

# Lillian Wald



America's Great  
Social and Healthcare  
Reformer

**Paul M. Kaplan**



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Pres. Franklin Roosevelt called Lillian Wald one of the least known yet most important people of her time. She was responsible for the placement of nurses in public schools and organized the Visiting Nurse Service. Wald also founded the Henry Street Settlement. She was an early promoter of women's suffrage and a relentless advocate for the welfare of children. Wald was adept at navigating both the poorest, most densely populated neighborhood in the world to aid those in need, as well as the upper circles of society, where she sought donors to support her efforts with such grace and success that she never even had to ask for donations.

Paul Kaplan's extensive research into the history of New York brought him to this fascinating subject. He shines a light on this amazing woman formerly lost in the annals of time in this inspiring book written for a young audience. Through his revealing profile of Lillian Wald, Kaplan deftly illustrates how far we've come as a society, how much work it took to get here, and how much more work there is still to be done.

*Lillian  
Wald*



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*For Kyle and Julian Rozanes*

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## *Preface*

They say one person can't change the world. Yet, there are those who have tried and largely succeeded. Often, it takes a different perspective, the courage to try something different and the skills to put that vision into action. It also takes stellar influencing skills to convince funders and partners to join.

Lillian Wald is noted as one of the least known, yet most important people of her time. President Franklin D. Roosevelt noted that in his 1937 radio address about her.

Starting as a young nurse in New York City, Lillian felt the field was too mechanical. It did not address patients in a dignified way. Nor did it address their underlying needs. Still yet, the task was not just curing them but about ameliorating the societal issues that often contributed to disease and suffering. From this, the field of nursing, social work, and public health spawned.

Teaching a class in the Lower East Side, the most densely packed neighborhood in the world at the time, she made a realization that would change her and those around her forever. She decided she would live in the neighborhood she was serving. Rarely done before, she left the security of a nursing job and along with her classmate moved into the neighborhood and opened up her impromptu practice. She convinced a philanthropic family to fund her efforts. It became among the first "settlements."

Soon after, it became apparent that health needs were just one part of the puzzle. The population she sought to help were bogged down by very low-paying and long-hour jobs with little or no protection for workers. The need for worker's rights and labor strikes for reform rose to the surface. But this caused conflict among the Henry Street Settlement's donors. Many of them felt that giving money for healthcare needs was fine—but not to labor reforms. Lillian Wald and

her Settlement were in a moral bind: fight for labor reforms or keep the donations flowing.

This bind was most apparent during the US entry to into World War I. Lillian and many nurses at the Settlement opposed the US entering the War. This put her at odds with her backers—not to mention her personal relationship with the US president at the time, Woodrow Wilson. The conflict highlights larger questions about charities. When does an organization become political? What if it contrasts with those supporting it? What is a charity's role in resolving political and economic conflicts?

Lillian and her Henry Street Settlement challenged the status quo, racial integration, and gender equality as well. Somewhat unusual at the time, Settlement classes integrated black and white students. The organization that would become the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was born in the Henry Street Settlement's dining room. On the gender equality front, she and her staff marched for obtaining the right to vote for women and supported efforts eventually leading to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Another aspect ahead of its time was the notion of treating the "whole" person. Looking beyond patients' symptoms, Lillian recognized the need for people to express themselves artistically. From this idea spawned the Grand Street Playhouse where neighborhood residents and professional artists alike have performed. That theater today is over a century old.

What's remarkable about this story is that many of these themes from over a century ago are today's headlines. Society still grapples with issues around immigration, gender and racial equality, labor reform, worker rights, and much more. Still, Lillian and her team are to thank for school nurses, school lunches, playgrounds, advancement of nursing and public health, artistry as part of enrichment programs, and social services advancements.

Indeed, this narrative is not simply about one woman nor even just about the Henry Street Settlement or Visiting Nurse Service. Rather, it is a story about America—how the country has struggled to evolve in the face of multiple conflicts. From that, we can draw contemporary lessons.

Enjoy the story.

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## Chapter 1

### *The Early Years*

Of all the efforts in helping the poor, few succeeded more than the one that sprang from a single young woman named Lillian Wald.

Her name is little known, but she changed the nation in a way few could. She transformed healthcare and brought medical attention to those who needed it most. She helped stop abuses of workers and children in the workplace. She championed the rights of children. School nurses, free school lunches, special education, community nursing, and healthcare were all causes she advanced. She transformed the way society treats the sick and the poor. Changes that last to this day.

Yet, Lillian Wald came from an unlikely background to become one of the country's greatest reformers. She grew up in the 1870s-'80s in an environment far away from the tumult of the Lower East Side she would one day serve. In fact, Lillian had little contact with the poor during her childhood. The poor were another world—people unknown to her who lived in slums and toiled in factories.

But the future reformer grew up knowing little of that. Her grandparents were immigrants to the US from Germany. Both her parents' ancestors lived harmoniously in their homeland. Yet, they sought more opportunity in the rapidly growing US. Like so many at the time, they brought with them a culture and the strength and idealism which they hoped to make the most of in the US. Lillian's Jewish ancestors settled in the US easily. They would become prosperous businesspeople and highly regarded members of their new communities.

Her father, Max Wald, was a quiet man focused on providing for his family. Lillian was somewhat distant from him, as he did not smile easily. He was a dealer in the optical business. At the time, Rochester, New York was known for optics and imaging. It is the city where Eastman Kodak and Baush & Lomb were founded.

Her uncle also lived with the family. Uncle Sam had a brilliant

career in medicine. Yet, it was short-lived. One day, he swallowed more of a self-prescribed medicine than he had intended. He was hurt physically by the overdose. But the scars were emotional too. He lost his confidence in prescribing medicine to others.

He came to stay with the Walds often. Despite his wounds, he was jovial with Lillian and her three siblings. He introduced them to the theater, music, and literature and was said to spoil them with elaborate toys and ponies.

Lillian always had a special relationship with her brother Alfred. He made her his partner and confidant. He had considered becoming a doctor. But his plans shifted when he entered the family business.

Outside her sheltered life in Rochester, New York in the 1870s, major social movements in labor and women's equality were afoot. Emma Goldman, an immigrant from Russia, complained of intolerable and oppressive work conditions. Living in Rochester, Emma worked for ten and a half hours per day for six weeks and could not even cover her room and board. These conditions enraged her. She began to talk of unions with other workers in secret. They demanded an eight hour workday. As Lillian was in her teens, worker strikes broke out to all factories including those owned by Lillian's uncles.

While these labor strikes were growing, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were fighting for women's rights. Not far from Lillian's home in Rochester, history had been made just decades prior. In Seneca Falls, New York, women suffrage activists declared at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 the importance of giving women nationwide the right to vote. When Wald was a teenager, Anthony and Stanton formed the National Woman Suffrage Association. They also fought for property rights for married women. Their vision for a federal amendment granting all women the right to vote would not occur until 1920. But in the intervening years, there were many protests and demonstrations. Demands for a more just social order were growing louder.

Lillian was exposed to some of this thought when her grandfather took her to hear the famed minister Henry Ward Beecher, an outspoken supporter of women's suffrage. When Wald was around twelve years old, the National Suffrage Association held its annual meeting in Rochester with Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton present. Other campaigns focused on opening up the nearby University of Rochester to women.

In 1851, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton entered into a famed partnership that transformed the political and social condition of American women—and by extension, women around the globe. They spearheaded the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls in upstate New York in July 1848. Here, Stanton expounded her Declaration of Rights and Sentiments invoking equal rights such as the right to vote. Stanton and Anthony were both anti-slavery and therefore encountered hostile audiences at their speeches.

She sought changes in her own life too. She was studying at Miss Martha Cruttenden’s English and French Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies and Little Girls. Their motto was to “make scholarly women and womanly scholars.” Growing bored with her studies at Miss Cruttenden’s school, she decided she would apply to college early.

One day at the age of sixteen, in a burst of assertiveness, Lillian announced she was going to apply to college. That was an unusual move for a woman at this time. Her mother had always planned for her to get married and raise a family nearby.

Lillian announced that she was applying to Vassar, unusual given her young age. In fact, Vassar did admit students at fifteen years of age if they fulfilled the entrance requirements. But not always. Weeks later, Lillian would learn that Vassar College decided she was too young to attend. The president of the college suggested that she continue her studies and that when she was older, he may reconsider her application. Then, tragedy struck.

Lillian received a telegram that her brother Alfred had drowned. His life had ended quickly. She felt like hers had too. Sadness beset the Wald family for years. Lillian later wrote that her mother’s eyes “took on a sadness that they never lost again.”<sup>1</sup>



*Portrait of early women’s suffrage leader Susan B. Anthony in Rochester, N.Y. around 1855. History of Woman Suffrage by Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Volume I, published in 1881.*



*Organized protest for women to receive the right to vote, circa 1917. (Courtesy of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York Records, Archives & Special Collections, Health Sciences Library, Columbia University.)*

Lillian's dreams were shattered. Her relationship with Alfred was more than that of siblings. She had imagined they would work and study together. Her future was intertwined with his.

Lillian changed course. She realized how much her mother was hurting. With her sister, Julia, married and out of the house, she wanted to become the faithful daughter. She attended parties that had the unspoken purpose of her meeting her future husband. Her mother wanted to see her settled in the life she imagined for her.

She met several suitors. She liked them. Yet, she did not want to commit herself to marriage. She could not shake the feeling that she was meant to do something else. But what? Was it finding employment? She briefly worked as a correspondent for the Bradstreet Company (today, Dun & Bradstreet). Her responsibility was to write down anything she could find on a company's credit rating and financial status. This information was then sold to brokers or investors.

The work was fairly easy. She was happy to be exercising her curiosity in this new field. Yet, she eventually grew bored with writing the reports.

Then a course of events would show Lillian the path she was meant to take. She was visiting her sister Julia at the seashore when Julia became ill. They called for a doctor, who summoned for a nurse. Lillian was asked to fetch the nurse. Lillian walked the nurse back to the house,

and asked her many questions. Lillian hadn't met any woman with her background. The nurse had trained at Bellevue Hospital in New York, the first hospital in the US to offer nurse training. She seemed to know much about therapeutic practices.

For the first time, Lillian could see herself in this young nurse. She knew what she wanted to do. She was to become a nurse. Her family had mixed emotions. But if they were to support this decision, they wanted her to at least stay in Rochester.

Yet, Lillian marched to her own beat. In early 1889, she applied to nursing school in New York at the age of twenty-two. Yet, the minimum age requirement was twenty-five. She decided that the ends justified the means and lied about her birth year. She used her sister's birth year of three years earlier.

Her interest stemmed less from an empathy for the sick and more about her need to feel useful and to find a fulfilling career. She longed for that. She never felt at home among her peers in Rochester. She defied conventions. But she herself was not sure what she wanted instead. Nursing gave her that window.