



Excerpt from Hilda Satt Polacheck, *I Came A Stranger:
The Story of a Hull-House Girl, 29-31 (1989)*

South Halsted Street

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My first home in Chicago was on South Halsted Street, four blocks south of Hull-House.¹ 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.²

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.³ 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.⁴ 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.

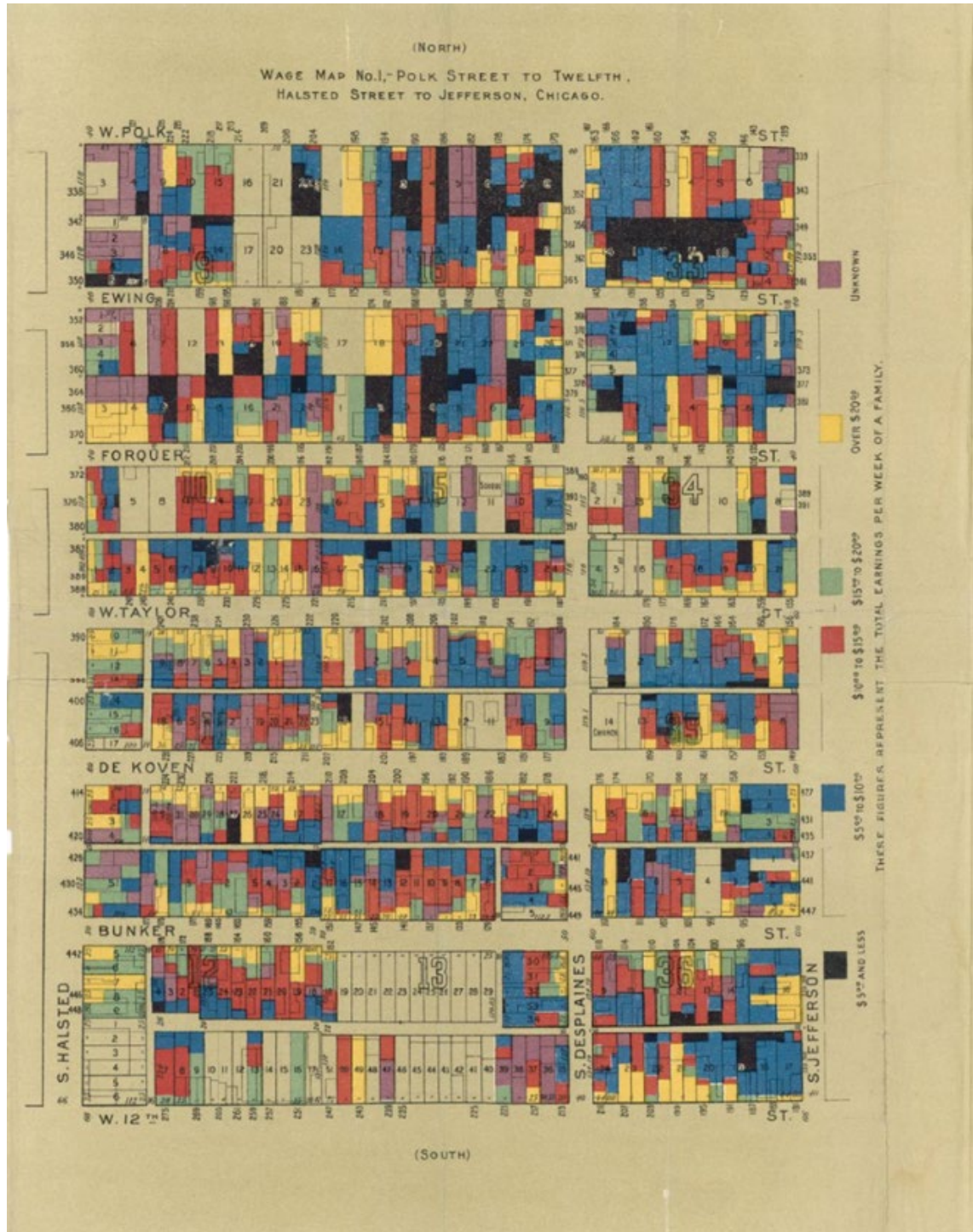
The barbershops were designated by a red-and-white striped pole, and every drugstore had large glass globes filled with colored water.

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

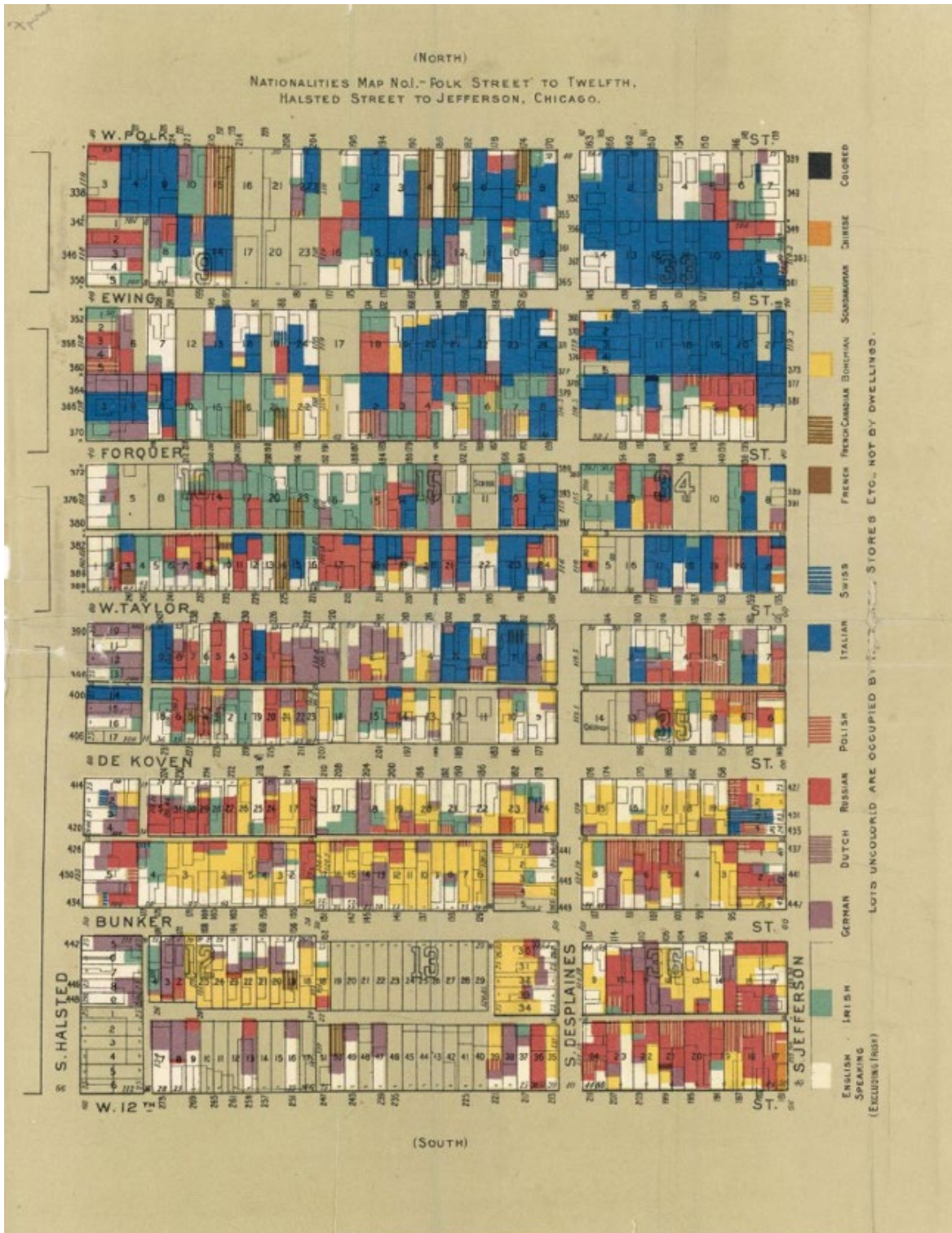


Samuel Sewell Greely, Wage Map No. 1-4, Polk Street to Twelfth, Chicago, detail (1865)




















Samuel Sewell Greeley, Nationalities Map No. 1-4, Polk St. to Twelfth, Chicago, detail (1895)



Wage Map Key

Total earnings per week of a family	
\$5.00 or less	
\$5.00 to \$10.00	
\$10.00 to \$15.00	
\$15.00 to \$20.00	
Over \$20.00	
Unknown	

Nationalities Map Key

Nationality of Family	
English Speaking	
Irish	
German	
Dutch	
Russia	
Polish	
Italian	
Swiss	
French	
French Canadian	
Bohemian	
<u>Scandanavian</u> [sic]	
Chinese	
Colored	