The decades between 1890 and 1920 constituted a period of such vital reform activity that historians have dubbed them "the Progressive era." In this age, millions of Americans organized in voluntary associations to devise solutions to the myriad problems created by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.

Although many of these wildly energetic reformers united in the Progressive party of 1912--with Theodore Roosevelt as their presidential candidate--progressivism was not a single movement but a collection of coalitions agitating for changes that often seemed to contradict each other. For instance, many progressive reforms aimed to increase democracy in America. These included women's suffrage, the direct election of senators, the availability of the referendum, and the right to recall representatives whose behavior in office did not satisfy their constituents. On the other hand, many progressives hoped to increase efficiency in government and believed that they could do so by diminishing the power of elected officials and installing "experts" in their stead. This impulse found expression, for example, in progressive campaigns to hire city managers in the place of elected mayors or city councils. Government by un elected "experts," of course, undermined democracy and thus set one set of progressive reforms at odds with another.

One especially remarkable aspect of progressivism was the full participation of American women. Denied the vote through most of the period, women nevertheless exercised what they saw as their rights as citizens to shape public policy and create public institutions. Acting through such organizations as the Young Women's Christian Association, the National Consumers' League, professional associations, and trade unions, female reformers were at the forefront of the movement against child labor as well as the women's suffrage campaign. They won minimum wage and maximum hours laws for women workers, public health programs for pregnant women and babies, improved educational opportunities for both children and adults, and an array of social welfare measures at the local, state, and federal levels. They even succeeded in creating the Children's Bureau (1912) and the Women's Bureau (1920) in the federal Department of Labor. All in all, women's activism created a more intimate relationship between citizens and their government and laid part of the foundation for the welfare state that would take definitive shape during Franklin Roosevelt's presidency in the 1930s.

One institution that epitomized women's activism was the settlement house. Some American women--mostly middle-class and unusually well-educated--started opening settlements right around 1890. Settlement houses were places where middle-class women (and sometimes men) went to live in working-class, usually immigrant, neighborhoods. Here, native-born women sought to acquaint their neighbors with "American" culture and government and to learn about the cultures of the newest Americans. Over time, the hundreds of settlements that opened in cities all over the country routinely offered day care and kindergartens for the children of working parents, health care, English and citizenship classes, a space for community theater, all kinds of classes and clubs for children and adults, libraries, and organizational space for unions and political associations. As you will see in the upcoming itinerary, settlements like Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement in New York City became hotbeds of progressive reform. Indeed, one historian has referred to them as "spearheads for reform."

Progressive reformers created many institutions and policies that we accept as a natural part of our national life today, and progressive reform was unimaginable without the participation of women.