THE URBAN PHILANTHROPY OF MRS. RUSSEL SAGE

by Ruth Crocker

"With all her heart she desires great things -- to deal wisely and sanely by the trust committed into her hands."

"What kind of society leaves the solution of its social problems to the whim of people like me and Rosie O'Donnell?"
Can private initiatives be counted on to identify urban problems and underwrite solutions? Should private, voluntary agencies be charged with the delivery of social services in urban communities? Is it reasonable to count on private donors to help fund health and social services, or should private funding be relied on mainly for a city's cultural and educational institutions, its universities, museums and concert halls? The shrinking of federal government responsibility since the 1980s has thrust these questions into prominence, while the revolution in public policy signaled by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996) which abolished the federal safety net has increased need in urban communities. While politicians and providers debate whether Americans should channel federal funds through religious ("faith-based") organizations, the unmet needs of urban communities become more urgent than
Historians can offer a useful perspective on these issues. The nineteenth century supplies numerous examples of millionaires who ascribed their success to divine will or survival of the fittest while paying their workers starvation wages. But it also offers examples of benevolent, wealthy individuals who undertook to remedy social ills or aid the poor. These men and women underwrote a complex and varied urban philanthropy in a period of limited government spending on human welfare. A vast fortune, amassed on an unregulated Stock Market by the inspired and ruthless speculator Russell Sage ended up, on his death in 1906, in the philanthropic hands of his widow, Margaret Olivia Sage (1828-1918). She then proceeded to spend $45 million of it (over $770 million in current dollars) before her death in 1918 at the age of ninety. This paper explores the methods and objectives of this remarkable body of private charitable giving directed mainly, though not entirely, to New York City and region, and considers what we might learn from it one hundred years later.

Margaret Olivia Sage (Mrs. Russell Sage, or Olivia Sage, as she preferred to be called) appears in our histories, if at all, either as a benevolent old lady, or as a significant foundation-funder. She was actually both -- and more -- than these. In this paper focusing on the intense philanthropic activity of her last years (1906-1918), I distinguish four kinds of urban
philanthropy that she engaged in, often simultaneously. These were, first, her personal philanthropy to Sag Harbor, Long Island, where she sporadically resided as the town's lady bountiful; second, a very active personal philanthropy benefiting a remarkable number of charitable, educational and religious institutions. Third, Sage set aside a fund for the relief of poverty in New York City ("the Sage Fund"), to be administered through the New York Charity Organization Society (NYCOS) according to guidelines established by the Society. Her fourth and best-known philanthropic achievement was setting up the Russell Sage Foundation with $10 million, or $182 million in current dollars (she added another $5.6 m. in her will).

A product of the Victorian era and of evangelical Protestant culture which encouraged charitable work by women, Sage positioned herself as a benevolent woman, a public role that conferred responsibility for others. In her only published essay, "Opportunities and Responsibilities of Leisured Women" (1905), she explained what this role meant to her: "[W]oman is responsible in proportion to the wealth and time at her command. While one woman is working for bread and butter, the other must devote her time to the amelioration of the condition of her laboring sister. This is the moral law." 6

In her philanthropy, Sage would benefit from the mixture of benign indifference and good-humored paternalism that greeted the
activities of elderly females. The establishment of foundations by John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie was viewed with alarm by a public inflamed with antitrust sentiment. Their philanthropy was seen as an attempt to cover up after careers of predation, and men and women of conscience seriously debated whether or not to accept such "tainted money." For example, James Barton, corresponding secretary to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and a friend of Syracuse University, wrote reassuring Syracuse Chancellor James Day that he could in conscience accept Standard Oil money. "I feel it to be my duty as a Christian man and an officer of a benevolent organization to use every means in my power to convert money from idle uses, from secular uses, and even from vicious uses into the service of the Kingdom of God."

I have found no such objections to accepting Sage money. Reactions to the founding of the Russell Sage Foundation were positive, for who could suspect the kindly Mrs. Sage of aiming to undermine the American Republic? Russell Sage's money achieved this magical conversion to good uses only at his death: as his friend and physician commented, "In leaving his fortune to Mrs. Sage, Mr. Sage has left it to charity." Sage money, in passing from the calculating hands of Russell Sage into those of his widow seemed somehow purified, redeemed, and rededicated to higher purposes.

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For Mrs. Russell Sage had often stated her determination to devote her husband's money to good works. Our consideration of her urban philanthropy begins with her activities in Sag Harbor, a Long Island town dear to her as the birthplace of her mother. This was a small-scale but ambitious effort that aimed to rebuild the town's cultural and educational institutions and to effect the moral reconstruction of the small community. It combined large projects of social reconstruction and old-fashioned largesse, including a traditional "dole" of money "for the poor of the town" which she directed to be distributed through her friend, Mrs. Aldrich.

Sage felt great affection for the town where her mother had grown up but which had fallen on hard times since the collapse of the whaling industry and the loss to fire of its textile manufacturing plant. Even while her tight-fisted husband was alive Sage managed to purchase her grandparents' house at Sagaponack near Bridgehampton, Long Island. Then, after his death, she bought the Huntting House, a columned mansion, for $40,000, and lived there during her summer visits to Sag Harbor between 1908 and 1912.

Sage philanthropy to Sag Harbor was aimed especially at the immigrant population who formed the workforce of Fahy's, a watch-case factory and the town's major employer. She supplied the funds for a new "scientifically designed" park with modern
equipment and amenities, hiring the New-York landscaping and architectural firm of Samuel Parsons. Mashashimuet Part, built on property formerly a race track and fair ground, symbolized moral renewal as the land was converted from vulgar amusements to improving purposes. Sage underwrote the programs of supervised recreation, including folk-dancing and uplifting and educational talks at the town's Atheneum. She drew on the experts of the Russell Sage Foundation, established in 1907, incorporating some paid Foundation staff into plans for the little seaport. The Park director was Lee F. Hanmer, director of Child Hygiene for the Russell Sage Foundation; Hanmer in turn hired Robert K. Atkinson, a field-secretary of the Playground and Recreation Association of America as director of recreation at the Sag Harbor park. This philanthropy reflected the new thinking of the "play movement" reformers who sought "to organize the recreational life of the children of the poor and to use local public schools as the focus of neighborhood life." She also paid for a new high school, the Pierson High School, which was completed in 1908 at the cost of $102,000, its name commemorating her ancestor Abraham Pierson, first rector of Yale University in 1702. Another large donation made possible the building of a domed public library of grandiose style, the John Jermain Memorial Library, opened in 1910 and named for her grandfather, a Sag Harbor merchant.

This emphasis on building a community through work with youth and planned recreation was a hallmark of Progressive-era reform. At
the same time, the Sag Harbor philanthropy was a personal philanthropy steeped in the donor's imagined historical relationship to Long Island, and one that put her in a "Lady Bountiful" relationship to a whole community. Perhaps for this reason it was ultimately unsuccessful. The whole episode ended in tragicomedy with the community in revolt against the reformers' uplift plans, and with Mrs. Sage abandoning her summer home there and withdrawing from the town in anger in 1912 after she discovered that the contractors for the high school had cheated her by substituting inferior building materials for the expensive ones she had paid for. According to local legend, she summoned the building supervisor to her home and said bitterly, "We will finish what we have started, nothing more." One observer described Sag Harbor's inhabitants as "unappreciative," reported complaints that Sage had "pauperized" the community (made it unwilling to shift for itself), and described vandalism against fixtures in the park. 15 Such philanthropy to a single community by its wealthiest resident was beset with problems, whether it was an experiment in welfare capitalism like Pullman, Illinois, or the benevolent gesture of a large individual donor like Olivia Sage. 16 Yet Sage's affection for Sag Harbor outlasted her dispute with its city fathers. According to a friend, in the winter of 1914 and 1915 she read in a New York paper that the workers at Fahy's were in need because of strikes and unsettled working conditions growing out of the World War, "so she sent a thousand dollars secretly for relief." 17
A second phase of Sage spending was the private philanthropy. Between 1906 and 1918, Olivia Sage disbursed about $35 million. Her giving was mostly to institutions in New York City and state because that was where she had lived all her life. During her thirty-seven-year marriage, she had rarely left New York City except for summers in Long Island and occasional trips to Syracuse, her home town. She never went abroad.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her narrow existence, Sage brought a restless, reformist spirit to her philanthropy. She intended her money to support reform, as she defined it. To this end, she kept abreast of reform ideas, and, according to one observer, had "an active intellectual life." She read the newspaper with an intensity remarked on by several observers, clipped and saved articles about educational experiments and civic reform, and remained aware of policy debates in several areas even when she was elderly. At her summer home in Lawrence, Long Island a reporter noted downstairs, "a reading room, where the leading papers of the city are spread out."  

Since her marriage in 1869, Sage had been involved in the network of reform organizations sustained by women's voluntary labor and money donations. A reporter wrote, "She belongs to the strongly defined New York type of well-to-do committee-working church women."  She volunteered time on boards of women's
separatist associations like the New York Exchange for Woman's Work and the Lady Managers board of the Woman's Hospital, and took an active interest in city charities like New York's Gospel Mission and working girls' societies. She also served on mixed-sex boards including the board of governors of the New-York Woman's Hospital. In the 1890s she was active in parlor suffrage and the Woman's Municipal League. Ostensibly a moral reform and municipal improvement association with no suffrage agenda, the League was nevertheless a political organization that aimed to unseat Tammany and to bring more women into public life. These reform and associational connections were already in place when she received her inheritance in 1906, and she made use of them when she began to spend. Probably she had already picked out many of the institutions and causes. Woman suffrage provides a brief example.

Sage believed in moral progress and women's advancement, causes she believed identical. She saw woman suffrage as the overarching reform that would make possible all the others. "When women vote there will be a national housecleaning such as no nation ever saw," she wrote optimistically. "Once armed with the ballot, then the mop, the broom and the bucket will be decidedly more in evidence in the places in which they are most needed." For Sage (as for others) suffrage was urban reform. She believed that female voters would insist on legislation to protect children and families, support working women, and close brothels and saloons.
Her financial support of suffrage is not well known and some of it was anonymous, but her declaration that woman's power for good was about to be unleashed is unambiguous: "One of the most important movements of the day . . . is the reawakening of woman, the building her up on a new basis of self-help and work for others. That movement will set loose an amount of energy and talent that will revolutionize our social life." 23 It surprised no-one that some of her philanthropic dollars went to New-York suffrage associations, including the New York branch of the National Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). 24 Olivia paid the rent on the woman suffrage building for several years. Perhaps she reasoned that it was safer to designate her donations for rent than to give discretionary amounts that might be used to produce sensational demonstrations or shocking public displays. 25

But even larger than her donations to the cause of suffrage were her gifts to the Ys. Founded as a response to rapid urbanization and the threat to order posed, so it seemed, by a large, shifting population of strangers, YMCAs served the thousands of young men living in the city exposed to bad influences, while YWCAs aimed to help the young working women barely able to support themselves and thus vulnerable to prostitution. 26 An institution brochure explained why women of wealth should support the YMCA. It was a "legitimate field for woman's interest and help, because it has to do with those who will determine in large measure the future of the home, the church, and the state," the writer explained.
"The direct outcome of this special effort for young men is the making of better sons, better husbands, better fathers, and better citizens." 27

Both the YMCA and the YWCA received multiple, large donations from Olivia during her lifetime, and each was the recipient of an $800,000 gift in her will. In October 1906 and again in 1907, and with a speed suggesting that she had been contemplating this action for some time, Sage anonymously gave a quarter of a million dollars for a new YMCA at 27th and 28th Streets in New York, and another $30,000 to the San Francisco "Y." 28 The New York gift was made jointly with her wealthy, evangelical friends, Sara and Grace Dodge and Helen Gould, and resulted in establishing a Women's Auxiliary of the International Committee of the YMCA. Sarah Dodge gave the land while Olivia Sage gave the seven-story building at a cost of $350,000. 29 She also gave $250,000 to buy land and buildings for the International Y.M.C.A. in Brooklyn, to be administered through the Women's Auxiliary Board of the International YMCA. The YMCA movement went beyond urban reform to advocate reform of the social order itself through a redeemed and cleansed male citizenry -- a goal which transcended its earlier missionary and recreational purposes. The women also gave jointly to found Railway YMCAs for young men. 30 Sage philanthropy also helped endow New York City with great cultural and educational institutions. She gave $25,000 for the renovation of the Governor's Room of New York's City Hall (the
building had been saved from demolition in 1894). And her will contained bequests of $1.6 million for the American Museum of Natural History and $800,000 each to the (private) New York Public Library, the New-York Botanical Gardens, and the New-York Zoological Society.  

Donations to Central Park expressed her affection for the refuge where she had spent many hours, feeding the squirrels and birds while her husband toiled on Wall Street. She made large donations to the park for rhododendrons, and for some years, every employee of Central Park received a Christmas gift from her. Always hopeful about the uplifting power of education, she gave a small library of technical books to each of 258 firehouses in Greater New York. A passionate advocate of the protection of animals, she donated $10,000 to the New York Women's League for Animals, allowing the League to install drinking fountains for work-horses throughout the city, and matched donations from other wealthy donors to set up an animal hospital. Advancing age increased her concern about the plight of the elderly. In March 1907, a widow for only four months, she gave the great sum of $250,000 for a home for indigent women. Facing old age without her husband in affluence she thought of those who did so in poverty.  

Some of her philanthropy was prompted by her attorney Robert W. de Forest, a philanthropist and reformer in his own right. Her bequest of $1.6 million to the Metropolitan Museum of Art is
something of a mystery. Olivia had little interest in art and was not a collector. A reporter who penetrated the Sages' New York home (506 Fifth Avenue) at the turn of the century unkindly described it as a "homely brownstone residence upon which no stranger would waste a second glance."  

Probably, the donation was prompted by the de Forests. Olivia's friend Emily Johnston de Forest's father was the Museum's founder, and Robert de Forest was a major donor. Significantly, her other major gift to the Metropolitan was the Bolles Collection, six hundred pieces of early American furniture, a visual demonstration of the colonial past that so stirred her patriotism as it recalled also the history of her own family.

A great city needed a great university. Earlier, Sage had dreamed that Vassar, a women's college and in New York State, might become "Willard University," and that she might endow it as a counterpart in the East to Rockefeller's university in the West. But as the women's colleges turned into secular liberal-arts colleges Sage lost interest in them, giving a few buildings here and there in the name of various family members, but reserving her largest donations for prestigious universities, or what J. Anson Phelps, Jr., Secretary of Yale University called, "a few institutions of national scope."  

In the end, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton received large gifts from Sage, leaving the women's colleges to beg for $25,000 here and there. Sage educational philanthropy thus illustrates the remarked-on tendency of donors
to give to the largest, most prestigious entity rather than to the most needy. As historian Manuela Thurner remarked, "Women's public activities have not always been put to feminist ends." ³⁹

But this would be to overlook one remarkable attempt by Sage to establish a New York institution for women's higher education in her own city and state. Only six weeks after Russell Sage's death, in October 1906, she gave land valued at $294,000 to New York University with the instructions that, "Some part of the property at least will be used by New York University as a center for women's working and living, for a women's building, or for other University activities in connection with women." ⁴⁰ Vaguely worded and poorly drafted, the condition was never enforced. Probably she was little comforted when, ten years later, Chancellor MacCracken's successor Elmer Brown wrote apologetically to her brother, "[W]e have not given up hope of having a eventually a college for women on the magnificent property which Mrs. Sage has made available." ⁴¹ The NYU debacle was Sage's most notable failure. Her greatest donations for education were to places and institutions dear to her for personal or familial reasons: Syracuse University and in Troy, New York, Rensselaer Polytechnic University and Emma Willard School, and Russell Sage College for Women, which she founded in 1916.
A large part of Sage philanthropy was to home and foreign mission associations. Missions are not usually considered "urban reform" and even more rarely are they included under "Progressive reform," but it might be argued that such philanthropy to change peoples' hearts and minds as well as their habits deserves the name "reform." At any rate, missions were generously rewarded by Sage in her lifetime and in her will. Often she funded both the "mainstream" (male) association and the female auxiliary. Her will, dated October 1906, gave two parts of her estate (each part was approximately $800,000) to each of the Women's Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, the New York City Mission and Tract Society, and the New York Female Auxiliary Bible Society. This was revised in the codicil dated February 17, 1908, to give the American Bible Society one and one half parts and the New York Bible Society one half part, both to be administered through the New York Female Auxiliary Bible Society. It is remarkable how much Olivia Sage gave to separate women's boards. Yet only a few years later the rationale for such separatism would be lost and the institutions themselves would merge into mainstream (male) ones, as the major Protestant denominations moved to consolidate control and fundraising in a single body and as the culture of all-female institutions became obsolete.

In the midst of these activities, Sage had set up a third kind of philanthropy, establishing a fund to relieve poverty among needy
individuals and families in New York City and State. The identity of benevolent lady, carefully constructed as a public image over the previous decades, began giving Sage a great deal of trouble even before news of her husband's will leaked out. Multimillionaires attract a lot of correspondence, and she was soon receiving hundreds of begging letters each day. Sometimes she brought friends into the parlor or library of her New York home to view the enormous piles of letters, accepting their expressions of horrified sympathy. In October 1906, overwhelmed with appeals, Sage turned to the COS to administer her philanthropy for the poor. She handed the letters over to the New York Charity Organization Society (NYCOS), with a fund of $10,000 a year to administer aid to deserving cases. At the same time, she tried to discourage further appeals. Interviewed for a national magazine, she stated, "Helping the poor does not mean giving them money. In the majority of cases that would be the very worst thing to do." 

After 1906, begging letters addressed to Sage from individuals were forwarded by those close to her to the COS offices where they were investigated and sorted into two categories: wants, including "personal wants," "family wants," "vicarious wants," "public wants"; and needs including, "means of support, aid in business, payment of debts, purchase of home, means of education, means of medical treatment," and so on. Writing to COS president Robert de Forest in July 31, 1907, agent W. Frank
Parsons reported that he had received 39,096 Sage letters, of which he had read carefully 14,000 and skimmed 24,000. Every time the fund got down to one thousand dollars, Mrs. Sage sent a personal check for $10,000. By 1914 she was giving $10,000 six-monthly.  

It seems as if in giving to needy individuals Olivia Sage was content to rely on the criteria set by the COS and its agents, but this was not the case. We now know that Sage was also supporting charities for the poor that were not approved by the COS, such as the Salvation Army. Moreover, COS criteria themselves were shifting. Under general-secretary Edward Devine, the Society had jettisoned its ban on giving money relief and had begun to give cash payments to families identified by its agents as capable of achieving self-support. Funds came from private donors. In funding the Society over two decades and adding another $1.6 million to the COS in her will (probably at the urging of Robert de Forest), Sage accelerated the adoption of COS methods. And from the reformed COS of the early twentieth century, historian Dawn Greeley argues, emerged the outline of modern social-work practice and theory -- a striking example of administrative innovation in the private arena, initially nurtured by private donors, and later adopted by state bureaucracies.  

Progressive-era reformers redefined urban problems and devised
new tools to deal with them. In some cases, this involved turning away from institutions in general. For example, the traditional custodial orphanage was put on the defensive by Progressives who preferred the "cottage home" idea and foster care. Similarly, the settlements, as Erik Monkonnen has observed, turned social welfare inside-out, putting the social experts and urban missionaries inside and leaving the clients on the outside. They were a kind of anti-institution.

In the fourth part of her philanthropy, establishing the Russell Sage Foundation, Olivia Sage reflected the bold spirit of the Progressive era when she created a remarkable new tool for social investigation and reform, a think-tank and grantmaker for urban and regional problems. In the larger work from which this essay comes I describe the Russell Sage Foundation as a "two-parent foundation," a joint creation of Olivia Sage and of her attorney, New-York COS president, Robert de Forest. But because de Forest wrote the only surviving account of how the Foundation came into being it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate out Olivia Sage's contribution. Historians have depended on de Forest's famous memo and letter to Sage where he discusses the idea of an open-ended foundation, lists the policy issues it should address, and urges a charitable instrument "sufficiently elastic in form and method to work in different ways at different times." We have his account of an earlier conversation with her, but not her account. "Your inclinations, as you have expressed them to me,
have rather tended toward social betterment," he wrote to his employer in December 1906, "improvement of the hard conditions of our working classes; making their homes and surroundings more healthful and comfortable and their lives happier; giving more of opportunity to them and their children" (emphasis added). 56

The Foundation was incorporated under the laws of New York State in 1907. Olivia Sage's letter of gift transferred to it ten million dollars in securities and cash, the principal to be invested and the income applied to "the improvement of social and living conditions in the United States of America." By the terms of the gift, a significant amount, at least one quarter of the funds, was to be applied to "the needs of my own city and its vicinity."57

In recruiting trustees and experts, the Foundation gathered up the major strands of postbellum reform, drawing trustees from the overlapping charitable, academic, and evangelical elites. Friends wrote to invite friends. Gentlemen's clubs and faculty clubs (then the same thing), boards of mission, ladies' parlors -- some of them earlier politicized by suffrage and municipal reform movements -- the trustees came from these interconnected worlds. The resulting amalgam is described by Guy Alchon as "scientized empiricism and evangelical impulse."58
By her power to appoint the trustees, Sage had a major impact on the direction the Foundation took for its first two decades. There was Daniel Coit Gilman, first president of Johns Hopkins, the newest type of research university. There were the charity experts Louisa Schuyler and Gertrude Rice, veterans of the Civil War Sanitary Commission and its successors, the interconnected worlds of postbellum charity organization and of public-private experiments such as the State Charities Aid Association. There were reforming businessmen: racial reformer Robert Ogden, Cleveland Dodge of a famously philanthropic and wealthy family, and Alfred Tredway White, the housing reformer. A number were philanthropists in their own right; in addition to Dodge, just mentioned, Helen Gould and Robert de Forest.

John Glenn, first director and secretary of the Foundation, exemplifies how the Russell Sage Foundation linked reform networks with distinct philanthropic traditions and experience. Religious antecedents went unacknowledged in the Foundation's mandate and its public image, for the act of incorporation stated its purpose in broadly secular terms. But in the career of John Glenn, a corporate lawyer and the Foundation's first director, these traditions are evident. Like Mary Richmond, John and Mary Glenn came to the Foundation from the Baltimore COS, and before that from the South and the Protestant home missions movement. Shelby Harrison, Glenn's admiring biographer, recalled that he "liked that aspect of the American missionary movement, home and
foreign, which had traditionally combined some material aid and lifting of the general standard of living with the teachings of faith and religion." The Glens believed in what David Hollinger has called, "the moral efficacy of social science." Of Mary Willcox Glenn, a colleague wrote, "Her activities for social work were part of her religion."

Harnessing these different reformers and social planners into one organization for social improvement, the Russell Sage Foundation made a significant contribution to the development of urban policy-making, becoming the main institutional home of the developing social sciences in America. The Foundation sponsored empirically-based studies of urban problems, highlighting many aspect of urban life: work and wages, housing, child labor, crime. Investigation was combined with publicity to draw attention to the need for safer, healthier neighborhoods. And foundation-funded public health exhibits informed the public about tuberculosis and its links to bad housing. The New-York-based Foundation had a major impact on urban policy, and its impact was national.

The most significant project taken on by the RSF was the brilliantly innovative Pittsburgh Survey. The Foundation charged experts to develop social knowledge for an entire industrial region. By one estimate, it employed as many as seventy-four paid and volunteer researchers. But the Foundation's efforts
were not confined to Pittsburgh. Grants supported research and generated public policy in the fields of urban planning, public health, social work and social provision, and consumer economics. The trustees were given power to fund "activities, agencies or institutions established or maintained for the improvement of social and living conditions," provided that these yielded at least three per cent, and provided that no more than one quarter of the principal was invested at one time. This provision allowed experiments with model housing that would bring a modest financial return on investment together with a more significant social return. It would make possible the Forest Hills Gardens experiment that absorbed as much as one quarter of the Foundation's capital between 1909 and 1922.

Through the Foundation, Sage money also helped to underwrite social work as a profession. A June 1907 grant of $127,000 to the Charities Publication Committee of New York Charity Organization Society included $27,000 for the Pittsburgh Survey and an unspecified sum for the development of the periodical, *Charities and the Commons*, renamed *The Survey* in 1909. The Foundation gave substantial support to this journal in the form of grants totaling an estimated $355,100 over forty years. Other grants infused money into the training of "social workers" (the term was new), funding Schools of Philanthropy in Boston, St. Louis, New York, and Chicago. (The New-York Training School had previously been funded privately by Robert de Forest and perhaps others.)
Foundation grants to the New York COS were estimated to total over $1 million between June 1907 and 1947, a sum that included funds to establish the New York School of Social Work in 1918. This figure also included funds for prevention of tuberculosis, housing reform, and reform of criminal courts.  

Paul Boyer had argued that at the heart of Progressive reform was the shift from blaming the immoral individual to studying the environmental causes of poverty and crime. The RSF did not make so sharp a break from the nineteenth century as Progressives have claimed. Looking back from 1949, John Glenn, first director of the RSF, claimed that early RSF grantmaking was guided by concerns similar to those of the Charity Organization societies of the late nineteenth century: "individual treatment, based on knowledge of circumstances; avoidance of 'pauperization' or of creating "dependence"; aid toward self-support." 

But Glenn's assessment was too modest. Like the settlements from which it drew some of its personnel (Paul Kellogg, Mary Van Kleeck), the general-purpose foundation signaled more than a new approach to reform. In the words of social-policy historian Alice O'Connor, the Russell Sage Foundation institutionalized "the space, outside government and outside the academy, where reform-minded women and men could engage in social scientific exploration and have it recognized as such."
Other Progressive-era urban reform efforts generally focused on the "neighborhood," a small world that could serve as a demonstration unit for reform, the settlement, the neighborhood house, the community center, or the "social unit plan." The Russell Sage Foundation was much more ambitious, for it took as its problem "the improvement of social and living conditions in the United States," using what David Hammack characterizes as "simple and breathtakingly general language." The Russell Sage Foundation, set up by the generous gift of Olivia Sage in 1907, offered the nation a road-map for reform of urban-industrial society. Yet its approach to organizing reform was ignored in the years that followed, and moral explanations of poverty would again resurface periodically. In our own day, urban policymakers are again haunted and distracted by the specter of "dependency," and discussion of poverty has moved back from explanations based on "place," such as "the slum and the ghetto," "the inner city," to those based on "character" and the defects of a so-called underclass. Too often, discussion of bad individual decisions such as single motherhood (viewed as a decision by an autonomous individual), pushes aside consideration of environmental and structural factors in poverty such as low wages, loss of manufacturing jobs to "off-shore" companies, race- and gender-discrimination.

What is there to be learned from the example of one extraordinarily generous philanthropist who chose to exercise,
for a few years, "a kind of old-age freedom" by giving her money away? For all its splendid intentions, the career of Olivia Sage illustrates the limitations of even the grandest private initiatives in solving urban problems. It shows how individual donors, however well intentioned, may disburse vast funds in the pursuit of obsessions, prejudices, or chimerical schemes. As for today's urban problems, only governments have the resources to tackle such problems with any hope of success.
Notes

1. This essay is based on a paper read at the Conference, "Philanthropy and the City: An Historical Overview," organized jointly by the Center for the Study of Philanthropy and the Rockefeller Archive Center on September 25-26, 2000. Sessions were held at the Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, New York and the Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York. My thanks to conference co-chairs Kathleen D. McCarthy and Darwin H. Stapleton, and to Ken Rose and Barbara Leopold for local arrangements. Thanks also to Steven C. Wheatley who provided comments for the session.


Her varying use of names points to how she used the different identities available to her. Sometimes she is M. Olivia
Sage, sometimes M. Olivia Slocum, or Mrs. Russell Sage. I discuss this issue in 'Splendid Donation': A Life of Mrs. Russell Sage, forthcoming, Indiana University Press.


15. "We will finish what we have started, nothing more," quotes Sag Harbor resident Stuart Payne, whose father was the building supervisor in 1912. Unidentified newspaper clipping in letter from Mrs. M. Winslow, Stamford, Ct. to the author, July 23, 1994; Lewis, "Sag Harbor: The Study of a Small Community," pp. 183-85. There was also a dispute between Olivia Sage and the trustees of the First Presbyterian Church over the costs of renovating the steeple in 1910.


17. Marjorie Harrison, Margaret Olivia Sage: Philanthropist and Friend (New York: Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. A., 1907-8), p. 5. This pamphlet must have been reissued later since it deals with World War I.


24. Sage's correspondence with suffrage organizations is in RSF Box 98, folders 995-998.

25. Carrie Chapman Catt to MOS, January 10, 1910; January 17, 1910, RSF Box 98, folder 995.


29. Letitia Craig Darlington to MOS, March 16, 1907, RSF Box 101, folder 1010.

30. RSF Box 100, folder 1007.

31. RSF Box 68, folder 616.


34. Ellen P. Speyer, secretary, to MOS, May 29, 1914; October 16, 1915, Box 88, folder 853; Speyer to MOS, January 3, 1912; Speyer to MOS, May 14, 1912, RSF Box 88, folder 852.

35. MOS to Mrs. Haslett McKim, First Directress, Board of Managers, Association for Relief of Aged and Indigent Females, New York, March 11, 1907, RSF Box 68, folder 619.

36. Its interior "might have been a boarding house," he wrote, with the walls hung with "somber wall paper interrupted by somberer pictures of clouds and chariots and things." William Griffith, "The Sage Home on Fifth Avenue," newspaper clipping, n.d., Onondaga Historical Association, Syracuse, New York.


38. "The great need of our country today is the strengthening of a few strategic educational institutions of national scope which stand for scholarship and high Christian ideals." J. Anson Phelps, Jr., to MOS, April 7, 1908, RSF Box 99,
folder 1001.


41. Elmer C. Brown to J.J. Slocum, November 20, 1917, NYU.

42. Such an argument would support the "faith-based" initiatives advocated by fundamentalist Christians one hundred years later.


43. "Last Will of Margaret Olivia Sage, dated October 25, 1906; First Codicil, dated February 17, 1908," p. 21.

45. An acquaintance writing to Olivia in 1900 mentions another friend's visit, and "that immense pile of letters you showed [her] in your parlor." Estelle Morris to MOS, Aug 2, 1900, RSF Box 97, folder 979.


47. Quoted in Gleason, "Mrs. Russell Sage and Her Interests," p. 8185.


49. W. Frank Persons to Robert W de Forest, August 1, 1907; RW de F to W. Frank Persons, August 3, 1907, Community Service Society Collection, Columbia University (hereafter CSS) shows the New York COS handling many of the letters addressed to Mrs. Sage. On Robert de Forest, "Personalities," Box 153, CSS.

50. For example, RW de F to Persons, June 15, 1912, enclosing Mrs. Sage's check for $10,000. Persons to RW de F, October 1, 1914, Columbia.

51. _______ to RW de F April 11, 1914, CSS; RW de F to MOS, February 7, 1907, RSF Box 2, folder 11.

33. The Society collected funds from wealthy donors and held them in a special relief fund.


53. Dawn Greeley, "Beyond Benevolence: Gender, Class, and the Development of Scientific Charity in New York City, 1882-


73. The Foundation was to maintain a fund and apply the income to "the improvement of the social and living conditions in the United States of America . . . to use any means for that end which
from time to time shall seem expedient . . . . including research, publication, education, the establishment and maintenance of charitable or benevolent activities, agencies and institutions, and the aid of any such activities, agencies or institutions already established." "Constitution of the Russell Sage Foundation," in "Russell Sage Foundation, Minutes," RS Foundation. Hammack, "A Center of Intelligence for the Charity Organization Movement," p. 3.

Barry D. Karl and Stanley N. Katz point out that many of the early foundations stated their purpose with similar "naivete and ambition." For example, the Rockefeller Foundation's stated purpose was, "to promote the well-being of mankind throughout the world." Barry D. Karl and Stanley N. Katz, "Donors, Trustees, Staffs: An Historical View, 1890-1930," in The Art of Giving: Four Views of American Philanthropy (Pocantico Hills, N.Y., 1977), pp. 6-7.


Russell Sage (April 4, 1816 – July 22, 1906) was an American financier, railroad executive and Whig politician from New York. As a frequent partner of Jay Gould in various transactions, he amassed a fortune. Olivia Slocum Sage, his second wife, inherited his fortune, which was unrestricted for her use. In his name she used the money for philanthropic purposes, endowing a number of buildings and institutions to benefit women's education: she established the Russell Sage Foundation in 1907 and founded Learn about working at Russell Sage Foundation. Join LinkedIn today for free. See who you know at Russell Sage Foundation, leverage your professional network, and get hired. One of the oldest American foundations, the Russell Sage Foundation was established by Mrs. Margaret Olivia Sage in 1907 for "the improvement of social and living conditions in the United States." In its early years the Foundation undertook major projects in low-income housing, urban planning, social work, and labor reform. The Foundation now dedicates itself exclusively to strengthening the methods, data, and theoretical core of the social sciences as a means of diagnosing social problems and improving social policies.