



Louisa Lee Schuyler, a Pioneering Social Reformer

Schuyler Center's Founder

Louisa Lee Schuyler, a pioneering social reformer, created the State Charities Aid Association (SCAA) on May 11, 1872, in response to the deplorable conditions she observed in hospitals and almshouses in New York City. A great-granddaughter of General Phillip Schuyler and Alexander Hamilton, Miss Schuyler was born in 1837 in to a life of privilege, yet raised in a tradition of public service and public interest.

Early Reform Efforts

Miss Schuyler's earliest reform experiences began during the Civil War, an era marked by independent, women-led reform work. She helped organize and became secretary of the Women's Central Association of Relief, which became the United States Sanitary Commission, predecessor of the International Red Cross. In charge of organizing all services needed by the Union soldiers, the Sanitary Commission created an independent system of transportation to insure the receipt of supplies, prepared simple health pamphlets to train inexperienced officers about field nutrition and campsite selection, and disbursed almost \$5,000,000 in cash and over \$15,000,000 in supplies. Under Louisa's leadership, 25,000 packages were successfully classified and forwarded to northern troops, with only one package lost.



1865 Women's Central Association of Relief, NYC branch of the U.S. Sanitary Commission. Schuyler is 3rd from the left, all were active in the founding of SCAA.

While remaining in charge of the Women's Central, Miss Schuyler also became chairman of the Committee on Correspondence and Publicity of the United States Sanitary Commission, and wrote letters and reports, and lectured to other aid societies in the United States about the Commission's efforts. The success of the Sanitary Commission showed the value and power of a voluntary organization in promoting public welfare. The grim experiences of war and selfless devotion to relief of a young woman in her twenties, took an emotional and physical toll on Louisa's health, requiring several years of rest in Europe.

Creating SCAA

In 1871, upon her return to New York City, Louisa read the reports of the New York Board of State Commissioners of Public Charities chronicling the dreadful conditions of the state's poorhouses and almshouses. After visiting the Westchester County Poorhouse and inspecting other institutions within her reach, she organized volunteer visiting committees to inspect and insist on good management of public institutions. From these visiting committees as a nucleus, the State Charities Aid Association (SCAA) was formed on May 11, 1872 in the dining room of Louisa's parents at 19 W. 31st St., New York City.

Schuyler's plan was a simple one: to form in each county a local committee of citizen volunteers charged with visiting the county poorhouse, encouraging county officials in the proper management of their duties, detecting and correcting abuses, securing the moral and physical welfare of the "inmates" and raising institutional standards of care. SCAA's earliest members were a roll call of New York's most distinguished: Charles Loring Brace, Professor Theodore White, Henry Fairfield Osborn, Theodore Roosevelt, Abby Woolsey and Grace Dodge, along with several of Schuyler's trusted Sanitary Commission associates (Mrs. Josephine Shaw Lowell, Mrs. William B. Rice, and Mrs. Laura Wolcott d'Oremieux).

As its name connotes, State Charities Aid Association's mission was to promote an active interest in New York State institutions of public charities and aid the state in the administration of its public charities. It was organized as a nonprofit, nonsectarian, and independent organization and remains so today.

A friend once asked Louisa why she didn't just visit every poorhouse in the state and make a report to the Legislature – why the need to spend so much time organizing? Miss Schuyler replied, "Because this would then be the say-so of one woman; I wish it to be the say-so of a thousand men and women." The New York Board of State Commissioners of Public Charities welcomed the founding of SCAA, who cooperated closely with the Board and submitted reports to it annually. By the turn of the century, SCAA had become, in the words of Frank J. Bruno "the most successful non-official adviser on matters of social welfare" in the entire country.

Miss Schuyler devoted her life to the service of humanity and some of her greatest achievements included:

- Organizing the women's work of the U.S. Sanitary Commission during the Civil War
- Founding the State Charities Aid Association (SCAA) in 1872
- Creating the nation's first training school for nurses at Bellevue Hospital in 1873
- Securing passage of the Children's Law of 1875 removing children from almshouses
- Securing passage of the 1890 State Care Act requiring state responsibility for care of the insane
- The creation of the State Committee for the Prevention of Blindness in 1908



Graduates of Bellevue's Training School for Nurses

In 1915, Columbia University conferred upon Schuyler the degree of LL.D; the first time in 161 years that honor had been given to a woman. Eight years later, Miss Schuyler received the Roosevelt Memorial Association's Medal of Honor for her distinguished service to the American people through improvements in the welfare of adults and children.

The American Dictionary of Biography says of Schuyler, "had she been a man...she would have been a captain of industry." Today, Schuyler is recognized as a captain of the social services and advocacy world.