poor-house inquiry.

Louisa and others were soon off to Bellevue, where glaring deficiencies were readily apparent. "I found myself," she wrote at the outset, "depressed and more hopeless." Unsanitary wards were neglected by orderlies she considered "useless," brought in from the city poor houses. The nurses were "inadequate in number and nearly all illiterate; some immoral, others inadequate." Louisa moved into action.

Sixty men and women gathered at her father's house and promptly formed a committee to oversee Bellevue. Abby H. Woolsey, already with considerable experience at Presbyterian Hospital, became committee chair, while Dr. W. Gill Wylie went off to Europe to study nursing schools in Germany, France, and especially England. He would return with a letter of support from Florence Nightingale.

Once again a "visiting committee" would spearhead efforts at reform. An effective engine of advocacy, it would engage influential individuals and enable them to develop expertise and remind officials they would be held accountable.

Early on, the Hospital Committee determined that expectant and new mothers should not be cared for together with other patients. Many were contracting puerperal fever from such exposure. Once separated, dramatic improvement resulted. In addition, SCAA visitors recommended that female nurses be employed in the maternity ward. Predictably, male doctors, their prerogatives challenged,



resisted. Louisa would not back down even as “the most distinguished doctors in New York,” she quipped, “treated us as if we were Tammany politicians trying to rob them of their fees.”

Visitors representing SCAA’s Hospital Committee, predominantly women (an observer characterized the walks to Bellevue as “the most fashionable promenade of the city”), claimed special competence for the task since they were “ladies whose experiences in the supervision of their own households have made them experts as regards washing, care of linen, cooking, nursing the sick, etc.”

To assist visitors and inform change efforts, SCAA produced a detailed “Handbook for Hospital Visitors” and others on

hospital construction and sanitation. To William Letchworth, a reform-minded member of the New York State Board of Charities, it was essential reading. “I would recommend,” he wrote, “that everyone charged with the care of dependent, sick or the infirm receive a copy of it.” In addition, mindful of the tedium of hospitalization, Louisa established a special committee to collect and deliver used newspapers and books to hospitalized individuals and residents of other institutions. A well-organized network of volunteers operating under the aegis of the Hospital Book and Newspaper Society assumed responsibility for this initiative, and by 1892 it was reported to have distributed 158,417 daily papers, 7,716 books and 59,000 illustrated weekly papers.

## Establishment of the Nation’s First Nursing School

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SCAA’s most ambitious undertaking at Bellevue Hospital was to propose and quickly create an on-site training school for nurses, reputed to be the first of its kind in the United States. Plans called for “acceptable” nursing students from “the middle class be sought out and provided with suitable living accommodations.” SCAA’s Miss Euphemia Van Rensselaer was credited with creating the white and blue uniforms students would wear when it opened in May 1873. Soon thereafter, SCAA’s Mrs. William Osborn donated a building that would serve as lodging for the school’s students.

The Nightingale plan for nurse training was adopted as the model for Bellevue, and Sister Helen Bowdin from London appointed the school’s first superintendent. To Louisa it was an important step toward transforming nursing into a “profession” as it would serve as a model for the many others that would soon follow across the country. Testifying to the success of the nursing school was the fact that by 1879, there were 63 students enrolled, and 15 years later it could boast of 424 graduates, 19 of whom subsequently would serve as



*Early graduates of the Bellevue School of Nursing, established in 1873*

superintendents of other nursing schools that emerged. Surely, launching the training school for nurses at Bellevue must stand as one of the landmark achievements of Louisa Schuyler and SCAA, representing an enduring contribution to the welfare of all Americans.

## Transformational Early Achievements

In 1893, SCAA produced a list highlighting noteworthy achievements since its formation in 1872. Item number one featured the improved conditions to be found within the many poor houses throughout the state, the original objective of the organization. It noted both small and large improvements thanks to “pressure of a few humane and intelligent visitors commanding the confidence and respect of their own communities, and sure of powerful backing from headquarters.” The New York State Board of Charities concurred. Referring to SCAA, it observed that, “They made frequent visits to those institutions and have in many instances proved valuable auxiliaries” with regard to “improvement and reform.” The Board noted, “with pleasure that there has been a gradual and steady improvement of the poor houses and almshouses of the state.” Robert Hunter, whose landmark 1904 book *Poverty* addressed the subject in considerable detail, confirmed that “New York has made great progress in its treatment of the poor.” Surely a part of the improved state of affairs must be credited to the persistent efforts of Louisa Schuyler and SCAA, and its success in recruiting citizen volunteers, exposing existing conditions, supporting improvements within existing systems, and advocating for a range of programs deemed essential by progressive thinkers and activists.

*“In conclusion, I would ask the members of our Visiting Committees to continue their work in the same spirit with which they have conducted it for the past nine years, a spirit not of fault finding or criticism, but of earnest desire to appreciate the efforts made by local officials in behalf of the inmates of Poor-houses and Almshouses under their charge. Lenient and helpful where the desire to be faithful is manifest; fearless in exposing corruption, cruelty, and neglect, where these shall be found to exist: remembering always that the value of our volunteer service depends solely upon the earnestness, the devotion, and the good judgment we each bring individually bring to our work, let us pledge ourselves to renewed efforts in behalf of the causes we represent, the cause of*

*the poor, the afflicted, and the friendless. May we feel strengthened by the assurance which the new law brings to us, that our work is now established under a firm foundation, and that the principle for which we contend, the right of the people to take part in the oversight of their public institutions of charity, has been again been vindicated, and recognized in the Statute-book of our State.”*

—Louisa Lee Schuyler, 1881

One observer familiar with the work of Louisa Schuyler concluded that the creation of SCAA represented “the chief monument of her career.” Years later, Governor Al Smith, in his tribute to her, referred to SCAA as “A network of helpful endeavor that earned her grateful prayers of countless thousands. It will,” he was confident, “be a perpetual memorial to her.”

Louisa had inspired and created a powerful change mechanism and set it into motion. With it, she was able to accomplish a number of significant reforms.

From the outset Louisa had opposed indiscriminate confinement of young children together with adults, whatever their circumstances, within the same facilities. In time, the effort succeeded. Children aged three or younger (a later law changed the age to two or younger) were taken from poor houses and placed with families or in orphanages. SCAA also campaigned for more appropriate facilities, e.g., that the insane be placed in small cottages located near hospital facilities. The New York Night Refugee Association was organized to house and feed the more employment seeking “revolvers,” homeless men and women who had been accommodated in police stations overnight.

SCAA had, moreover, long urged Albany to play a direct role in caring for the state’s dependent populations, replacing the counties, towns, villages and private caretakers because of their generally poor performances. Success came when the state constructed its own facilities for

## Selections from Louisa Lee Schuyler's Annual Reports to the State Board of Charities

### *Louisa's Compassion for Children*

Louisa Schuyler's concern for the children she saw when she was a visitor to the Westchester poorhouses is evident in her first annual report to the State Board of Charities.

She writes, "The children are neither properly clothed or fed; but saddest of all is to see the stolid look gradually stealing over the faces of these little ones, as all the joy of their lives is starved out of them." She goes on to share that sixty children are being cared for by "an old pauper woman" and her daughter who has "a contagious disease of the eyes, which is apparently communicated to them." She then recounts her poignant experiences with one of these children.

"Last Spring I was much attracted by a little girl in the poorhouse, three years old, whose parents were respectable people. The father had been drowned, the mother had an arm so wasted by rheumatism, that she was unable to support herself and her child.... The love of the mother and child...brought a redeeming flood of light into the darkened room. Shortly after the mother died. Last autumn I saw the little girl. In the interval the girl had turned to stone. The bright look had faded utterly. She was now under the care of the pauper-woman. I had known this old woman for more than a year, and ought not therefore to have been surprised at the change in little Mary, and yet I did not recognize the child at first. Since then, through the efforts of our Visitors, the child has been adopted into a respectable family in Dutchess County, and is now happy and well" (Schuyler, 1873, p.4).



Her experiences in Westchester influence her proposal that all children, "whether sick or well, of sound mind or otherwise, should be removed from the Poorhouse, and not be allowed grow up exposed to the contaminating influences of adult paupers." They are to be placed with families, "either by adoption or indenture" and SCAA visitors are to continue to visit them, to provide "intelligent supervision of the children....by which it can be ascertained if the children are being kindly treated ....no healthy child of sound mind would be allowed to remain or grow up in any institution, public or private, no matter how well managed...." (Schuyler, 1874, p.13). The following year, through SCAA's advocacy, the New York State legislature passed the Children's Law of 1875, which removed all children over the age of three from poorhouses. She suggests the question of retaining natural (family) ties needs consideration but offers no concrete proposal to resolve this issue.

the insane and assumed responsibility for their care and aftercare at the recommendation of SCAA. Louisa encouraged and supported this expanded range of activity, whether or not she remained involved directly. Indeed, Homer

Folks observed that over the years he continued to rely on Louisa; while she was no longer a close collaborator, she continued to be his wise counsel.

## Work in the 20th Century

By early in the 20th Century, Louisa Schuyler had come to be regarded as a "grand dame" within the philanthropic and social welfare community. Highly respected, she was sought out for guidance, especially given her extensive network of contacts. That would help account for her appointment to the executive committee of the Russell

Sage Foundation, upon its formation in 1907. She would hold that position for the next twenty years. The Foundation in its mission statement committed itself to "eradicate as far as possible the causes of poverty and ignorance rather than to relieve the sufferings of those who are poor and ignorant." Louisa's presence on the board and influence over its activities suggests that

she'd come to realize that ameliorating conditions must also advance hand in hand with efforts to address causal factors as well. That is confirmed by her ongoing interest in industrial training and her strong support of efforts to combat tuberculosis, a cause taken up by the Sage Foundation, resulting in substantial grants to SCAA for this purpose.

Louisa became intensely committed to combating blindness, especially among infants (becoming chair of the Foundation's Committee for the Prevention of Blindness), and was instrumental in the formation of what ultimately emerged as the National Association for the Prevention of Blindness.

She welcomed the growing role played by social workers in the field and encouraged the establishment of social work education programs and eventually full-fledged schools, e.g.,

the New York School of Philanthropy founded in 1904 which later became the Columbia University School of Social Work.

Given her extensive experience in the field, and the deference accorded her as a leading social reformer, she encouraged the Sage Foundation to consider grant policies which she believed would result in a more efficient use of its resources and encourage recipients to demonstrate program effectiveness. She recommended that grants be limited in duration; that matching funds be employed, and pilot projects encouraged. John Glenn, then General Director at Sage, agreed that it should support "new approaches for social work until they had a chance to demonstrate their usefulness and secure sufficient support to establish them permanently." Thus, even in her advancing years her agile mind and her commitment to the cause of social advancement in no way diminished.

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## Louisa's Legacy

**H**erald of the modern age of "scientific" philanthropy, Louisa was among other notable leaders in the field of social welfare who, toward the close of the 19th Century and beyond, proposed innovative ways to improve conditions among the poor and dependent. They exposed intolerable circumstances, pioneered new services and urged oversight of providers. They also called for close collaboration between private agencies and government bureaus, the latter staffed by professionals now expected to deliver a broad range of social programs.

Historians usually date this awakening of social consciousness, an offshoot of the Progressive Movement, somewhere around 1900, but clearly, Louisa Schuyler had moved in that direction long before, creating an early and enduring model for what would follow.

According to Homer Folks, Louisa recognized the "great sweep of public agencies, the educational value of legislation, and the great

potential resources of the public purse." She had, in fact, encouraged Folks to enter the reform administration of Mayor Seth Law in 1901 as Commissioner of Public Charities.

Louisa had demonstrated "the right stuff." She was no armchair theorist. She'd been directly involved in the Civil War struggle, personally investigated conditions at a Westchester County poor house, and entered the wards of the massive Bellevue Hospital. Not for her to play the lofty but limited role of "Lady Bountiful," or merely pay lip service to the supposed female propensity for benevolence. Instead, she acted to extend the boundaries society had long imposed upon women. In all her efforts, women—many from her wide circle of friends—joined together with her assuming prominent roles. She encouraged them to get involved and cheered their successes. Somewhat surprisingly, suffrage never seemed to be a priority for her. Dr. Ellice Alger who worked with Louisa confirmed this. "I do not suppose," he remarked, "she ever in her life felt handicapped because she had not a personal



## Compassion Infused with Hope, Optimism, and a Belief in Change Through Service

Louisa Schuyler's writings throughout her tenure as SCAA president reveal her belief that people in need can be uplifted through the work of the visitors.

Her compassion and belief in the power of caring individualized service delivery is vividly expressed in the paper she delivered in 1878 to an SCAA conference. She calls for "personal intercourse with the poor, a wish to know them, willingness to take a great deal of trouble about them as individuals, to become their friends" (Schuyler, 1878, p.4). She goes on to state that "to elevate the poor they must be dealt with, not in masses, but as individuals and by individuals" (Schuyler, 1878, p.6).

Louisa Schuyler optimistically believes that citizens will do the right thing once made aware of inhumane conditions. This is the way she connects with those with the means to assist SCAA; she does not blame them for not caring but instead trusts that once informed they will seek reforms.

*"Our people are essentially humane. It is because they are ignorant of its existence that they allow human suffering to go unchecked, or unrelieved, never because they are not willing or able act in its behalf. Our benevolent, enlightened, and influential citizens do not know—not one in ten thousand of them knows—anything of the actual conditions of the inmates of our public institutions' charities.... The only reason why our pauper system is not what it should be arises from ignorance—from ignorance alone. Which must and can be dispelled. Let in the light of knowledge, bring it home to the minds and hearts of our people, let them feel that this subject of public charities is one which directly concerns them, that they are responsible for good or bad management, that henceforth they have a duty to be fulfilled, and all reforms are possible, be they administrative, or legislative—the victory is practically won" (Schuyler, 1873, p. 5).*

vote, though much of that life was spent in work which was essentially political."

Louisa Schuyler was someone who offered a way forward, who, over time, identified unmet needs, whether in poor houses and hospitals, or involving children, industrial training, care of the insane and the blind, or addressing the scourge of tuberculosis, etc. No radical, she created or joined organizations that worked within the system; she was pragmatic, sensible, non-partisan, sought out the facts, respected the insights of experts, and often networked with other reformers (e.g., Charles Loring Brace, Lillian Wald, Helen Keller, Josephine Shaw Lowell). She was no zealot, comfortable leaving the field to others for periods of time in order to rest, travel, vacation, and partake in an active social life with people in her circle. Homer Folks, then SCAA Executive Director, reported receiving a flurry of upbeat chatty letters from Louisa while she vacationed overseas on one of her respite intervals.

Like many reformers at the time, Louisa grasped that while traditional private philanthropic efforts were often well intentioned and could relieve distress, at least in the short term, conditions now required a different approach. "Systematic," "sustained," "efficient," "scientific," "organized," "coordinated"—these were the terms that she employed often. Louisa championed reliance upon experts, science, statistics, prodding government, collaborating with officials, holding them accountable, allotting funds from the public treasury to underwrite one program after another. This clearly mirrored the thinking of Robert Hunter, who wrote that "The great cities need social statesmen who, seeing the evils, will bring about through public agencies the new institutions required to save the rising generation." This was precisely the goal of Louisa Schuyler: "In its legitimate field," she declared, "government could and must be made to function." Alexander Hamilton had expressed that same hope over a century ago. Was Louisa somehow channeling her great grandfather? He was, it turned out, a prophet in his time. It could be said of Louisa Schuyler as well.

## Recognition and Honors

Over the years, Louisa was honored and celebrated on many occasions for her philanthropic contributions and innovations. Seemingly by coincidence, 1915 proved the year most notable in this respect. Columbia granted her an honorary Doctor of Laws (LLD), only the second woman to receive this award from the University. Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler (who had married a Schuyler) explained the basis of the degree:

*Louisa Lee Schuyler, a pioneer in the service of noble women to the state; founder of the State Charities Aid Association and of the system of visitation of state institutions by citizens; originator of the first American Training School for Nurses; initiating and successfully advocating legislation for the state care of the insane; powerfully aiding the first public movement for the prevention of blindness in little children; worthy representative of a splendid line of ancestors.*

A special tribute in the Social Service Review (“Louisa Lee Schuyler: An Appreciation”) informed readers that the American Nurses Association and the National Organization for Public Health Nursing meeting in convention had telegraphed congratulations to Louisa on the occasion of her honorary degrees. The author then added that, “No careful student of the history of nursing in this country can fail to appreciate the debt this profession owes to this far-sighted philanthropist.”

Most moving and meaningful was the gathering held on February 25th at New York’s Colony Club, attended by 270 invited guests, including Mayor John P. Mitchell, the darling of the city’s reform group. Louisa took the occasion to reminisce, explaining that “old people of seventy-seven years love to recall the past.” She spoke of her carefree days of youth at Nevis, her grandfather’s estate in Westchester County, where a Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington hung in the hallway, and where Washington Irving served as “President” of their archery club. She recalled her anxiety that President



*Louisa Lee Schuyler received an honorary Doctor of Laws (LLD) from Columbia University in 1915*

Lincoln might not be re-elected in 1864, the nation forced to settle for a “patched up peace.” “I broke down at the end of the war,” she acknowledged to the audience, “as did so many others,” after four long years of exhausting labor on the home front. Moving forward, she recounted her campaign to reform New York’s poor houses after she and her sister’s visit to one in Westchester County and the subsequent formation of SCAA to oversee this effort. It was only a matter of time before SCAA went off in other directions, including helping to create a nurses training school at Bellevue Hospital, for the removal of children and the insane from poor houses, and spearheading efforts to combat tuberculosis.

She defended SCAA against those who wondered whether it had strayed from its original intention. “It is sometimes said,” she declared that “we have wandered far from our original plan of work by doing so much outside

prevention,” but insisted that when it comes to, for example, supporting children, or combating tuberculosis, prevention represents “the legal extension of our work.”

No doubt she sensed that in the year 1915 the nation was receptive to such efforts, more than once had been the case. Louisa would live on for more than a decade after this heartfelt public tribute. It is apparent that she continued to believe in what she reminded listeners on that memorable occasion—“Given a good cause to work for and a well-organized public opinion, no reform is impossible. Not in this country.”

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