



Mary McDowell was born in Cincinnati in 1854. Her father was active in the anti-slavery movement and the family moved to Chicago after the Civil War. As a young woman McDowell joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and was active in the struggle for women's suffrage.

In 1889 McDowell joined Jane Addams, Ellen Gates Starr, Alzina Stevens, Edith Abbott, Grace Abbott, Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, Alice Hamilton, Sophonisba Breckinridge and other social reformers at Hull House.

Inspired by the work of Jane Addams at Hull House, McDowell established the University of Chicago Settlement in 1894. McDowell was particularly interested in helping workers in Chicago improve their pay and conditions. As a member of the American Federation of Labour, McDowell helped organize several strikes.

In 1903 she helped establish the Women's Trade Union League, and the following year assisted Michael Donnelly, organizer of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen in the Chicago Stockyards Strike.

McDowell, who became known as the 'Angel of the Stockyards', was a much loved figure and when a local newspaper ran a contest entitled "Who is the best woman in Chicago?", McDowell ran second to Jane Addams in the poll.

Mary McDowell died in 1936.

Sometimes called the "Angel of the Stockyards," Mary McDowell preferred to think of herself as Concerned Citizen. The Head of the University of Chicago Settlement from its inception in 1894, she reached out from that base to promote trade unionism and safer working conditions, woman suffrage, inter-racial understanding, and reforms in municipal waste disposal.

Her abolitionist father brought the family from Cincinnati to Chicago after the Civil War. In the 1880s Mary McDowell worked with the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which advocated the right of women to vote. Her experiences at Hull-House and strong sympathies for the striking railroad workers in 1894 prompted her to devote the rest of her life to the settlement house in Back of the Yards, and to labor reform. McDowell assisted Michael Donnelly, organizer of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, and took the initiative in starting Local 183 for female employees. During the bitter 1904 packinghouse strike, she was a staunch supporter and interpreter of the union cause.

While representing the union at the 1903 American Federation of Labor convention, she joined with others to establish a national Women's Trade Union League. As the first president of the Illinois branch of the WTUL, she recruited glove maker Agnes Nestor, and boot and shoe worker, Mary Anderson into the battle for shorter hours for factory women in Illinois. McDowell was also instrumental in persuading President Theodore Roosevelt to authorize the first federal investigation of working conditions and wages for women and children in industry.

She was a watchdog for safe working conditions and decent wages for women during World War I, and spoke on these issues to women's organization's, and as Chicago's Mayor William Dever's Commissioner of the Department of Public Welfare in the 1920s. Agnes Nestor was correct when she said that Mary McDowell's "influence was not to be found in the offices she held, but in the human relationships she strengthened and the social vision she imparted."



**Mary McDowell and Jane Addams
at a protest meeting in 1932.**

*Portrait of Mary McDowell, who organized the
University of Chicago Settlement House.*

Back of the Yards

The living conditions in the neighborhood were far from ideal. Poverty, overcrowding, and illness plagued its residents. In 1889, Chicago laid sewer lines and paved some of the larger streets, but much of the neighborhood remained unimproved.

The working-class neighborhood needed community reform and grass roots organizing, and it found both in three dedicated individuals: Mary McDowell, Saul Alinsky, and Joseph Meegan. In 1894, Mary McDowell started the University of Chicago Settlement House, located near the stockyards. McDowell is best known for her successful campaign to close several disease-infested garbage dumps in Back of the Yards, her help in creating Davis Square Park, and her support for unions during the 1904 strike. She also assisted Mexican immigrants in the neighborhood by providing meeting spaces for religious services and organizing athletic and cultural programs such as team sports, dances, and English lessons.

A Fountain Outside Mary McDowell Settlement House



There were few opportunities a century ago for travelers on the streets of Chicago to obtain fresh drinking water. In 1877 the Illinois Humane Society began the practice of erecting public drinking fountains. They commissioned a design "both pleasing and practical" by which water would flow at three levels, first accommodating thirsty people at the top, then horses and finally dogs and small animals near the ground level. The cost was \$70 per fountain and \$60 for a hookup to the city water pipes, including the services of a plumber and stone mason.