

## Introduction

Denison House, the third college settlement in the United States, was founded in 1892 by a small group of college-educated women who were “distressed” and “made restless” by “a sense of privileges unshared,” and who looked forward to a time when there should be no barriers between workers of any kind and the so-called leisure class. Their ideal was not philanthropy but democracy, which they defined as “a free flowing life between group and group.”

Residents and members of the Executive Committee, Emily Greene Balch (a Wellesley College professor who later won the Nobel Peace Prize), Helen Cheever, and Vida Scudder, and other residents and day workers of Denison House in 1892 and 1893 kept a communal diary in which they recorded their daily conversations with each other, the parish priest, and with the people they referred to as their neighbors. Throughout the early years a strong connection with Wellesley College continued. In 1893 Helena Dudley became the headworker, and for the next fifteen years a more business-like day book was kept of the expanding activities. The settlement, originally located at 93 Tyler Street in the Old South Cove area of Boston, grew rapidly and four neighboring buildings were purchased.

Under the leadership (1893-1912) of Helena Dudley, and of subsequent headworkers, Denison House provided the neighborhood with various activities and facilities: sports for girls and boys; numerous clubs; classes in basketweaving, English literature, home nursing, dancing, Dante, and Shakespeare; and a library, a gymnasium, and a clinic. In addition, during periods of strife and emergency, Denison House joined with other settlements in providing relief programs, such as a milk station and coal distribution.

Located in a neighborhood of many nationalities, principally Italians, Syrians, and Greeks, the settlement worked closely with its immigrant neighbors. Most notable was the Circolo Italo-Americano, which, under the direction of Vida Scudder, held a festival each May and an exhibition of Italian arts and crafts each December. During the summer there were day excursions, a vacation school, and Camp Denison. Members of the Social Science Club, 1893-1900, discussed socialism and the history and ethics of trade unions. The Federal Labor Union, Local 5915, held monthly meetings at the settlement.

For nearly two years, starting in October 1926, Amelia Earhart was a social worker and resident at Denison House. She worked with children and adults as a teacher and home visitor, and devoted her weekends to flying, once dropping leaflets over Boston to advertise a Denison House benefit.

In 1941, as a result of neighborhood studies by Denison House and the Boston Council of Social Agencies, the decision was made to move Denison House to the Dorchester-Roxbury area. The move took place in 1942. For six years the office and the various programs were not centralized under one roof but made use of several local buildings. In 1949 Denison House moved into permanent quarters in the renovated Howard Avenue School. In 1965 Denison House and three other settlements merged to form Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses. Each house retained its own director and program staff, with FDNH responsible for program coordination, fund raising, and fiscal management. In 1975, after a fire destroyed the Howard Avenue building, Denison House moved to Codman Square, Uphams Corner, where it still operates today as part of Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses.