

MUNICIPAL HOUSEKEEPING

St. Louis clubwomen jumped into planning the 1904 World's Fair, forming a Board of Lady Managers (BLM) to oversee the Women's Exhibition Hall and showcase women's work. Although the BLM was allocated only a small fraction of the Fair's budget, the Women's Hall attracted large crowds each day, showing an "increasing recognition of women's value" and demonstrating just how far they had come in broadening the domestic sphere to improve social conditions over a few short years.

The transition from cultural studies to civic action was exemplified by the St. Louis Wednesday Club, a group founded in 1889 by affluent women from the West End neighborhood to study poetry and engage in "serious discussion of science, history, and cultural matters." After a few months of Wednesday-afternoon meetings, its members devoted their time to civic improvement campaigns, joining the GFWC in 1891. The St. Louis Wednesday Club continued to plan cultural events while mobilizing women to tackle major industrial problems. Boasting a paid membership of five hundred by 1910, the Wednesday Club had built enough social capital to lead an anti-pollution campaign in St. Louis. To this end they formed a smoke-abatement committee, appointed delegates to monitor factories and report on polluters, hosted a mass meeting featuring presentations by city officials, and successfully agitated for ordinances to regulate air pollution. Wednesday Clubs were seeded in Kansas City, Sedalia, Springfield, Hannibal, Cape Girardeau, and other cities and towns across Missouri. Clubwomen were "no longer working toward self-culture . . . but were beginning to be a power in their communities," Elizabeth Flora Dierssen, member of the Cape Girardeau Wednesday Club, noted in 1912. When St. Louis Wednesday Club members helped secure a municipally owned purification plant in 1915,

MFWC president Ada Chivvis reminded luminaries at the dedication ceremony that even though they were prohibited from voting, clubwomen had effectively worked alongside men to "better our civics."

Through the 1910s urban Missouri women joined clubs with the intent of "municipal housekeeping" to improve city life. This included neighborhood beautification efforts, such as the "Clean Up and Paint Up" campaign in St. Louis in the spring of 1916, when clubwomen toured working-class areas of the city and provided direction and supplies for "the cleaning of streets, alleys, front and back yards, cellars and stables . . . the planting and trimming of trees and hedges, planting of flowers, and the liberal use of paint on everything that needs it." Women in St. Joseph's Runcie Club leveraged their position in society to establish free kindergartens and soup kitchens, while in the state's Lead Belt region the Flat Iron Women's Club worked to beautify the towns of St. Francois County with gas streetlights and public parks.



The Board of Lady Managers' reception group for the Palace of Art at the 1904 World's Fair. Unknown photographer, 1904. Missouri Historical Society Collections.