

The Neighborhood House: The Americanization Forerunner of  
Madison's Italian Community, 1916-1927

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Abstract:

In a broad scope, the paper addresses Italian immigration to the United States and the socioeconomic problems Italians faced in the transition from Italian to American culture. More specifically, the content focuses on Italians in Madison, Wisconsin from approximately 1916 to 1927. Inspired by the research and thesis of University of Wisconsin graduate student Henry Barnbrock Jr., a settlement house known as Neighborhood House was founded in Madison's foreign colony to provide basic social services and English classes to Italian immigrants. Due to the duality of funding, the organization transformed into a movement with the chief goal of assimilating the foreigners to American culture via the sponsorship of the National Department of Vocational Education. The NDVE adopted the Americanization program of the Department of the Interior, and the program was implemented upon Madison's foreign community via Neighborhood House.

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In 1966, UW alumni Henry Barnbrock Jr. returned to Madison, WI from his home in California to attend the annual University of Wisconsin Alumni Weekend. Barnbrock was welcomed by the University and city as an honored guest; his reputation as both scholar and humanitarian perpetuated by his 1916 graduate thesis that “exposed the miserable living conditions endured by the members of a small Italian colony in a swampy area of Madison’s Regent-Park vicinity.”<sup>1</sup> Barnbrock’s thesis inspired a collective effort from citizens of Madison to improve the social, economic, and living conditions of Madison’s foreign residents – the majority being Italian immigrants at the time Barnbrock wrote his thesis. Founded upon the research highlighted in Barnbrock’s thesis, the effort to improve the environment of Madison’s Italian community initially began as a privately-financed enterprise with the chief goal of self-betterment through improvements in sanitation, health, and economic standing for the immigrants. The movement evolved into a publicly financed organization - supplemented with private donations and volunteers - with the chief goal of *Americanization*: “To educate foreigners to adjust themselves to American customs and methods of living.”<sup>2</sup> Originally established as a community center providing basic social services and educational classes to the city’s foreign population, Madison’s unique social-service organization became a dynamic social settlement known as the Neighborhood House. The Neighborhood House promoted improvements in

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<sup>1</sup> “Class of ‘16 Grad Returns to Scene of His Triumph,” *Madison Capitol Times*, 1966 , Neighborhood House Records 1915-1980 Box 1, Wisconsin State Historical Society Archives, Madison.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart D. Levitan, *The Illustrated Sesquicentennial History, 1856 – 1931* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 224.

health, standards of living and economic growth for Italian immigrants in their transition to life and acceptance in Madison's community outside the foreign colony. Simultaneously, Neighborhood House functioned as a catalyst in the assimilation process of Madison's foreign settlers. The focus of this paper will be, approximately, the development of Neighborhood House and its influence on Madison's foreign colony during its first decade from foundation, 1916 to 1927.

### **Italians Come to Madison**

In 1910, six years before Barnbrock wrote and presented his thesis, citizens of Madison were alerted to a growing colony of Italian immigrants in a damp, swampy, garbage-filled area of the city, Madison's Ninth Ward. At this time, 426 Italians lived in the Ninth Ward and had little contact with the rest of the city outside that area. The population of Madison was 25,000. In five years this number increased to 30,000. In the same period the Italian population increased from 426 to a total of 1,100.<sup>3</sup> The increasing population of Madison's Italian immigrants during this period paralleled a similar pattern occurring throughout the United States. An overview of this trend will help to explain the culture and living conditions of Madison's Italian colony. Providing a brief background of Italian history during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century will illustrate reasons for Italian immigration to the United States and contextualize reasons for their settlement in Madison and the founding of the Neighborhood House.

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<sup>3</sup> Kittle, "Neighborhood House 1916 – 1941, An Account of the Beginning Years of the Neighborhood House 1916 to 1926," 1941, Pamphlet for 25 Year Anniversary, Neighborhood House Records 1915-1980 Box 1, Wisconsin State Historical Society Archives, Madison.

Between the years 1899 and 1924 approximately 3.8 million Italian immigrants came to the United States.<sup>4</sup> They fled the old country because of political instability, poverty and starvation. The main cause inciting emigration from Italy was the pressure of the population upon the means of subsistence, which had been a growing problem since the early nineteenth century. The Congress of Vienna<sup>5</sup> from 1814-15 divided Italy into eight principalities under Austrian, Bourbon, and papal rule with the intention of squelching whatever hopes of liberation and unification inspired among Italians by the French presence.<sup>6</sup> For Italy, the outcome of the Congress caused an uneven distribution of land and property throughout the country. Consequently, most of the wealth and land was monopolized in the hands of aristocratic proprietors and wealthy statesmen which subsequently hindered, if not made impossible, the socio-economic advancement of peasants and farmers in the agricultural districts.<sup>7</sup> The uneven concentration of wealth and land resulted in a struggle for survival for a large portion of the population. Thus, Italians came to America to escape poverty incited by political instability and an inefficient government. They sought economic opportunity and to improve their living conditions. They sought freedom and liberty.

Millions of Italians immigrated to the United States and poured in through New York City via the gates of Ellis Island. Some who did not enter through Ellis Island found their way

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A history of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 189.

<sup>5</sup> The Congress of Vienna was a conference of ambassadors of European states chaired by Austrian statesman Klemens Wenzel von Metternich. Its objective was to settle the many issues arising from the French Revolutionary Wars, the Napoleonic Wars, and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire.

<sup>6</sup> Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1992), 54.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel J. Barrows, Eliot Lord and John J.D. Trenor, *The Italian in America* (New York: B.F. Buck and Company, 1905), 40 – 41.

into U.S territory through Canada<sup>8</sup>. Many remained in the city but others sought employment elsewhere, preferring the countryside or smaller towns over the crowded streets and tenements of the big cities. The Midwest, namely Wisconsin and Minnesota, was a popular location of settlement because of the demand for labor in the iron mines and railroads.<sup>9</sup> A railroad official of the Great Northern railway conveyed this demand in a job post in 1907: “White men coming to Duluth will not work. Dagoes<sup>10</sup> only men who will work. Send more dagoes and shut off white men.”<sup>11</sup> The demand for labor in the iron mines and railroads in the Midwest promoted the settlement of Italians in Wisconsin and Minnesota. When work in the railroads and mines was finished, some Italians remained where they had settled while others dispersed to other areas of the state or country in search of more work. Madison was one of the cities where Italians began to settle.

### **Early Problems: Language and Discrimination**

Upon arrival in the new country, Italian immigrants struggled to communicate in English. They found themselves surrounded by immigrants from other countries speaking dozens of languages they could not understand. To complicate matters, they encountered Italians from different regions of Italy who spoke a variety of dialects. For example, the Florentine dialect of Florence, Italy - which eventually achieved the status of Italy’s national language and what is

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Valentino, interview by Noah Valentino, recorded in notebook, Black River Falls, WI., 25 December 2009. My grandfather indicated that some Italians, including his uncle, were informed that some immigrants were denied entry into the country at Ellis Island. To prevent denial, they came through Canada.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Valentino, interview by Noah Valentino, recorded in notebook, Black River Falls, WI., 25 December 2009. My grandfather indicated that his father worked on an Iron mine in Hurley, WI. My grandfather later moved to Crosby, MN to work in an iron mine.

<sup>10</sup> “Dago” was a derogatory slang term for Italian Americans and Italian Immigrants.

<sup>11</sup> Mary E. Mancina-Batinich, *Italian Voices: Making Minnesota Our Home* (St. Paul: The Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 14.

referred to as *Italian* today - was unfamiliar to many Italians, more specifically Southern Italians, in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Without a single language with which to communicate, Italians resorted to a hybrid language: a Creole that combined elements of English, Neapolitan-dialect and *Italian*.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, many Italian immigrants settled in colonies of people from their own regions who spoke the same or similar dialects. Former immigrant Annunzianta Donofrio – who became a U.S. citizen – conveyed this concept in an interview with historian Mary Mancina-Batinich. In the interview, Donofrio explains that “[Italians] all come from the same town, Montefalcone, they live on the North side because they wanna be around hometown people.”<sup>14</sup>

The trend of Italian immigrants settling in areas of “hometown people” continued in Madison, but complications in communication still existed. In 1915 ninety-nine percent of Madison’s Italians were Sicilian. The other one percent constituted three families from Northern Italy who lived on the edge of the community. Forty-seven percent of the population came from three Sicilian villages – St. Guisippe Iato, Sanciperallo and Piana Dei Greci.<sup>15</sup> Northern Italians, who constituted the bulk of immigrants to the West Coast, had higher rates of literacy thanks to greater educational opportunities in the North. Thus it was not uncommon for Northern Italians to be trilingual in *Italian*, regional dialect and English, making the transition to American life less difficult.<sup>16</sup> However, for the Sicilian Italians in Madison this was much less common. They

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy Carnevale, *A New Language a New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Mancina-Batinich, 177.

<sup>15</sup> Kittle, “Neighborhood House 1916 – 1941, An Account of the Beginning Years of the Neighborhood House 1916 to 1926.”

<sup>16</sup> Carnevale, 36.

came from less educated backgrounds and consequently did not speak English or Florentine *Italian*, and sometimes had trouble communicating with each other because of differing dialects. English classes provided by Neighborhood House facilitated the Italians' transition from speaking several dialects of Italian to being fluent in English. Simultaneously, the immigrants were able to maintain their regional dialects (at least for first generation Italian Americans). Over time, the Italians' ability to speak English united part of the community that was previously separated because of the language barrier. Simultaneously, the transition from Italian to English promoted the process of assimilation in becoming American because second generation Italian-Americans were not as likely to learn the native language spoken by their parents. Being fluent in Italian became much less common because English was the more practical choice to speak. But before the Italian immigrants in Madison learned English en masse, before they were fully accepted in the outside community, they encountered racial prejudice from some of Madison's *native* community and also city officials who often neglected the problems of the "dagoe" community.

As discussed above, despite sharing close geographic proximity in the old country, Italian dialects and customs varied from village to village, so communication among the Italian community in Madison was not always completely coherent. For first generation immigrants the lack of facility with English also led to embarrassment outside the community. In psychoanalytic terms, this lack has been characterized as *infantilization*: the adult is reduced to the status of a child upon struggling to communicate, in this case, with English speakers.<sup>17</sup> Coupled with the problem of *infantilization*, there was also a strong resentment among many Americans towards immigrants from Southern Europe. An excerpt from a New York City Newspaper echoes this

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

resentment, reading: “The floodgates are open. The bars are down. The sally-ports are unguarded. The dam is washed away. The sewer is unchoked. Europe is vomiting! In other words, the scum of immigration is viscerating upon our shores.”<sup>18</sup> Resentment towards immigrants from Southern Europe publicly expressed in the newspapers of big cities like New York often spread to other areas of the country. Consequently, Madison city officials and citizens occasionally echoed such resentments. According to Barnbrock, “the Department of Health, Streets, and Buildings deliberately neglect[ed] the general health, sanitation, and appearance of the Italian community,” and the “anti-dagoes” sentiments of city officials often yielded negligence to complaints and petitions registered by the Italians.<sup>19</sup> When asked by a person interested in improving the conditions of the Italian community why the street department did not clean certain spots on South Murry Street, an employee of the Street Department stated that he called the attention of the Commissioner to the matter, but all he said was, “They’re only Dagoes living over there.”<sup>20</sup> Political negligence made adjustment to American life difficult and perverted the Italians’ view of local government, making it difficult for the immigrants to trust and confide in the law, which led to further resentment and stereotypes from Madison’s community and city officials. But for a few residents of Madison’s community outside the Italian colony, racial prejudice towards the Italians was unacceptable. They wanted to erode the racial stereotypes associated with the Italians and begin a movement to improve the conditions of Madison’s foreign colony. People like Henry Barnbrock, Helen Dexter and Gay Braxton would

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<sup>18</sup> Barrows, Lord and Trenor, 190 – 191.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Barnbrock Jr. “Housing Conditions of the Italian Community.” (Graduate diss., University of Wisconsin, 1916), 3. Neighborhood House Records 1915-1980 Box 1, History and Background File, Wisconsin State Historical Society Archives, Madison.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 33.

venture into the foreign colony to learn about the Italians. Their openness to the Italian culture, coupled with their humanitarian-spirit ignited the movement for Neighborhood House.

### **The Founding of Neighborhood House**

The following statement from Barnbrock's 1916 thesis illustrated the social disconnect between the Italian colony and the rest of Madison's community and affirmed the necessity for improvement. Barnbrock's vivid illustration of the unsanitary and secluded environment which the Italians lived inspired citizens outside the foreign colony to venture into the Italian community in order to learn their culture and discover the source of problems. Barnbrock indicated:

The community is built upon extensive areas of swampy un-drained land. Filthy, stagnant water, polluted refuse dumped upon the land promiscuously partially covers the unoccupied areas – the remainder of these lands is an unsanitary dump filled with ashes, rubbish, tin cans and rotting vegetables and fruit... Thus far the Italians and the Americans have little social intercourse. In their social activities, indifference and race prejudice keep them apart. The Italian men isolate themselves in their own pool rooms on Washington Avenue and Milton Street, where they pass idle hours playing pool and cards, or gamble and loaf. The women meet each other in their homes and seldom enter a social activity beyond their own walls. The children meet American children on the school playground but only during school hours.<sup>21</sup>

To address the problems of Madison's Italian community, Barnbrock suggested that "A social center, conducted by paid workers, seems necessary to bring the Italians into a wholesome social life. There the American and Italians would meet more often on a social basis. The social center, preferably located in a school building, would emphasize community interests, encourage community cooperation, and develop constructive social adjustments."<sup>22</sup> Barnbrock outlined a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 4.

social services plan that became the basic model for Neighborhood House. The plan inspired the Associated Charities – an agency that later became the Public Welfare Association and sponsored many independent and public activities - to begin construction on a social settlement for Madison's Italian community.

Inspired by Barnbrock's research, Helen Dexter, the Associated Charities Visiting Housekeeper, and registered nurse Mary Saxton pioneered the movement that resulted in the establishment of Neighborhood House. Dexter and Saxton worked among the Italians who Barnbrock illustrated in his thesis. They discovered firsthand the problems Barnbrock described. They also knew that aside from Madison's Longfellow School and Continuation School, there was little outside influence reaching the immigrants. Madison seemed to have forgotten the entire section of the city. Subsequently, the swampy, garbage-filled area that Barnbrock illustrated in his thesis became the location Saxton and Dexter chose to establish a community center for Madison's Italian Colony.<sup>23</sup>

In September, 1916, financed by Thomas E. Brittingham - a wealthy physician, lumberman and philanthropist<sup>24</sup> - Saxton and Dexter, with the help of philanthropists Burt Williams and Dr. Thomas Hunt, opened *Community House* at 807 Mound Street. Community House was the forerunner to *Neighborhood House* and the direction and effort of Community House was conducted by a committee named by the Associated Charities. The committee believed that for Community House to be effective, closer contact with the Italians was necessary. So in August, 1917, Community House was moved to 25 S. Park Street. Coinciding

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<sup>23</sup> Kittle, "Neighborhood House 1916 – 1941, An Account of the Beginning Years of the Neighborhood House 1916 to 1926."

<sup>24</sup> Levitan, 224.

with this move the name was changed from Community House to Neighborhood House. It consisted of four large rooms, a bathroom and a cement basement that could be used as a gymnasium.<sup>25</sup> Neighborhood House remained at 25 Park Street for the next four years. During this period (1917-1921) the work was always directed by volunteer workers,<sup>26</sup> including a fulltime volunteer caretaker (an Italian woman from the foreign colony) and Neighborhood House blossomed into a popular community center for Madison's Italian community.

### **Americanization, Expansion and Motive: the Duality of Neighborhood House as Both Privately and State Funded**

The foundation of Neighborhood House was largely made possible by the private contributions of Thomas Brittingham – who alone paid the rent for Neighborhood House from 1916 to 1921<sup>27</sup> - the Associated Charities, various social clubs, and a few individuals from Madison's community. The financial contributions from Madison's community were used to construct the facility that initially provided basic social services and educational classes to the foreign community.<sup>28</sup> But as Neighborhood House expanded in both size and services, it captured the attention of organizations such as the National Office of Vocational Education and the local Lions Club. Both organizations were interested in transforming Neighborhood House

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<sup>25</sup> "Charity Society Sees Big Year," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 31 December 1917, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Kittle, "Neighborhood House 1916 – 1941, An Account of the Beginning Years of the Neighborhood House 1916 to 1926."

<sup>27</sup> A discontinuity exists in both primary and secondary sources as to who paid the rent for Neighborhood House between the years 1916 to 1921. According to two primary sources from Neighborhood House Chairman Mrs. Dudley Montgomery and Head Resident Worker Gay W. Braxton, and also a secondary source from Stuart D. Levitan, Thomas Brittingham paid the rent for Neighborhood House from its opening in 1916 through the year 1921. Contrarily, a pamphlet from Mary Lee Griggs identifies the Associated Charities (Public Welfare Association) responsible for paying the rent.

<sup>28</sup> Classes of English, sewing, cooking, music, and art.

from a basic social settlement into an organization that promoted assimilation and foreign transition to American customs, and their interest and contributions to Neighborhood House highly influenced that transformation.

Due to the increased popularity and use of Neighborhood House's social services among the Italian community while located at S. Park Street (1917-1921), the committee of the organization believed it was necessary for Neighborhood House to expand in size and staff.<sup>29</sup> The idea was conveyed to Brittingham, who, in agreement with the committee regarding the continuation and growth of Neighborhood House, bought a furniture store at 768 West Washington Avenue for \$6,800 that was converted into a full settlement house. The conversion of the store to a full settlement house cost an additional \$3,200, which was provided by various social clubs including the Kiwanis Club, the Rotary Club, Roxana Club, and the Technical Club. A few local churches and individuals also made donations and brought the total costs of the new settlement house to approximately \$10,000.<sup>30</sup> When Neighborhood House was finally operating at its new location, the committee realized the necessity for a Head Resident. The Head Resident was an organizer and caretaker of Neighborhood House and served as a liaison between the committee and the foreign community. The expansion of Neighborhood House and the search for a Head Resident were the events that led to national funding for Neighborhood House via the National Office of Vocational Education. Subsequently, national funding for Neighborhood House signaled the implementation of the Americanization program.

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<sup>29</sup> Kittle, "Neighborhood House 1916 – 1941, An Account of the Beginning Years of the Neighborhood House 1916 to 1926."

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

In 1919, Don D. Leschier, Associate Professor in charge of Americanization at the University of Wisconsin, wrote a letter to the editor of the Capital Times newspaper in Madison. At the time, the Capitol Times ran several stories that covered the development of Neighborhood House and Madison's Italian colony. Leschier's letter echoed the principals of Americanization defined by the Americanization Division of the United States Department of Interior, and foreshadowed what eventually became the chief motive of Neighborhood House. The following excerpt from the Capitol Times captured a common attitude Americans held towards Italian immigrant colonies of the time; the necessity for their assimilation to American culture. The excerpt also contextualizes the following section which discusses the Americanization movement of Neighborhood House:

It has become quite a practice in Madison to refer to the Italian community near Washington Ave. as "Little Italy." I realized how keenly interested your paper has been in the promotion of a spirit of national unity, and I am therefore calling your attention to a request which was sent out in February by the Americanization Division of the United States Department of the Interior, asking that all expressions such as "Little Italy" or "Ghetto" or other expression designating colonies of foreign residents, be dropped from public use as emphasizing a separation between the older and newer Americans. The department recommends that the expression "Italian community" or "our Italian citizens" or some such expression be used. Assuring you of my desire to cooperate with you in every way to advance Americanization in Madison, I Am Don D. Leschier.<sup>31</sup>

When the Neighborhood House committee started its search for a Head Resident, there were no funds to pay the salary of the workers they were seeking. Mr. Joseph Brown, a member of the Industrial Board of Vocational Education, was a supporter of the Vocational School's Americanization program (adopted from the Department of the Interior): "To educate foreigners to adjust themselves to American customs and methods of living."<sup>32</sup> Brown believed that the

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<sup>31</sup> "No More Ghetto, Americanization Makes it U.S.A." *Madison Capital Times*, 02 July 1919, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Levitan, 224.

program could be implemented unto Madison's Italian community via Neighborhood House. With this goal and primary motive, Brown secured a ruling from the National Office of Vocational Education that permitted funds from the local Vocational School to be used to pay the salary of the workers in Neighborhood House. With the acceptance of the funding, Neighborhood House thus adopted the concepts of the Office of Vocational Education's program: preparation for citizenship and *Americanization*.

Sometime between 1921 and 1923,<sup>33</sup> Madison's Lions Club adopted the concepts of the Office of Vocational Education's *Americanization* program. Continuing the model of Joseph Brown, members of the club focused their attention on the Neighborhood House as the focal point to implement the program. Seeking to "do all that they could to further this program and eager to help in the project of adjusting the foreigner to American ways,"<sup>34</sup> they contributed funds to the Neighborhood House to legitimize their effort towards Americanization.<sup>35</sup> The following statement described the motive driving the Lions Club's initiative of Americanization:

During this year our club has rendered conspicuous assistance to the Neighborhood House, a worthy institution located in our West side foreign colony. Its effort is concentrated on Americanization, which incidentally is also the major plank of the Lion's Civic Program...The most difficult, most significant, and most fruitful undertaking of the Lions Club during the past year has been the successful launching of a comprehensive Americanization campaign under the able leadership of Guy Lowman and that patriotic, earnest, diligent body of men chosen to serve with him...The constructive work in the field of Americanization...challenges our greatest degree of personal attention. It is

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<sup>33</sup> I was unable to locate an exact date within the primary sources when, specifically, the Lion's Club became an advocate of the *Americanization* program.

<sup>34</sup> Gay W. Braxton, "Reports and Talks," 1916-1926, Monthly and Annual Reports to Neighborhood House Committee, Neighborhood House Records 1915-1980 Box 2 History and Background, Administrative File, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>35</sup> In 1925, The Lions Club bought a vacant, adjoining lot to the settlement building at a cost of \$1500. They also donated an additional \$1800 to Neighborhood House in 1925.

certain to yield the most satisfactory return on any investment of time and energy we make.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, costs for the foundation and expansion of Neighborhood House were derived from both private and state (government) sources. The initial interest and support from local philanthropists and social organizations to Madison's Italian community grew large enough to attract national attention. Subsequently, Neighborhood House evolved from a settlement house that provided basic social services and educational classes intended to improve the well-being of Madison's immigrants to a full blown movement for Americanization. However, the initial movement towards self betterment for the Italian immigrants was not forgotten as Americanization became the primary focus of Neighborhood House. Many of the classes and services that promoted Americanization were also designed to enhance the foreigner's standard of living along the transition to American life; which leads us to a discussion of two key figures in the development and organization of Neighborhood House's services and programs – Head Resident Gay W. Braxton and her assistant Mary Lee Griggs.

### **Gay W. Braxton and Mary Lee Griggs: Neighborhood House's Expansion and Influence, and the Foreign Community's Response, 1921 – 1927.**

In 1921, with a salary approved by the National Office of Vocational Education and funded by Madison's Vocational School, Gay W. Braxton became the first Head Resident of Neighborhood House, and held the position for nearly 30 years.<sup>37</sup> Born in Richmond, Virginia,

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<sup>36</sup> Guy S. Lowman, "Excerpts About Neighborhood House, Historical Review of Proceedings." Neighborhood House Records 1915-1980 Box 2 History and Background, Administrative File, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>37</sup> "Ex-Head of Neighborhood House Miss Braxton, Well-Known Social Worker, Succumbs." *Wisconsin State Journal*, 20 November 1966, p. 32.

Braxton dedicated her life to social work. She received a professional education from Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts and the Kindergarten Training School in Chicago, Illinois. Before becoming Head Resident at Neighborhood House, Braxton worked at the Chicago Commons and served as a social worker in Virginia cotton mills. She came to Madison from Quincy Illinois, where she was the head of a settlement house known as “Cheerful house.”<sup>38</sup>

Braxton’s diverse experience in social work prior to coming to Madison equipped her with the knowledge necessary to organize and operate activities at Neighborhood House. Highly influenced by her experience working in the Chicago Commons program, Braxton implemented her knowledge and experience to correspond with the Americanization program of Neighborhood House. Her experience with Italian families in Chicago prepared her for success as Head Resident in Madison and made her a perfect fit for the job. In an excerpt from a monthly report regarding the progress of Neighborhood House, Braxton illustrates this point:

There are innumerable experiences that are interesting and I would like to tell you but I haven’t the time and I would like to tell you of the time that I went to Chicago Commons and Dr. Taylor told me if I had difficulty getting into the homes, if they did not understand English just say “Chicago Commons,” and they would open their doors wide. I found this to be the case and rejoiced at each entrance of this kind, thinking what a wonderful thing it was to be able use the name of the settlement as a password into any home. I wondered when I came to Madison if this would ever be the case at Neighborhood House. I believe it is true in a measure today that the workers are admitted into any of the homes, often being interpreted as “The neighbor lady.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Gay W. Braxton, “Reports and Talks.”

Within the first few months as Head Resident at Neighborhood House, Braxton realized that the responsibilities of being Head Resident were too much for her alone, so she successfully secured the salary, via the Vocational School, for a fulltime assistant.<sup>40</sup> While en route from Wheelock Training School in Boston, to her first job in a social settlement in Iowa, Braxton's longtime friend, Mary Lee Griggs, stopped in Madison to visit Braxton with the intention of only staying a few weeks. Braxton persuaded Griggs to take the position as her assistant and Griggs agreed, and went on to work for Neighborhood House for the next 44 years.<sup>41</sup>

#### Goals and Implementation: Americanization and Preservation

Braxton and Griggs were passionate philanthropists who respected the customs and traditions foreign immigrants introduced to the United States. They believed in the preservation of "old country" customs, while simultaneously, they supported the goals of Americanization. Braxton believed that immigrants could be Americanized while still preserving characteristics and customs of their native countries. In this context, Braxton articulated a policy for Neighborhood House, which she believed, could successfully preserve some elements of immigrants' cultural traditions while simultaneously transform them into Americans. According to Braxton, Neighborhood House had three primary functions:

The first is to make the settlement a second home in the community for neighborhood people. A second home because the first must be their own home, where the mother, father and children can congregate, where they can share their joys and their sorrows in their own little circle. The second home is simply a home where each member of the family can come to broaden his interest and there develop his ability for making associations interesting.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Levitan, 224.

<sup>41</sup> "Mary Lee Griggs Has Had Long, Productive Career," *Madison Capital Times*, 15 April 1966, p. 25.

<sup>42</sup> Gay W. Braxton, "Reports and Talks," Annual Report of Neighborhood House, January 30 1923, 26.

The second reason for the existence of the settlement is to show the foreigner that we are glad to get his point of view, to understand him and to sympathize with him. We can only do this by strengthening the bond of friendship and by making their problems our problems.<sup>43</sup>

[The] third point and about the most important is the fusion of the foreigner through the settlement forces thus uniting America; by helping the mothers understand their children, and the foreigner understand the American. The foreign fathers and children who go to the American schools really lead a double existence, for at work, at school and on the streets they use [English], they obey one set of laws of thought and custom in the half educated America while the mother at home is living her foreign language and customs and habits of thought. These children and fathers go home to a foreign home and put off their American ideas and language until the next day when they start out again. When at home they are unconsciously obedient to the laws of their old country because there the formative years of the parents were spent and the childhood lessons and habits of the old country are lasting. So it is not only necessary to educate and familiarize the children of the foreigners to the American ways and customs but the adult also.<sup>44</sup>

It was important to Braxton to empathize with the immigrants, to understand their culture and support their cultural traditions along the transition to American life. Contrary to forcing American customs upon immigrants, Braxton emphasized the importance of cultural empathy as the most effective method of persuading immigrants to openly learn and accept American customs. In this manner, Braxton and Griggs formed a bond of mutual respect with the immigrants of Madison's foreign community. By 1922, Braxton and Griggs, under the pretext of implementing and expanding the Americanization program, gained the trust and confidence of a large population of the foreign community and expanded the membership and influence of Neighborhood House.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>45</sup> "Aim of Neighborhood house is to be Friend to Community" *Wisconsin State Journal*, 29 March 1922, p.

Since acquaintanceship is the first requisite for successful work in a community, it has been the desire of the resident worker to make as many contacts in the neighborhood as possible...the interest manifested in the already organized clubs and classes was very gratifying as the settlement through the clubs was brought into contact with 83 families in the Neighborhood.<sup>46</sup>

Although Braxton and Griggs supported the preservation of cultural traditions of the Italians, Braxton was somewhat apprehensive towards the way Italian men treated Italian women. In her 1926 annual report of Neighborhood House, Braxton attributed what she viewed as the stern, conservative and often overly protective treatment of Sicilian women by their husbands as the reason for their slow progress to adapt to American customs and learn English, and she made it clear that it was a cultural tradition she wanted to change. Many Italian women did not attend Neighborhood House functions because, when not at work or school, their husbands expected them to be in the home. Consequently, many of the women did not have the opportunity to take English classes at Neighborhood House. Specifically, Braxton wanted the *Sicilian* women to “rebel” against the Italian men;<sup>47</sup> to attain a higher level of independence by breaking free from their traditional gender role as sheltered housewives obedient to their husbands. Braxton explained:

We find the Northern Italians very similar to American women in ideas, customs and desires. The women are respected in their own families and they are not held down by the men as in other parts of Italy or Sicily.

The Albanian is a little more reserved and quiet in her actions. Her children are held in perhaps a little more than the Northern Italians and she loses little time in telling you that she is Albanian, which simply means that she is of the Greek Sicilian stock rather than of the Italian stock.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Gay W. Braxton, “Reports and Talks,” Annual Report of Neighborhood House, 1926.

The Sicilian is the most conservative and the most cautious in actions. I say actions for I do not believe that any of them are racially or nationally as conservative as they pretend to be. Theirs is a rogue that the women should be homemakers and obedient to their husbands and let their men foil be the mouth pieces.<sup>48</sup>

Inspired, in part, by the feminist movement expressed throughout the Progressive Era<sup>49</sup>, Braxton echoed the principles of feminism – that women should be viewed and treated as equals with men - in her monthly and annual reports of Neighborhood House. She made distinct illustrations between the cultural traditions of Northern and Southern Italians, which demonstrated her insight and knowledge regarding a community of immigrants sometimes mistakenly categorized as a single group sharing the same cultural practices. Simultaneously, Braxton's desire to change a traditional aspect of Italian culture exemplified her commitment, the commitment of Neighborhood House, to Americanize the foreigners. For Braxton, it was in the best interest of Italian women, the improvement of their well-being, to become more independent. Braxton's commitment is one example of many methods Neighborhood House functioned as a catalyst of assimilation while simultaneously promoted the well-being of Madison's foreign community. One of the most effective methods in Americanizing Madison's foreign population was reaching the people at the earliest age possible.

Griggs explained that the young couples of the foreign community had growing families, and when young mothers came to Neighborhood House they brought their preschool children with them. "When I saw these children, I realized how badly they needed contacts with people

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 80-81.

<sup>49</sup> The ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 gave American women the right to vote. The ratification of the Amendment is associated with the American Progressive Era, a period of political and social reform that flourished from the 1890s to the 1920s.

from outside the home.”<sup>50</sup> In this context, the preschool program of Neighborhood House was founded. The program was instituted by Braxton, and later headed by Griggs, who expressed that “At first we didn’t know if we would be able to do it, but the pre-school plan worked.” The effort began as a “play school” where children from non-English speaking homes could learn the new language before entering public school. It became so popular that by 1940, there were several “play schools” established in South and East Madison.<sup>51</sup>

Coinciding with the preschool program’s aim to teach foreign children English and youthful American customs, the goal of Neighborhood House was also to reduce the rate of delinquent crimes within the foreign community. In 1964, an article in the *Capitol Times* claimed that “studies made during the depression of the ‘30s and in more recent years,”<sup>52</sup> revealed that the rate of juvenile delinquency in the foreign community was less than it was in other sections on the East and West sides of the city. The article attributed the lower delinquent crime rate to programs provided by Neighborhood House to the foreign youth. “Because of the danger of the boy out of school running the streets and getting into mischief, the Lions Club of Madison has equipping our basement with manual training tools so that five boys can work at once and not abuse their leisure time.”<sup>53</sup> By providing foreign children, mainly foreign boys, with activities to busy themselves, they had less idle time to get into trouble. Below, Braxton provides a firsthand example of instructing a young boy on proper behavior:

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<sup>50</sup> “Mary Lee Griggs Has Had Long, Productive Career,” *Madison Capital Times*, 15 April 1966, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> “Since 1916 Neighborhood House Has Met Changing Needs of Growing City,” *Madison Capital Times*, 21 January 1964, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Gay W. Braxton, “Reports and Talks,” *Monthly Report of Neighborhood House*, February 1924.

One boy, 12 years of age, gave the girl groups a lot of trouble one afternoon by yelling in the doors and windows and even boasted that the girls could not go on with their club because he would not let them. The next day I called him in and asked what he did the day before and he replied, "Everything." I said did you have a good time? "No." "Well what do you think should be done to a boy who acts in this manner?" He thought for a few moments and said "Give him another chance." I said "well suppose he does it again after that, what then?" He said not let him come to the Neighborhood House ever any more. I thought this rather strenuous so I said, "What about the Christmas party, don't you think it will do just as well to keep him away from the party?" So he agreed that was the thing to do and he was given another chance.<sup>54</sup>

Madison's Vocational School paid the salaries of Braxton and Griggs, but a large portion of the settlement house's activities were conducted by volunteers from the University of Wisconsin. The help of volunteers allowed the number of classes and activities conducted by Neighborhood House to increase. As Neighborhood House expanded in size and membership, Braxton wrote letters to the Lions Club and coaches and instructors from the University asking for student volunteers to conduct English classes, coach basketball or supervise other social activities. She secured many student volunteers in this manner and often adapted the schedule of Neighborhood House activities to correspond with schedules of volunteers. Student volunteers from the University received course credit, thus the exchange was one of mutual benefit.<sup>55</sup> University Sororities also conducted fund raisers to raise money for Neighborhood House. For example, in December, 1921 sororities of the University, through volunteer workers of Neighborhood House, gave \$63.50 to be spent for Neighborhood House Christmas Parties.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, January was often a dull month at Neighborhood house because "The ending of the first semester at the University with its examinations has kept many of our student club

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<sup>54</sup> Gay W. Braxton, "Reports and Talks," Monthly Report of Neighborhood House, November 1924.

<sup>55</sup> Gay. W. Braxton to Guy S. Lowman, 18 February 1926, Neighborhood House Records 1915-1980 Box 2 History and Background, Administrative File, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>56</sup> Gay W. Braxton, "Reports and Talks," Monthly Report of Neighborhood House, December 1921.

leaders way” and the clubs of Neighborhood House “[got] along as best they could without the leaders.”<sup>57</sup>

Largely conducted by volunteers from the University, Neighborhood House offered a number of classes and activities that promoted the well-being of the immigrants and also aimed at securing their citizenship by introducing them to American customs. There were three classes in English for men, three for women, and a class for girls, cooking and sewing classes for women, another for small girls, classes in woodworking for boys, table games for boys and girls, and social games for boys and girls. On Sunday afternoons an hour of musical entertainment was provided to adults.<sup>58</sup> By 1922, Neighborhood House offered 15 activities a week.<sup>59</sup> The number of activities per week grew significantly as Neighborhood House expanded in size and membership.

Many of the adults in the neighborhood were young couples with growing families, eager to purchase homes and become permanent residents of Madison. They spoke little English but were eager to learn. The main goal for the adults was to earn their citizenship papers. Most of the registered members of Neighborhood House worked unskilled jobs for long hours and little pay, but they were eager and determined to learn American ways and customs. Braxton explained that

They will go home from work, clean up, eat supper and come to school three nights each week for two hours. Most of these are men who have not received their second papers and are looking forward to the time when they can become American citizens. Four other men work in restaurants until seven o'clock, the time the school begins, and they cannot

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<sup>57</sup> Gay W. Braxton, “Reports and Talks,” Monthly Report of Neighborhood House, January 1922.

<sup>58</sup> “Aim of Neighborhood house is to be Friend to Community” *Wisconsin State Journal*, 29 March 1922, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Gay W. Braxton, “Reports and Talks,” Monthly Report of Neighborhood House, October 1921.

get there until 7:30. One of these likes the period of singing that we have at the beginning and comes in breathless each night to sing at least the last song.<sup>60</sup>

By 1924, the popularity of Neighborhood House among the foreign community increased significantly. Membership expanded beyond the staff's capability to meet everyone's needs and Head Resident Gay Braxton expressed the need for expansion. In 1924, Braxton presented to the Madison City Council the progress of Neighborhood House. During the meeting, Braxton explained that Neighborhood House was short-staffed. "We have not workers enough nor room enough to give them all they need but we are giving the immediate community 22 activities per week. The house is open from early morning till late at night administering the needs, requests, and happiness of the foreigner."<sup>61</sup>

In 1925, informed of Braxton's request for expansion, the Lions club purchased the adjoining vacant lot to the old settlement building at a cost of \$1500 and presented it to the Madison Public Welfare Association to be used for an addition to Neighborhood House. The Lions club gave an additional \$1800 to be used for additional expansion to Neighborhood House.<sup>62</sup> Inspired by this gift and encouraged to enlarge the classes and activities at the settlement, the Neighborhood House executive committee began the plans for a new building. In October, 1925 the much needed addition went under construction. The addition was constructed at a cost of \$10,000. There were two spacious club rooms, a large game room that adapted itself to basketball, and a large manual training room. The addition made it possible to carry on several activities at once, without interference, creating 48 activities per week. To give the neighborhood

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<sup>60</sup> Gay W. Braxton, "Reports and Talks," Monthly Report of Neighborhood House, November 1924.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Gay W. Braxton, "Reports and Talks," Annual Report of Neighborhood House, 51.

residents a sense of ownership over Neighborhood House, Braxton insisted they pay at least nominal dues and about four hundred members did, ranging from a nickel to a quarter a month.<sup>63</sup> With more activities offered, and a feeling of ownership, the foreign community became more excited and open to Neighborhood House. In a letter to the president of the Lions Club Braxton pleaded for the Lions Club's approval to mark the basketball floor before the baskets were even up because "The neighborhood is getting so excited over it all now that I do not believe that I can, nicely, keep them out longer."<sup>64</sup>

By April, 1926, when the new addition was complete, there were fifty men over 18 years of age who were active members of the Neighborhood House. According to Braxton, "some of these men [were] good and some [were] bad but all [were] willing to come and learn what it is all about."<sup>65</sup> Braxton explained that by becoming members of Neighborhood House, "They will get only good influence and if they are willing to hang on long enough, won't they be willing to give up their bad ways for good ones?"<sup>66</sup> There were 80 teenage boys and girls who attended the activities at the Neighborhood House and 200 boys and girls less than twelve years of age.<sup>67</sup> To illustrate the importance of transforming foreign immigrants into Americans via the programs offered by Neighborhood House, and to demonstrate the legitimacy of continued and additional state funding, Braxton explained that "These are the fathers and the mothers of our next

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>64</sup> Gay. W. Braxton to Guy S. Lowman, 18 February 1926, Neighborhood House Records 1915-1980 Box 2 History and Background, Administrative File, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison.

<sup>65</sup> Gay W. Braxton, "Reports and Talks," Annual Report of Neighborhood House, 51.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

generation, these are the future citizens. Isn't it worthwhile to teach them to be just, to be lawful, and be truthful? Isn't it worthwhile to educate them and to show them the way to citizenship?"<sup>68</sup>

In 1921, the year Braxton and Griggs were employed, Neighborhood House offered 15 activities per week. By 1927 it offered 48 activities per week. By January 1, 1927, there were 451 active members of Neighborhood House. Other members of the foreign community registered but were not counted because they were not regular attendants.<sup>69</sup> Within six years of their employment, Braxton and Griggs captured the trust and confidence of a large portion of Madison's foreign community and expanded the influence of Americanization throughout the population. According to Braxton, "Many of the people [were] so appreciative that they want[ed] to bring offerings to the teachers. Others had the idea that they ought to pay for the help they [got]."<sup>70</sup> Thus Neighborhood House succeeded in providing both the foreign population and Madison city officials with what each wanted: The Italians wanted citizenship in order to be more suitable and desirable for higher paying American jobs; the quest for citizenship involved the process of learning English and American customs, which the Italians were eager to do, in large part because of the financial returns. By learning American customs, Italians became less Italian, and if not less Italian than at the very least, more American, which was the desired goal of Madison city officials and, of course, the U.S. Department of the Interior.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> "Joint Meeting Votes \$50 to Neighborhood House; Mrs. Kittle Says Community Needs Work." *Wisconsin State Journal*, 03 May 1922, p. 11.

### Why the Italians?

The foundation and expansion of Neighborhood House coincided with similar developments throughout the United States during the same period, specifically the Chicago Commons and Hull House in Chicago, Illinois. In all three settlement locations, Italians were, at least initially, the primary targets intended for assistance and assimilation. Italians were initially perceived to be ethnically and socially unfit for America, but philanthropists quickly shed this belief, if they even believed it in the first place, and reached out to the Italians en masse. Throughout the history of immigration in the United States, among the many ethnic groups that immigrated to America, and are still immigrating, Italians seem to be unique. But why did this seem to be the trend?

According to the American census, “more Americans trace their ancestry to Germany than to any other country.”<sup>71</sup> To the predominately white, Anglo-German population of America, the often dark-haired, olive skin-toned Italians of Southern Europe may have had a light complexion, but their strange Mediterranean culture coupled with their romantic language, a language with a very different lineage than their own, distinguished them as an entirely separate race. The Nordic supremacist Lothrop Stoddard believed deeply in the inequalities of European races. In his book *The Rising Tide of Color*, Stoddard echoed the concept stated above, proclaiming the idea that differences in race can be distinguished even among “same-colored” people:

When we see the damage wrought in America, for example, by the coming of persons who, after all, belong mostly to branches of the white race and who nearly all possess the basic ideals of white civilization, we can grasp the incalculably greater damage which

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<sup>71</sup> Russell Kazal, *Becoming Old Stock: the Paradox of German-American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

would be wrought by the coming of persons wholly alien of blood and possessed idealistic and cultural backgrounds absolutely different from ours. If the white immigrants can gravely disorder the national life, it is not too much to say that the colored immigrant would doom it to certain death.<sup>72</sup>

Contrarily, in *White on Arrival*, Thomas Guglielmo presented Stoddard's racist concepts of white supremacy to illustrate that, although the "new" European immigrants were initially perceived as separate races, the fact they were "white" was exactly why they were able to gradually, even quickly, overcome racial prejudice:

Scientific racialists, then, placed Italians in an ambiguous social position. After devoting years of research and writing to "demonstrating" the racial inferiority of southern and eastern Europeans, they still viewed these groups as white. The message seemed to be that "new" European immigrants were inferior – but not *that* inferior. For all their dangerous inadequacies, they still occupied a place within the "superior" color division of mankind, even if they were relegated to an "inferior" racial branch.<sup>73</sup>

Although the Italians of Southern Europe were categorized as a distinct race, separate from the white, Anglo-American stock, Stoddard and Guglielmo's observations revealed that they were still white. Fortunately for the Italians, most U.S. citizens in the early twentieth century were not white supremacists like Stoddard. Therefore, although initially perceived by the Anglo population to be very different when they first arrived, the judgment gradually eroded as the Italians were Americanized. After all, today, other than the obvious indication of cultural heritage, the significance of the phrase "Italian American" hardly differs from the phrase "German American." In this context, it is possible that philanthropists in Madison perceived the

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<sup>72</sup> Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 267.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63.

Italians of the ninth ward to be approachable and worthwhile in terms of humanitarian support. One could also argue that it is why the Department of the Interior and the Vocational Board of Education found the Italians readily fit for Americanization.

### **Conclusion**

Inspired by Henry Barnbrock Jr.'s thesis and subsequently established in 1916, Neighborhood House still exists today and is the oldest community center in Madison. Initially, the community center served as a settlement house providing educational classes and basic social services for the Italians living in Madison's former Ninth Ward; what is still known as the Greenbush Neighborhood. Financial donations from philanthropic organizations, the Public Welfare Association, and various social clubs provided the funding needed for Neighborhood House's foundation. Eventually, the membership of Neighborhood House became large enough for the need of a Head Resident, and the salary for the Head Resident was provided by National Office of Vocational Education, and subsequently made Neighborhood House the only settlement house in the United States with such a connection. The national funding of Neighborhood House highly influenced the development and structure of its policies and future direction in the foreign community. Americanization of Madison's foreigners became the primary motive of Neighborhood House, and classes and services were designed to familiarize the foreigners with American customs in order to earn citizenship. Two of the most important figures in the history of Neighborhood House, the two people who gained the trust and confidence of the foreign community and organized and implemented the goals of Neighborhood House, were Gay Braxton and Mary Lee Griggs. Their education and former experience in the field of social work coupled with their hard work and diligent passion for helping others made them the perfect candidates for the job, and they worked for Neighborhood House for a

combined seventy-six years (Braxton nearly 30 and Griggs 44). The assistance of volunteers from the University of Wisconsin, and donations from organizations like the Lion's Club allowed Neighborhood House to expand in size and services, and subsequently increase its influence in the foreign community. The openness of the workers and volunteers, the feeling of a sense of belonging, and the benefits of attending Neighborhood House's classes and functions made Neighborhood House a popular social center in the foreign community. Neighborhood House reached out to improve the well-being of the foreign community, and many immigrants embraced the assistance with open arms. Simultaneously, Neighborhood House aimed at Americanizing the foreign immigrants. Through carefully designed classes and services, Neighborhood House embedded within many of the foreign immigrants a pride to be American, and thus succeeded in both goals.

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