The Hull House Neighborhood

Grade 6 and beyond
Curriculum Connections: Progressive Era, Settlement House Movement, Immigration, Chicago History

From the Hull House maps and papers, New York: T.Y. Crowell & Co., c. 1895

This lesson can be used to introduce or expand upon instruction related to settlement houses, immigration and the Progressive Era. It can also help students develop visual literacy and map reading within a history curriculum.

Process

You and your students will examine two maps created by the staff of Chicago’s Hull House in 1895. You will encourage students to get as much information as they can from each map and both maps together, using a two-step process. First, identify questions the maps might answer. Second, try to answer the questions.

After you have looked at both maps, you will read a short excerpt from the autobiography I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull House Girl, by Hilda Satt Polacheck, which describes life in the neighborhood shown on the maps.

Use the background material at the end of the second and third sources whenever you think it will encourage students to ask more questions and engage more effectively.

First Source: Wage Map

While looking at this map, which shows the neighborhood around Hull House, ask students to come up with questions they might be able to answer using the information they can get from the map. Then ask them to give you questions they could not answer about the neighborhood by looking at the map.

For more advanced students, provide no additional background information at first. Let them figure out everything they can on their own. For younger students, provide whatever background you think will help them, but try not to give them information they can figure out relatively easily on their own.

This can be a whole-class activity, or you can divide the class into groups. The latter may give more students the opportunity for active participation. If you have students that thrive on competition, you can make it a contest. The following are some questions your students might generate. You can use them to model the process for your students. You can also ask students these questions yourself if, in your judgment, the students need more help.
What questions could you answer using this map?

- What city are these blocks in?
- Which streets run north and south?
- Which streets run east and west?
- Where do the people who make the most money live?
- Where do the people who make the least money live?
- Do people with more money and people with less money live in the same blocks?
- Are there blocks where only people with more money live?
- Are there blocks where only people with less money live?
- Are there more families at the top of the income range or at the bottom?
- Do any families at the top of the income range live next door to families at the bottom?
- What conclusions can be drawn from the answers to these questions?
What questions cannot be answered with this map?

- When was this map made?
- Who are the people who live in this neighborhood?
- What could you buy with these incomes?
- Are any of the people in this neighborhood rich?
- What kinds of buildings do these people live in (houses, apartment buildings, etc.)
- What are the blank spaces on the blocks?

Additional Background

You can provide students with this information or challenge them to find it themselves.

According to the inflation calculator at www.in2013dollars.com:

- $5 in 1895 was equivalent in purchasing power to about $157.66 today.
- $20 in 1895 was equivalent in purchasing power to about $630.66 today.

Second Source: Ethnicities Map

While looking at the second map, it’s important to point out that we would no longer use “nationality” to describe ethnic groups in the United States. “Ethnicity” would be a better label for this map. Also, instead of “Colored,” we would use Black or African American. You might also want to discuss with students the significance of not including African Americans and Irish in the category “English speaking.” (Did the mapmakers use this term to refer to non-minorities, that is, white people who were born in the United States?)

When you show students this second map, ask them to come up with questions they might be able to answer using the information they can get from this map and the first map put together. Then ask them to give you questions they could still not answer about the neighborhood by looking at both maps.
What new questions can be answered with this map?

- How many different countries did the people who lived in this neighborhood come from?
- What countries did the largest number of people come from?
- Which groups have the smallest representation in the neighborhood?
- Which groups tend to have the highest incomes? (Find out by comparing the blocks of color on the two maps.)
- Which groups tend to have the lowest incomes?
- What conclusions can be drawn from the answers to these questions?

What questions cannot be answered with this second map?

- When was this map made?
- What do people do who live in this neighborhood?
- What was life like in this neighborhood?
- Did people in the neighborhood get along with each other?
- Why did people leave their countries and come to Chicago?

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Background

Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Hull House, Chicago’s first settlement house, in 1889. At one point, Hull House conducted a study of the people who lived in its Near West Side neighborhood. Many of them were recent immigrants, who came primarily from central, southern, and eastern Europe. These maps appeared in the volume Hull-House Maps and Papers, which was published in 1895.

For more background, read the entry “Hull House,” by Mary Ann Johnson in the Encyclopedia of Chicago.

Third Source: Autobiography Excerpt

From I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull House Girl

The excerpt provides information in a very different form from that of the maps. You may read it aloud or have students read it themselves. Or you might have students take turns reading it aloud to the class. The excerpt starts on the next page.

What questions could you answer using this excerpt?

- What were the buildings like in the neighborhood around Hull House?
- Where did kids play?
- What were the streets and sidewalks like?
- How did the people feel about their neighborhood?
- Where did people get their food?
- What kinds of stores were in the neighborhood?
- How was life for Hilda’s family different from life in your neighborhood today?

Ask students what questions are still left unanswered and where they might find more information to answer those questions.

Background

Hilda Satt Polacheck (1882-1967) came to Chicago from Poland with her family in 1892. The family settled in Chicago, in what was called the Near West Side neighborhood. Young Hilda became active at Hull House and wrote about the place and the neighborhood around it in her autobiography, which was published after her death.

Additional Resources

- More information about the Near West Side neighborhood of Chicago.
- More information and photographs of Hull House and its neighborhood.
- Timeline of immigration into Chicago from 1850-1990.

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South Halsted Street

My first home in Chicago was on South Halsted Street, four blocks south of Hull-House. I did not realize that my future as an American would be measured by that distance.

I remember the first morning after the arrival of the family. I jumped out of bed and ran to the window. The sight that greeted me brought on such hysterical weeping that my father and mother came running out of their room to see what was wrong.

“Where is the river?” I cried.

Father put me on his lap and explained that Chicago had a lake that was so big that the Vistula River would look like a dishpan full of water.

“But where is it?” I cried. “I want to see it.”

“Now, stop your crying. We will see it someday,” said my father.

But the summer passed and I did not get to see Lake Michigan. The only part of Chicago that I saw that summer was the block on South Halsted Street, where we lived, and a few of the side streets.

Father went to work very early every morning. On the Sabbath, the day of rest, we were not allowed to ride on streetcars; we were told it was too far to walk to the lake. The lake was only a mile from our home, but it may as well have been in Poland, as far as we children were concerned. We were left to our own devices. No one seemed to have time to show us the lake.

The only play space was the street in front of the house. The small yard in back of the house had been rented to a junk man and was used to store junk.

Halsted Street is thirty-two miles long. It runs from the extreme north end of Chicago to the extreme south. Hull-House is located at 800 South Halsted.

The home to which Father brought the family was a six-room flat, the upstairs of a two-story wooden house. The first floor was a steamship ticket agency. It was typical of the houses that had been built after the Chicago Fire, just twenty-one years before we arrived. Compared with some of the homes of children that I played with, our home was luxurious. We had a toilet with running water in a narrow hall just

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outside of the kitchen. One of my playmates, a little girl, lived in three rooms in back of a basement grocery store with her two sisters, five brothers, a father, and a mother.  

Most of the houses had privies in the yards. In many cases the owner of the front house would build a shanty in the rear to bring in additional income. Very little attention was paid as to how near the privy was to the shanty. On hot days the people living in these shanties had to keep their windows closed to keep out the stench.

The sidewalks were wooden planks, which became slimy and slippery after a rain. The streets were paved with wooden blocks, and after a heavy rainfall the blocks would become loose and float about in the street. During the drying process the stench was nauseating. There were many places where the blocks did not return to their mooring and the smelly water would remain for days. If this happened at an intersection, it was impossible to cross the street... and there was no Sir Walter Raleigh to spread a coat.

I have a feeling that some of the young people were politically minded in those days and put some of the blame for these conditions on the shoulders of the city fathers. I remember a sign that some pranksters put up at one such intersection after it had been raining for a week:

The Mayor and the Aldermen
are invited
to swim here

There was not a tree or a blade of grass anywhere in the neighborhood. Here I played my first American game, which was called "run sheep run." I do not recall any of the rules of the game, but I do know that we ran out into the street while playing it. But the streets were fairly safe for play. We did not hesitate to run into the street as there was very little traffic. An occasional horse and wagon would clump down the street, but the horse was nearly always old and tired and would drag along at such a slow pace that we could easily get out of the way.

The wagons were filled with either fruits and vegetables or junk. Potatoes were sold for five cents a peck, apples were ten cents a peck, and bananas were five cents a dozen.

The peddlers had their distinctive calls. After several weeks, Mother could tell by the call if her peddler was in front of the house. Most of the day the air was filled with these calls:

"Any rags, any bottles, any junk today?"
"Ripe bananas, five cents a dozen."
"Shiny red apples, come out and see."

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Even if the prices were low, the women would still complain that they were too high. It seemed to be a custom never to pay what was asked. The haggling was always good-natured. The peddlers seemed to expect it and perhaps would have been disappointed if a woman paid the price asked. Often a compromise would be reached by the peddler giving an extra banana or a few extra apples or potatoes to consummate the sale.

It was on this street that I learned my first English words. I was very eager to learn English. At that time it was my only goal in life. The sooner I could speak English, the sooner I would not be regarded as a greenhorn. So I decided to listen to what people would say and to try to remember and to repeat the words. It was only a week after my arrival that I heard a man and a woman quarreling; but they talked so fast that I only caught the last words. As the man left the store I heard the woman shout after him: “Go to hell!” I repeated the precious words to myself a dozen times and then rushed into the house to tell Mother that now I could speak English. No one paid any attention to me. No one in the family knew what the words meant.

The ground floors of all the houses on the block were shops and stores. There were saloons where people would buy a big pail of beer for five cents. Women and children were not supposed to go through the front door of the saloon, but it was proper to go through the side door. Then there were so-called cigar stores where all sorts of tobacco were sold. Most men bought little bags of tobacco and small books of tissue paper and rolled their own cigarettes. Chewing tobacco and snuff were also sold in these stores. In front of each cigar store stood a wooden Indian, painted in many bright colors.

The barbershops were designated by a red-and-white striped pole, and every drugstore had large glass globes filled with colored water.

The grocery stores were filled with large burlap bags containing rice, beans, coffee, barley, and other staples. Everything had to be weighed by the grocer. I remember when there were no paper bags. The grocer would roll a sheet of brown paper into a cornucopia and fill it with whatever was bought. Eggs were shipped in boxes and baskets and many would be cracked on arrival at the grocery store. All cracked eggs were sold a penny cheaper. The only canned foods that I can remember were salmon and peas. When I was sent to the store for a can of salmon, the grocer had to open the can, as can openers were scarce. I would then have to walk home very slowly in order not to spill the liquid in which the salmon was packed.

The windows of the bakery shops were filled with large loaves of rye bread and with rolls covered with poppy seed. There were kosher