

CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES  
WESTERN RESERVE STUDIES SYMPOSIUM

## BUILDING A MEDICAL COMMUNITY IN THE WESTERN RESERVE

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Allen Memorial Medical Library  
Ford Auditorium

### “The Girls in Blue”: The Visiting Nurse Association of Cleveland

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Of the Visiting Nurse Association, a student at Hathaway Brown School wrote in 1905 that no charity in Cleveland was more deserving: “it looks into the unhealthful conditions...and it tries to better them; it reaches the very hearts of the people.” Founded in 1901, the Visiting Nurse Association was for its time a radical organization, born during the heyday of progressive reform. Its mission included not only nursing the “sick poor,” but also relieving the underlying conditions that produced poverty, ignorance, and disease. Known as the “girls in blue,” Visiting Nurses taught their patients cleanliness, how to prevent the spread of infection, and how to find help in a city with only embryonic social services. The Association set up the city’s first dispensary for treating tuberculosis, at that time a scourge of Cleveland’s large immigrant population.

The autonomy that Visiting Nurses enjoyed in their districts helped them develop the independence and judgment needed to become leaders of their profession. The Dean of the Lakeside Hospital Training School in the 1920s, Marion G. Howell, for example, came from their ranks.

Because the Visiting Nurses depended on the financial backing of private individuals, they welcomed the efforts of upper class women who volunteered their time to serve the Association. This volunteer service provided them with a lens through which to understand the city’s myriad of problems and promoted a collaborative spirit between nurse professionals and volunteers.

My paper will explore the origins of the Visiting Nurse Association in two girls’ clubs and the fortuitous involvement of nurse reformer, Isabel Hampton Robb in its founding. It will trace some of the connections with the settlement house movement and turn-of-the-century progressivism.