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The Travelers' Aid Society: Moral Reform and Social Work in New York City, 1907–1916

Eric C. Cimino, Molloy College

In director James Gray's recent film *The Immigrant* (2014), a Polish immigrant named Ewa is awaiting deportation at Ellis Island when she encounters a man who claims to be a worker for the Travelers' Aid Society. The man, Bruno, promises Ewa a safe place to stay and a good job if she will leave the island with him.¹ Having no other options, she agrees. Bruno escorts her off the island to an apartment on the Lower East Side, where Ewa senses that something is not right. Her initial suspicions are confirmed when the next day Bruno takes her to a seedy burlesque theater where she is put to work as a seamstress. He later pressures her into dancing for the theater's male patrons and, through constant psychological manipulation, ultimately convinces her to work for him as a prostitute. Ewa's immigrant American dream now shattered, she must find a way to survive amidst New York City's underworld.

In reviews, film critics have presented a confused picture of Bruno's identity. For instance, A. O. Scott writing in the *New York Times* asserts that Bruno is a "well connected representative" of the Travelers' Aid Society.² Others have called him an imposter who simply poses as an aid worker from a group that may or may not exist.³ Readers and film viewers may wonder if the Travelers' Aid Society has a history in New York and,

1. The author wishes to thank Susan Hinely, James Nichols, David Rothman, Ari Sclar, and Lilla Toke for reading drafts of this article. In addition, *New York History's* editors, especially Thomas Beal, and an anonymous peer reviewer offered insightful critiques that significantly improved the article.

Marion Cotillard and Joaquin Phoenix play the two lead roles in the film. For her performance as Ewa, Cotillard received the New York Film Critics Circle award for best actress.

2. Scott, "She's Just Off the Boat. He's the Wrong Man," *New York Times*, May 15, 2014, C6. For a similar portrayal, see Elias Savada, "The Immigrant," *Film Threat*, May 25, 2014, online at <http://www.filmthreat.com/reviews/77244/> (accessed 6/11/2014).

3. See for example Matthew Kassel, "James Gray Turns His Lens to 1920s New York in 'The Immigrant,'" *New York Observer*, May 14, 2014, online at <http://observer.com/2014/05/james-gray-turns-his-lens-to-1920s-new-york-in-the-immigrant/> (accessed 4/30/2016) and Peter Bradshaw, "Cannes 2013: The Immigrant—first look review," *The Guardian*, May 24, 2013, Main section, 13.

if so, was it a front used to recruit women into an illicit world of burlesque dancing and prostitution?

The Travelers' Aid Society of New York (TAS) did indeed exist. And, it was not a front; rather, it was established to *prevent* women from falling victim to schemes similar to Bruno's. The prominent philanthropist, Grace Hoadley Dodge, founded the TAS in 1907 as a response to the moral and sexual dangers that she believed confronted single women (immigrant and native-born) as they entered American cities in search of work and leisure. Moral reformers, like Dodge, assumed that traveling women who were adrift from their family and community existed on the "border line of tragedy," where the slightest misstep could result in a downward spiral that culminated in white slavery, the coerced prostitution of white women.⁴ To prevent the tragedy of white slavery, the TAS provided social work to at-risk travelers at New York City's train stations and piers. Much of its work involved escorting travelers away from "danger zones" and to locations it deemed safe and respectable, such as the accommodations of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Young Women's Hebrew Association.⁵ It also helped arriving travelers connect with family members and departing travelers to catch their trains and steamships. In more dramatic instances, the TAS separated female travelers from men who were judged to be imminently dangerous.

When writing about social welfare and reform projects, like travelers' aid, scholars often invoke theories of social control and discipline. They claim that social welfare is used to compel working-class and poor people into behaving according to middle-class values for the sake of maintaining the industrial order and the state.⁶ However, a rival interpretation also

4. TAS, *Annual Report*, 1912, 5. The TAS's Annual Reports are cataloged in the general collection of the Klingenstein Library at the New-York Historical Society (New York, NY). On "women adrift," see Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

5. The phrase "danger zone" is from Barbara Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 75.

6. For classic examples of this interpretation, see Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1995); John Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination: A History of Social Work and Social Policy in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poor House: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986). For more recent examples, see Anna Igra, *Wives without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, and Welfare in New York, 1900–1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007) and Jennifer Fronec, *New York Undercover: Private Surveillance in the Progressive Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

exists that presents welfare as a dynamic field that incorporates a wide-range of actors who have competing ideas about how to best serve clients and address social problems. This literature maintains that in addition to having a history of discipline and control, social work also has a tradition of benevolence and empowerment.⁷

This essay draws from both perspectives. It takes seriously the Travelers' Aid Society's claims to protect and assist travelers, while also acknowledging the organization's disciplinary features. It argues that the TAS's coercive elements were moderate during its period as a women's organization (1907–1910), which allowed members of the group, more often than not, to provide valuable aid to travelers. Travelers who could, for example, use assistance navigating a crowded station, locating a city address, or finding a job accepted travelers' aid and used it to their advantage. There appears to be more evidence of discipline in the ensuing period (1911–1916) when the TAS intensified its anti-white slavery activism.⁸ This led to instances where agents were more aggressive in cases involving female travelers and suspicious men. The heightened vigilance could be intrusive, denying women a chance to assert their independence. Nevertheless, by protecting women's morality and respectability (i.e. their social capital), the TAS furthered women's chances of building lives for themselves in New York.

Before turning to the history of the TAS, a brief discussion of the origins of the travelers' aid movement is in order. Travelers' aid was a product of the nineteenth century moral reform milieu. Middle- and upper-class moral reformers believed that vices such as alcoholism and prostitution were wreaking havoc on individuals, communities and, consequently, on

7. Barbara Levy Simon, *The Empowerment Tradition in American Social Work: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, eds., *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and YWCA in the City* (New York: NYU Press, 1997); Beverly Stadum, "Female Protection and Empowerment: Travelers Aid Services, 1919–1934," *Affilia* 12:3 (Fall 1997): 278–96; Walter Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*, 6th ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1999), xxvi–xxviii; Gary Lowe and Nelson Reid, eds., *The Professionalization of Poverty: Social Work and the Poor in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999), especially Clarke Chambers, "Afterward," 161–65; Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

8. This article only considers the first two periods of the TAS's history. For a brief overview of its subsequent history from World War I to the present, see the author's dissertation, "On the 'Border Line of Tragedy': White Slavery, Moral Protection, and the Travelers' Aid Society of New York, 1885–1917" (Stony Brook University, 2012), 199–203.

the national fabric.⁹ In 1834, activists in New York founded the Female Moral Reform Society and initiated a campaign to combat prostitution with the twin goals of “rescuing” prostitutes and reforming men’s sexual behavior. The Female Moral Reform Society held that prostitutes were not to blame for their condition; they were, instead, victims of men who acted as “cruel seducers and evil agents.” Two years later, its work was augmented by the establishment of a sister society in Boston, the New England Female Moral Reform Society.¹⁰ The early moral reform movement’s vision of prostitutes as passive victims lasted throughout the nineteenth century and, as Barbara Hobson states, informed “future strategies to preserve women’s sexual purity.”¹¹

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of new moral reform campaigns in the United States, as well as in England, that targeted a phenomenon known as white slavery, or coerced prostitution. Author and reformer Edward O. Janney defined white slavery as “the procuring, selling or buying of [white] women with the intention of holding or forcing them into a life of prostitution.”¹² London’s *Pall Mall Gazette* famously highlighted this practice with its publication in 1885 of W.T. Stead’s exposé “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” which inspired a rash of British anti-white slavery activism.¹³ In the United States, reformers sought to emulate Stead’s investigation and uncover examples of coerced prostitution on its shores. Newspaper reports and an 1888 investigation by Katherine Bushnell of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union claimed that white slavery was rampant in midwestern lumber towns, where “young virtuous women were enticed into brothels from which they were unable to escape.”¹⁴

9. On moral reform, also known as social purity, see David Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868–1900* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973).

10. Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 7–8, 49–55, 75; Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 182–83.

11. Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 75. See also Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 274–75.

12. Janney quoted in Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-Vice Activism, 1887–1917* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 20. See also Janney, *White Slave Traffic in America* (New York: National Vigilance Committee, 1911) and David Langum, *Crossing over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 34.

13. Stead’s piece has been reprinted in W. T. Stead and Antony E. Simpson, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission* (Lambertville: True Bill Press, 2007). On Stead, see Deborah Gorham, “The ‘Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ Re-examined: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late-Victorian England,” *Victorian Studies* 21 (Spring 1978): 353–79.

14. The quote is from Marion Horan, “Trafficking in Danger: Working-Class Women and Narratives of Sexual Danger in English and United States Anti-Prostitution Campaigns, 1875–1914”

First reported in 1887, the story of one young woman, Mary Schuman, was typical of the white-slave narratives that emerged during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Schuman traveled to Chicago expecting to meet a friend who would help her find work. The friend never appeared and Schuman turned to a stranger for help. The stranger deviously told her to leave Chicago for a restaurant job in another town. Mary followed the stranger's instructions and arrived not at a restaurant, but at a disreputable dance hall, where she was subsequently imprisoned and forced to have sex with different men over a period of several days.¹⁵ It was this type of scenario that motivated reformers in London and American cities to establish the travelers' aid movement.

The Young Women's Christian Association was the driving force behind travelers' aid in London. Since the early 1880s, it had been meeting young working-class Christian women at the city's train stations, which it thought "infested with men and women in whose hands [girls fall] an easy prey."¹⁶ The YWCA's work escorting travelers to safe lodging took on an added urgency in 1885 with the appearance of Stead's "The Maiden Tribute." In response to Stead's piece on sexual exploitation, the YWCA called a meeting of like-minded groups, such as the Girls' Friendly Society and the Moral Reform Union, for the purpose of federating into an umbrella organization that would more efficiently coordinate the city's travelers' aid services. The meeting resulted in the creation of the London Travelers' Aid Society in October 1885.¹⁷

Soon after the founding of London's TAS, the American branch of the YWCA began sponsoring travelers' aid for white Christian women in the United States, first in Boston (1887), and later in cities like Chicago, St. Louis, and New York.¹⁸ In New York, parallel to the YWCA's efforts, the Council of Jewish Women and the White Rose Mission offered trav-

(Ph.D. diss., Binghamton University, 2006), 16.

15. *Ibid.*, 155–57.

16. London Travelers' Aid Society, *Annual Report, 1886*, quoted in Horan, "Trafficking in Danger," 196.

17. "History: London," *National Travelers Aid Society Bulletin* 1:5 (September 1918), 9 [The *National Travelers Aid Society Bulletin* is hereafter referred to as the *Bulletin*]; "History," *Bulletin* 1:6 (October–November 1918), 10. For a scholarly account of the London TAS, see Richard Phillips, "Unsexy Geographies: Heterosexuality, Respectability, and the Travelers' Aid Society," *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 5:2 (2006): 163–90.

18. Elizabeth Wilson, *Fifty Years of Association Work among Young Women, 1866–1916: A History of Young Women's Christian Associations in the United States of America* (New York: National Board of the YWCA, 1916), 102; "Chronological Outline of Travelers Aid Development," *Bulletin* 1:1 (January 1918),

elers' aid to Jewish and African American travelers respectively.¹⁹ In 1897, the African American clubwoman Victoria Matthews founded the White Rose Mission as a settlement house for black migrants from the South.²⁰ Matthews did not view white slavery solely as a "white" problem and believed that black women were also vulnerable to trafficking.²¹ Accordingly, the White Rose Mission sponsored an agent at Manhattan's Pier 26 to meet African Americans from Virginia who arrived by steamship. Travelers' aid in other cities, such as Philadelphia and Boston, was similarly divided along racial and religious lines throughout the nineteenth century. This changed in the twentieth century when the Philadelphia Travelers' Aid Society (1901) and the Travelers' Aid Society of New York (1907) were the first to bring together Christians and Jews in order to centralize their respective cities' travelers' aid fields.²²

A leader of this drive to centralize travelers' aid was the prominent philanthropist and reformer Grace Hoadley Dodge.²³ Dodge was best known in New York City for her efforts to uplift working women through education and practical training. In the late nineteenth century, she established women's associations that included the Kitchen Garden Association, the Industrial Education Association, and the Working Girls' Societies.²⁴

9; "History: Other Early Work," *Bulletin* 2:1–3 (January–March 1919), 17; Helen Bittar, "The Y.W.C.A. of the City of New York, 1870 to 1920" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1979), 137–38.

19. On the Council of Jewish Women, see Val Marie Johnson, "Protection, Virtue, and the 'Power to Detain': The Moral Citizenship of Jewish Women in New York City, 1890–1920," *Journal of Urban History* 31:5 (July 2005): 655–84.

20. Matthews was an adherent of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist approach to racial uplift, which emphasized industrial education as the key to African American progress in the post-Civil War era. Travelers' aid was one of numerous social services that the White Rose provided to its clients, which included temporary lodging, training in domestic service, and a kindergarten. On Matthews and the White Rose Mission, see Steve Kramer, "Uplifting our 'Downtrodden Sisterhood': Victoria Earle Matthews and New York City's White Rose Mission, 1897–1907," *The Journal of African American History* 91:3 (Summer 2006): 243–66 and Floris Cash, *African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896–1936* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 90–97.

21. Matthews claimed that Southern employment agencies lured "good-looking" African American girls to the North through "glowing accounts of life in New York" and false promises of "honorable positions in respectable families." Matthews quoted in Kramer, "Uplifting our 'Downtrodden Sisterhood,'" 246.

22. Horan profiles the Philadelphia Travelers' Aid Society in "Trafficking in Danger," 232–35.

23. Grace Dodge was from the elite Dodge merchant family of New York City. The Dodges were known for their wealth, business acumen, and philanthropy. Esther Katz, "Grace Hoadley Dodge: Women and the Emerging Metropolis, 1856–1914" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1980), 1–18.

24. On Dodge's late nineteenth century reform projects, see Katz, "Grace Hoadley Dodge," Chs. 2–4; Abbie Graham, *Grace H. Dodge: Merchant of Dreams* (New York: The Womans Press, 1926); and Wilson, *Fifty Years of Association Work*, 207–14.

The latter was an umbrella organization for the numerous women's clubs (proto-settlement houses) that Dodge opened in the 1880s. These clubs provided a meeting space where blue and white collar women could build an identity as independent workers. In this setting, Dodge sponsored a variety of programs, often suggested by the women themselves, such as child care services, an employment bureau, and a support group for those trying to maintain their "purity."²⁵ However, according to her biographers, Dodge's allegiance to her upper-class background prevented her from taking the further step of leading these women in an "economic struggle" for social justice that would have involved "legislation and a public fight."²⁶

Her interest in the welfare of working women gradually led Dodge to travelers' aid. At first, her only contact with the movement came through observing the work done by the YWCA and the African American-led White Rose Mission.²⁷ In 1903, her involvement increased when she volunteered to serve on the YWCA's travelers' aid committee for the World's Fair in St. Louis.²⁸ Dodge's successful stint coordinating travelers' aid at the fair led her to question the quality of services offered in her hometown, New York City. A study she later commissioned revealed that there were too many religious organizations providing travelers' aid, which resulted in "useless" overlap and overall ineffectiveness.²⁹ In response, Dodge assembled a group of reform-minded women at her house on Madison Avenue to discuss the need for better-coordinated travelers' aid. At the meeting, Dodge proposed the creation of a central travelers' aid organization that would unite the city's religious factions.³⁰ Dodge's cohort promptly assembled a provisional Travelers' Aid Committee. After a successful two year trial run (1905–1907), the Committee was incorporated as the Travelers'

25. Wilson, *Fifty Years of Association Work*, 210–13; Graham, *Merchant of Dreams*, 81–95.

26. Graham, *Merchant of Dreams*, 115–16; Katz, "Grace Hoadley Dodge," 252.

27. Wilson, *Fifty Years of Association Work*, 216–17; Hallie Q. Brown, *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*, 1926 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 214.

28. Wilson, *Fifty Years of Association Work*, 200–201; Bittar, "The Y.W.C.A. of the City of New York," 138.

29. Graham, *Merchant of Dreams*, 222; TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 3; "History," *Bulletin* 1:6 (October–November 1918), 7.

30. Graham, *Merchant of Dreams*, 222; Bertha McCall, *History of the National Travelers Aid Association, 1911–1948* (New York, 1950), 3–4; Orin Baker, *Travelers' Aid Society in America: Principles and Methods* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1917), 20–21. Dodge's interest in eliminating "useless" overlap through centralization stemmed from her long involvement with the charity organization movement. For histories of charity organization, see Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State*, Ch. 5 and Dawn Greeley, "Beyond Benevolence: Gender, Class, and the Development of Scientific Charity in New York City, 1882–1935" (Ph.D. diss., Stony Brook University, 1995).



Figure 1. A 1909 image of the exterior of the Travelers' Aid Society Headquarters, located at 238 E. 48th Street. Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.

Aid Society of New York with headquarters located in a four-story row house on East 48th Street and only a short walk from Grand Central Station.

The Travelers' Aid Society's first all-female Board of Directors was dominated by upper-class philanthropists that included Dodge; Harriet Judson, the founder of the Brooklyn Young Women's Christian Association; and Kate Bond, a longtime member of the New York Charity Organization Society. The TAS billed itself as a "non-sectarian" organization, which meant that its leadership included white women from the three major faiths of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism.³¹ On its fourteen-member Board, Protestants (namely Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists) held the majority of the positions, while there was only a minor Jewish and Catholic presence. Beth Israels, a member of the Council of Jewish Women, was the lone Jewish woman on the Board; while Helena Goessmann, an expert on Catholic charity and education, was the Catholic representative.³²

The Travelers' Aid Society's mission was to prevent women at train stations and piers from falling victim to the white slave traffic. Young working women, often referred to as "girls," were the TAS's primary clientele. They could be either native- or foreign-born. If native-born, according to TAS descriptions, she was an "unsophisticated young country girl" who left for the big city to work in a factory, a shop, or in someone's home as a domestic servant.³³ Upon arrival, she was vulnerable to the manipulations of various urban confidence men and hustlers, like the runners who roamed the stations on behalf of cheap hotels and dubious employment agencies.³⁴ If foreign, the traveler was described as a "bewildered non-

31. "History," *Bulletin* 1:6 (October–November 1918), 7; "Non-Sectarian: What Does it Mean?," *Bulletin* 1:2 (February–April 1918), 7.

32. Israels was one of the only middle-class members of the TAS's Board. She later became the country's leading investigator of urban amusements, as well as a close advisor to New York Governor Alfred E. Smith. On her impressive career, see Elizabeth Israels Perry, *Belle Moskowitz: Feminine Politics and the Exercise of Power in the Age of Alfred E. Smith*, 1987 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000) and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), Chs. 4, 5, 7. In 1909, a second Jewish woman, Rita Halle, joined the TAS Board.

33. TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 4–6. The innocent young country girl was a common trope in white slavery narratives. See Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 54–61 and Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 20, 23–29. Young farm boys, on the contrary, were encouraged by the era's popular literature to travel on trains in order to "pass into adulthood, into adventure, and into real or seeming wisdom." John Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 11, 218.

34. Belle Lindner Israels, "Modern Samaritans," *Good Housekeeping* 14:6 (December 1907), 718–19.

English speaking woman,” whose ignorance of American culture made her easy prey for the “procuress” and “cadet.”³⁵ In the TAS’s narratives of sexual danger, young working women were gendered as innocent, passive, and dependent, incapable of negotiating on their own the “larger world” they encountered at the city’s transportation hubs.³⁶

As the term white slavery indicates, the TAS assumed the victim to be white. At the turn of the century, when racial categories were in flux, “white” could be defined narrowly to mean only Anglo-Protestants or broadly to include eastern Europeans such as Jews and southern Europeans like Italians. The society subscribed to an expansive notion of whiteness, thereby including Jews, Poles, and Italians alongside Anglos and Germans as its regular clients. Furthermore, at train stations that were not covered by the African American-led White Rose Mission, the TAS broadened its client base and reached out to black travelers as well.

To meet travelers, the organization’s General Secretary, Ms. C. M. Anderson, assigned a dozen paid female social workers to patrol the city’s piers and its two main rail hubs, Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Station.³⁷ At both stations, agents met incoming express and local trains. On the Hudson River docks, agents engaged those traveling on the transatlantic lines (American, White Star, and Cunard) that connected New York with Liverpool. Other lines included the Hamburg-American, the North German Lloyd from Bremen, and the Anchor, a line out of Glasgow. The TAS did not have an official desk at either the stations or docks, requiring agents to claim informal spaces for themselves. At the stations, they stood in the concourses near the exits. On the docks, they positioned themselves near the gangplanks to watch for debarking second-cabin passengers.³⁸

35. TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 5–6. Cadets were young men in ethnic street gangs who scouted the city for girls to supply to white slave traders or directly to brothels. See David Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene: Women, Prostitution, and the ‘American Plan,’ 1900–1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 79, 83 and Theodore Bingham, *The Girl that Disappears: The Real Facts about the White Slave Trade* (Boston: The Gorham Press, 1911), 39–44.

36. TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 5; *Annual Report, 1908*, 5.

37. The TAS did not have a presence at Ellis Island. Immigrants at Ellis Island were inspected and processed by the U.S. Immigration Service and assisted by other aid organizations, such as the Council of Jewish Women. On Ellis Island, see Vincent Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009); Jessica Pliley, “The Petticoat Inspectors: Women Boarding Inspectors and the Gendered Exercise of Federal Authority,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 12:1 (January 2013): 95–126; and Johnson, “Protection, Virtue,” 668–70.

38. Orin Baker, *Travelers’ Aid Society, 77*; TAS, *Annual Report, 1912*, 9; *Annual Report, 1914*, 7. At the docks, the TAS did not handle steerage (third-class) passengers because they debarked at Ellis Island.



Figure 2. Agents at work inside TAS headquarters in 1909. Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.

TAS workers did not wear uniforms and they were only identifiable by their badges made of ribbon.³⁹

In general, whether working the stations or piers, agents used the technique of *observe, assess, approach, and help*.⁴⁰ First, agents were to observe individual travelers; second, assess how vulnerable they were to exploitation; then, if warranted, approach and offer help. Once the agent initiated contact, it was designed to be short, especially compared to the long term social work offered in “protective residential settings” by organizations like the YWCA.⁴¹ In a typical scenario, the agent was to conduct the traveler as quickly and efficiently as possible to her final destination in the city or, if the traveler intended to leave New York, to another station/pier where she

39. TAS, *Annual Report, 1908*, 4.

40. Horan gives a similar account of TA methods in “Trafficking in Danger,” 262.

41. Stadum, “Female Protection and Empowerment,” 280–81.

could safely continue her journey.⁴² If an agent encountered a traveler who did not have a definite street address to go to, it was the agent's responsibility to guide her to one of the numerous lodging houses for single women.

The TAS served as a vital link in a wide-ranging chain of women's residential facilities. Agents sent foreign young women to the city's numerous immigrant homes. These included the Polish Home and the Italian Immigrant Society, both on lower Manhattan's Broad Street, as well as the Hebrew Relief Society on East Broadway.⁴³ The TAS was also a supporter of the newly established German-American Friendship Club for Young Women on Park Avenue. The Friendship Club was founded in 1908 to protect young immigrant Germans, mostly servants and shop-girls, from the "evils" of the white slave traffic. It sought to remedy their perceived ignorance, which made them vulnerable to the city's dangers, by teaching them English and explaining the city's street plan and subway system. It also maintained bedrooms for those needing a place to stay.⁴⁴

The Travelers' Aid Society sent native-born, English speaking young women to the Shelter for Respectable Girls on 46th Street, as well as to the YWCA, the Young Women's Hebrew Association, and the public Municipal Lodging House.⁴⁵ Single women who desired "greater independence" lodged at the Trowmart Inn on 12th Street in the West Village. The Trowmart Inn offered room and board at \$4.50 to \$5.00 a week to travelers and "low-salaried" workers. It did not require boarders to follow strict daily check-in or check-out procedures and it allowed male guests in the parlor.⁴⁶

From 1907 to 1910, the basic outline of travelers' aid work took shape. Agents established themselves at the city's main train stations and transatlantic piers, where they watched for distressed travelers and practiced their "short-time" social work. The TAS forged ties with the city's women's residential organizations to which it delivered travelers in need of lodging and long term assistance. The train stations and piers, the women's residences,

42. TAS, *Annual Report, 1910–1911*, 5, 7.

43. TAS, *Annual Report, 1908*, 8, 16.

44. "The Friendship Club," *New-York Tribune*, February 14, 1909, Woman's Realm Section, 4.

45. TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 11; *Annual Report, 1908*, 8–9; *Annual Report, 1909*, 5.

46. TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 11; *Annual Report, 1908*, 8; *Putnam's Monthly* 1:1 (October 1907), 91; Mary Maule, "What is a Shop-Girl's Life?," *The World's Work* 14:5 (September 1907), 9315.

and the streets of New York formed the travelers' aid field, providing the stage on which encounters between agents and travelers occurred.

When agents and travelers met, TAS discipline was mild and travelers typically used the services that they received to their advantage. In the majority of the available records from 1907 to 1910, the agent carried out the case to the satisfaction of both parties. Often travelers had routine needs that were easily fulfilled. In a case from 1907, a twenty-three year old Irish woman arrived at Grand Central Station and sought out the Travelers' Aid Society (in her words, "the ladies who helped"). After meeting with an agent, she was escorted to the Sisters of Mercy Home, which promised to find her employment as a domestic servant.⁴⁷ Agents also observed disoriented travelers who were overwhelmed by crowds and struggling to navigate a station or pier. An agent found an older Dutch woman visibly upset and confused on a Hudson River pier. She had just arrived after visiting her native Holland and was attempting to return to her Wisconsin farm. The agent calmed her down and escorted her off the pier to Pennsylvania Station, where she could connect to a Wisconsin-bound train.⁴⁸ Similarly, an agent observed a "bewildered" young French woman wandering in Pennsylvania Station. She was on her way to an uncle's funeral and trying to locate her 12:44pm train to New Jersey. The agent approached the traveler, viewed the ticket, and quickly guided her to the correct platform, where both women waited together until the train arrived.⁴⁹

Other cases were not so straightforward, but seemed to have been resolved to the travelers' satisfaction nonetheless. In instances where the traveler wanted to connect with a relative, addresses could be wrong or not what the traveler or agent expected. A "pretty, young Russian who spoke little English" presented agents with a Suffolk Street address where she hoped to stay temporarily before taking a steamship back to Europe. When the agents and young woman arrived at the building, they "found it to be a music hall," a site of amusement that was always morally suspect in the eyes of social workers. The agents rejected the music hall as a suitable place

47. Case 8 in TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 19. The sample cases were originally not titled or numbered, therefore I assigned numbers to them that correspond to the order in which they appear in each Annual Report. After 1910, the TAS began to use titles.

48. Case 5 in TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 18.

49. TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 23.

to leave the woman, who then gave the agents another address on Norfolk Street. This address was her aunt's home and a joyful reunion ensued.⁵⁰

Agents also met travelers who were in the midst of a personal crisis and desperately needed assistance. In June 1908, the Travelers' Aid Society encountered a "poor, sick Belgian woman with two children" at Pennsylvania Station. She was attempting to get to the Belgian Consul, but she had no money and her family had not eaten "for a long time." Agents gave them food and took them to the Consul, which provided the family with free tickets back to Belgium.⁵¹ Hunger was also an issue in a situation involving a Russian woman who came to New York to "hunt" for her baby's father. Agents found the woman and her baby "very weak" and hungry in Grand Central Station. They gave the mother coffee and a sandwich, then escorted her to an immigrant home, which promised to help her find work.⁵² Further examples of travelers in distress who benefited from the intervention of the Travelers' Aid Society include a Russian Jewish family fleeing a pogrom; a five year old girl attempting to return to Hungary after the death of her parents; and a deserted bride from Buffalo, whose husband had stolen her life savings and abandoned her at Grand Central Station.⁵³

Travelers and agents did not always have similar agendas and when this was the case, conflict ensued. Such was the situation with a twenty-year-old Polish woman at Grand Central, who was brought to the attention of the TAS by a hotel runner.⁵⁴ The runner knew Polish and volunteered to interpret for the woman, who clearly just wished to be left alone. The woman reluctantly explained that she was from Vermont and on her way to Pennsylvania. Since her connecting train was not arriving until later in the day, the agents offered to take her to TAS headquarters for breakfast and then escort her to Pennsylvania Station. The woman refused: "No, I will stay right here in the station where I am." They tried convincing her that the train was not leaving from Grand Central, but it was of no use. The agents then became more confrontational and began questioning the

50. Case 12 in TAS, *Annual Report, 1908*, 17.

51. Case 13 in *Ibid.*, 17–18.

52. Case 4 in TAS, *Annual Report, 1909*, 10.

53. On the deserted bride, see "Husband Takes Her Cash," *New York Times*, November 7, 1909, C6.
54. Runners and the hotels that employed them were typically seen as exploitive (see below), so it was unusual for the TAS to consider the runner an ally in this case.

woman about her intentions once she arrived in Pennsylvania. The woman curtly replied, “It is none of your business.” Desperate, agents turned to the police, who threatened to take her into custody. With this, the woman broke down and cried, and finally consented to accompany the TAS to Pennsylvania Station.⁵⁵ This case reveals that the TAS could, on rare occasions, force a client to accept help by invoking the threat of police action.

Despite such evidence of coercion, travelers generally benefited from the assistance that received between 1907 and 1910. Travelers’ needs were often straightforward and the TAS was well equipped to respond. Travelers may not have sensed that they were vulnerable to sexual danger (as the TAS believed all female travelers were), but if agents could get them to where they needed to go or suggest viable lodging options, then travelers were usually willing to accept help. Even when encounters became tense, the situation could still be resolved to the travelers’ advantage. The stand-off between the TAS and the Polish woman, discussed above, resulted in the woman being placed on a train bound for Pennsylvania—a destination that she selected. Once she was on board, the TAS had no control over her subsequent behavior. Thus, ironically, the Travelers’ Aid Society may have even enabled future inappropriate actions on the part of the traveler.⁵⁶

During the next period of the TAS’s history, 1911 to 1916, the society transitioned from a women’s organization to a mixed-sex organization that was led by men. This development was intended to strengthen the TAS as its leadership of the travelers’ aid field was threatened by two new organizations, the North American Civic League and the Bureau of Industries and Immigration.⁵⁷ The restructuring was also one of the many “insti-

55. Case 4 in TAS, *Annual Report, 1908*, 13–14.

56. Lynne Kirby explains that the “in-between nature of the train journey” often presented opportunities for “romance, seduction, and crime.” Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 83.

57. The North American Civic League (NACL) was a voluntary association made up of wealthy businessmen that sponsored immigrant social welfare programs. It also lobbied for the creation of a special state department that would enact legislation aimed at protecting immigrants. The NACL’s lobbying resulted in the creation of the Bureau of Industries and Immigration (BII) as a sub-division of the New York State Department of Labor. Neither the NACL nor the BII focused exclusively on travelers’ aid, but their comprehensive social welfare programs and campaigns for protective legislation included it. Furthermore, both organizations operated under the assumption that the state should play the leading role in immigrant protection. On the NACL and BII, see Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Christina Ziegler-McPherson, *Americanization in the States: Immigrant Social Welfare Policy, Citizenship, and National Identity in the United States, 1908–1929* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 23–29.

tutional and activist” responses to the publication of muckraker George Kibbe Turner’s major piece on white slavery entitled “The Daughters of the Poor.” Appearing in the late fall of 1909, Turner’s article for *McClure’s* turned the nation’s attention from Chicago to New York City as the new ground zero in the battle to root out white slavery.⁵⁸

With the national spotlight on New York, the TAS committed to a reorganization plan that focused on the enlistment of men as Board members and as leading officers.⁵⁹ As the nature of charity continued to change, moving away from volunteerism and toward professionalism, Grace Dodge and her cohort saw the addition of men as adding credibility to their work. What some in the public mistook for an amateurish women’s organization would now count some of the city’s most influential men as members.⁶⁰

From her Madison Avenue home on February 3, 1911, Dodge announced the new twenty-five person Board of Directors. Seven women from the previous Board remained, including Dodge and Israels. Dodge was no longer the President, but from 1912 until her untimely death at the end of 1914, she served as the Chair of the Executive Committee and continued to be the TAS’s primary source of funding. Alongside the female leadership were now seventeen “influential and well-placed” men from the fields of business, industry, academia, politics, law, religion, and labor.⁶¹ They included Gilbert Colgate, the Vice-President of the Colgate toothpaste company; Frederick Underwood, President of the Erie Railroad; Cardinal John Farley, the head of the Catholic Church in New York; Rabbi

58. In New York, Turner’s article sparked numerous investigations into the nature of white slavery. Reform groups aimed to uncover its root causes, while the city’s District Attorney’s office and the State of New York undertook their own investigations. Gretchen Soderlund, “Covering Urban Vice: The *New York Times*, ‘White Slavery,’ and the Construction of Journalistic Knowledge,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19:4 (December 2002), 443–49; Turner, “Daughters of the Poor: A Plain Story of the Development of New York City as Leading Center of the White Slave Trade of the World, Under Tammany Hall,” *McClure’s* 34 (November 1909): 45–61.

59. TAS, *Annual Report, 1910–1911*, 8.

60. Joan Brumberg and Nancy Tomes describe how women often had to transcend the popular image of the female volunteer/amateur in order for their professional position to be “secure.” In other words, the masculine “culture of professionalism” required distance from the “amateur and the volunteer.” Brumberg and Tomes, “Women in the Professions: A Research Agenda for American History,” *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982), 284–86. Greeley in “Beyond Benevolence” (75–77) discusses the credibility and prestige that men brought to women reformers beginning as early as the 1880s.

61. The quote is from Fronc, *New York Undercover*, 66.

Dr. Samuel Schulman of Temple Beth-El; and John Mitchell, the Vice-President of the American Federation of Labor.⁶²

Concurrent with the expansion of the Board of Directors, a search committee selected a new General Secretary, Orin Baker, to direct the work. In New York, Baker was well known for his Protestant evangelism and had only recently become interested in non-sectarian, professional travelers' aid.⁶³ Despite his inexperience, Baker became a tireless promoter of travelers' aid as an antidote to white slavery. In this second phase of the organization's history, he succeeded Grace Dodge as the leader of the travelers' aid movement.⁶⁴

Under Orin Baker's leadership, the Travelers' Aid Society intensified its anti-white slavery work. During its initial years as a women's organization (1907–1910), the TAS believed that the best approach to preventing white slavery was to assist travelers with the ordinary stresses of travel. As we have seen, the organization's first Annual Reports emphasized cases in which agents escorted travelers to transportation hubs or to other city addresses because of their unfamiliarity with the city, which was often exacerbated by crowded stations or a personal crisis. Strange men representing a direct threat appear in only five out of fifty-four sample cases (9 percent).⁶⁵ In contrast, from 1911 to 1916, the TAS was more alert to impending threats of sexual danger. Men with manipulative and/or criminal intentions are found in over half (34/64) of the cases from this period. Accompanying this increase in cases involving suspicious strangers was also an escalation in the level of discipline and surveillance used by the TAS's agents.

The 1911 to 1916 cases depict sexual danger originating from three types of locations: travelers' hometowns, onboard steamships or trains, and at transportation centers. In the traveler's hometown, she might answer

62. By including such men, the new Board bore a striking resemblance to those of two other prominent anti-vice organizations, the Committee of Fifteen and the Committee of Fourteen, both of which likely served as models for the restructuring. *Ibid.*, 3, 37–38, 66–67.

63. On Baker's evangelism, see "On their Way to the Holy Land," *New York Observer*, December 29, 1910, 849 and "Aiding Travelers," *New York Tribune*, January 21, 1912, Of Interest to Women Section, 4. For an account of how Baker transitioned from evangelical work to non-sectarian travelers' aid, see Anna Pratt Simpson, *Problems Women Solved: Being the Story of the Woman's Board of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition* (San Francisco: The Woman's Board, 1915), 62–63.

64. While acting as General Secretary, Baker also led efforts to create a National Travelers' Aid Society, which he accomplished in 1917. McCall, *History of National Travelers Aid*, 9–20.

65. Cases 9 and 10 in TAS, *Annual Report, 1907*, 19–20; Cases 3, 8, 19 in *Annual Report, 1908*, 13, 16, 19–20.

a fraudulent advertisement for work in New York and upon arrival find herself in an economically and/or sexually exploitative situation. In another scenario, a man would make a promise of marriage to a young woman and offer to pay for her ticket to the big city. When she arrives, the proposed relationship turns out to be a scam. A case from 1913 shows a young girl named Lucy who was persuaded by a man to leave her home. He instructed her to arrive in New York prior to him in order to evade “a well-known law,” the anti-white slavery Mann Act.⁶⁶ Upon arrival, Lucy approached an aid worker in the station and asked to be directed to a nearby boarding house. She claimed to be meeting her “brother” the next day and needed a place to stay in the meantime. The agent was immediately suspicious of the girl due to her appearance: “It was evident she was not accustomed to long dresses and that her large ill-fitting brown suit had been hurriedly purchased.” She was clearly “masquerading” as a “grown woman” and thus probably a runaway. In order to teach Lucy a lesson, the agent accompanied her to the train station the following day. Under the agent’s close watch, Lucy approached the man and only then discovered “his evil motive.”⁶⁷

Another common site where fraud began was on board a train or steamer. In these cases, a well-dressed and charming man would strike up a conversation with an unsuspecting passenger, usually a foreigner with little knowledge of English. After a while, the man would offer to help the woman with the next leg of her trip. In 1911, the TAS assisted a young Danish woman badly shaken by an earlier incident with a man she had met in Nevada. According to the traveler, she bonded with the man over the course of her train journey and when they reached Chicago, the man promised to look after her as she waited for her connecting train. During the layover, he convinced her to go to a hotel with him where she would be “safe.” After obtaining a room for her, the man abruptly entered and

66. The Mann Act made it a federal crime to transport a woman of any age across state lines for commercial purposes that were considered immoral. An overview of the law appears in Ruth Engs, *The Progressive Era's Health Reform Movement: A Historical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 210.

67. The report does not explicitly describe the man’s “evil motive,” but the earlier invocation of the Mann Act implies that the TAS believed that it entailed sexual coercion. “Oh! I Want my Father!,” in TAS, *Annual Report, 1913*, 32.

“bolted the door.” The Danish woman was able to quickly unlock it and fled the room screaming.⁶⁸

In this case, the man disappeared, giving up his interest in the young woman after his initial efforts failed, but some men encountered en route proved more persistent, loitering near TAS headquarters for hours or days in an attempt to pry young women away from their protectors. For example, two men who had met a seventeen year old girl on a steamer in 1913 refused to concede her after agents brought the girl to headquarters. The younger of the two men promptly came to reclaim the girl, stating that he had money for her. The older man, posing as an “uncle,” also appeared and declared that he had been charged by the girl’s “aunt” to care for her. Upon further questioning, the uncle, who was drunk, admitted that he had just met the girl on the ship. The two men proceeded to make themselves at home in the neighborhood, staking out TAS headquarters in the hopes of catching the girl coming or going. Through some trickery of their own, however, agents snuck the girl out of the building and delivered her to a “fast train in Newark” bound for Chicago.⁶⁹

Lastly, women faced sexual danger when they exited their ocean liner or train and had to negotiate the chaotic stations and piers. On board a liner or train, the relationship between men and women developed over time, but on the ground women had to make quick decisions about whether or not to trust strange men offering assistance. At the Coney Island terminal in Brooklyn, an agent observed “four men in eager conversation with a young girl.” The girl had come to the amusement park with a friend, but had since become separated from her. The men were proposing to escort the girl home if she would first spend the remainder of the evening with them. She appeared to be struggling with her decision, so the agent intervened by taking over for the missing companion and accompanying the girl home.⁷⁰

The reports also reveal cabmen, hotel runners, and porters at stations and piers who allegedly posed threats to women. In a case from 1912, a foreign traveler who had been receiving assistance from the TAS decided to venture off on her own. At the pier’s street level exit, a cabby picked her

68. “A Narrow Escape,” in TAS, *Annual Report, 1910–11*, 29.

69. “Whatever You Do, Get that Girl,” in TAS, *Annual Report, 1913*, 31.

70. “Coney Island,” in TAS, *Annual Report, 1916*, 21. The TAS began to service Coney Island in the summer of 1916.

up. The agent, realizing that her client was gone, went to the street and daringly stopped the taxi. The driver insisted that the woman was his legitimate fare, but the agent, worried that the traveler would be taken advantage of due to her lack of English, pulled the woman from the taxi anyway. Later, at a train station, a man who spoke the woman's language picked up her suitcase and urged her to follow him. Once again, the agent intervened, persuading the man to "put down the valise immediately" by threatening to get the police involved.⁷¹

Connected to the rise in cases of sexual danger was a noticeable increase in the level of discipline and surveillance used by the Travelers' Aid Society's agents. This could take the form of outright coercion, as when the agent above forced her client out of the taxi cab. Likewise, in 1913, an agent removed a young woman "against her will" from a city hotel. The traveler had earlier been in TAS custody, but had escaped in order to reunite with a man who she had met at sea. The agent, anticipating trouble, had already learned of the man's whereabouts from the ship's passenger manifest. With address in hand, the agent rushed to the hotel and, despite the woman's protests, blocked the couple from entering.⁷² The TAS also increasingly used their headquarters as a temporary holding station while they undertook comprehensive investigations into their clients' backgrounds and travel plans. At headquarters, travelers could be monitored closely while agents worked on their cases.

Discipline and surveillance could also be subtle, as seen in the aforementioned case of young Lucy. The TAS taught Lucy a lesson by allowing her to confront her suitor and learn of his ill intent on her own, with an agent observing the situation in the background. Similarly, a case from 1911 shows a worker eavesdropping on a shabbily dressed young woman who was accompanied by a "well dressed" man. Whenever there was an obvious difference in appearance between a man and woman, agents took notice. In this instance, the worker positioned herself just close enough so that she could hear what was going on. She learned that the man was trying to convince the woman to take a taxi with him since her brother had failed to meet her at the station. The woman held her ground and insisted on staying put. The worker then moved to a nearby seat while the man continued

71. "Not Careful About Trusting Herself With Strangers," in TAS, *Annual Report, 1912*, 10.

72. "Protected Against Her Will," in TAS, *Annual Report, 1913*, 29.

his harassment. Just when the agent was set to intervene, “the brother arrived and the man hurried away without ceremony.” The case summary explains that “Had the brother failed to come, the girl was being guarded unknown to herself or her dangerous companion.”⁷³

The increased emphasis on sexual danger from 1911 to 1916 should not obscure the fact that the TAS’s routine social work from the previous period continued. Agents helped travelers who were not in any immediate danger navigate New York City by escorting them to immigrant homes, transportation hubs, or to other city addresses. For these travelers, the TAS was usually a source of benevolence. But was this also the case for the women who encountered the more aggressive side of the Travelers’ Aid Society? Did they benefit from the heightened vigilance?

TAS discipline could be intrusive, denying women a chance to assert their autonomy. However, it is important to remember that early twentieth century New York City was home to an underground vice world that posed threats to newcomers.⁷⁴ Train stations and piers, with their unregulated economic environments, were part of this underworld (and, by extension, so were trains and ships). These spaces were chaotic and host to a wide range of manipulative schemes that threatened women’s personal safety and moral reputation.⁷⁵ In an era where respectability was often a requirement for employment, marriage, and immigrant assimilation, a woman whose morality was tarnished faced serious consequences in terms of her place in society.⁷⁶ Thus by removing female travelers from situations that potentially could lead to sexual assault, abduction, or the formation of an exploitive relationship, the Travelers’ Aid Society protected travelers’ social capital (their morality and respectability) and furthered their chances of building lives in New York.

73. Case 1 in TAS, *Annual Report, 1910–1911*, 10.

74. On vice in New York City, see Luc Sante, *Lowlife: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991); Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*; and Isabel Vincent, *Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced into Prostitution in the Americas* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), Ch. 4.

75. See the above cases, as well as Bureau of Industries and Immigration (BII), *Annual Report, 1911*, 44–49, 52, 55–56; BII, *Annual Report, 1912*, 7–8; BII, *Annual Report, 1913*, 33–37; and Amy Richter, *Home on the Rails: Women, the Railroad, and the Rise of Public Domesticity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 38–39.

76. Phillips, “Unsexy Geographies,” 182–84.