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Meet the Philly women who shaped the future of philanthropy | Philly History

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PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Gertrude Ely speaking at a luncheon of the residential committee of the Philadelphia USO project, circa 1942.

by **Patrick Glennon**, For the Philadelphia Inquirer

Volunteerism has existed in the United States since colonial times. Early settlers practiced “barn-raising,” a preindustrial custom where communities banded together for the benefit of one of its members with the tacit understanding that each individual would receive the same support under dire circumstances. These benevolent cultural practices were in some ways a corollary to those of the sharing societies of Native American tribes, whose own traditions of mutual assistance predated the arrival of Europeans.

During the 18th century, volunteerism as it is known today began to take shape. Benjamin Franklin famously paved the way for volunteer societies with the formation of the Union Fire Company in 1736. Other Philadelphia-based organizations ushered in the era of institutional philanthropy and advocacy, such as the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, which lobbied for prison reform.

The social conditions stemming from industrialization resulted in the proliferation of volunteer societies and charity organizations, as increasingly entrenched class divisions created a disparity of wealth and leisure time. During this time period, a number of organizations that exist to this day began operations, notably the YMCA and the Salvation Army in England.

While women played an important role during this era of volunteerism and charity (especially in the realm of medical care, perhaps best illustrated in the United States by the American Red Cross founder Clara Barton), the philanthropic activities of women’s societies were underreported in historical records of the time. This would change with the turn of the century, when the scope of work of one women’s volunteer organization was too large to ignore.



 Margaret Yarnall Newbold in a photograph from 1933.

In 1912, a group of women from prominent Philadelphia families including Constance E. Biddle, Sarah Lowery, Margaret Newbold, and Gertrude Ely founded the Junior League of Philadelphia (JLP), among the earliest expansion chapters of the storied women's service organization. The first Junior League began in New York City in 1901, launched by wealthy women who banded together to create settlement houses to provide basic-needs services for poor immigrant workers. JLP brought this mission to Philadelphia, setting up service houses that bridged social classes while offering poverty relief for the city's working-class neighborhoods.

Within JLP's first decade, the organization rapidly expanded its areas of focus. During World War I, volunteers from the organization offered vital services as nursing aides in Philly hospitals; the organization sponsored arts and cultural events for the enjoyment of injured servicemen returning from Europe.

Following the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, JLP integrated civic engagement and advocacy into its programs. Volunteers offered training and educational resources for women who were preparing to vote for the first time, striving to ensure that women made their political voices heard.

Over the next two decades, JLP had an enormous impact on a number of communities. Throughout the tribulations of the Great Depression, the organization supported homeless shelters and ran unemployment relief programs. Throughout the 1940s, JLP contributed greatly to the war effort by gathering and physically preparing medical bandages for the Red Cross, raising money for the purchase of hospital aircraft and penicillin, and serving in an advisory capacity in the Civilian Defense Office.

From raising money for children's health care to running initiatives to make produce more accessible to underserved communities, JLP has consistently run charitable programs in Philadelphia for more than 100 years.

Despite this history of service, the organization has suffered from what one member referred to as a "pumps and pearls" image problem, which pigeonholes the group as a social club for self-congratulatory wealthy women. Whatever the motivations of individual members who have passed through this historical organization over its many years of operation, JLP has benefited countless people, ranking it among the most notable, impactful charity organizations in Philadelphia history.

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