In the 1880’s, Winnipeg was a city of contrasts. Following a period of extraordinary population growth, it had evolved from a small fur-trading town to a wealthy and bustling city on the edge of the frontier. While parts of the city were known for beautiful and elaborate mansions, housing in other areas consisted of poor tarpaper and clapboard shacks. Poverty, unemployment, prostitution and disease were endemic. When Dr. Amelia Yeomans arrived in Winnipeg in 1883, the city was known as one of the wickedest in Canada -- based on the large number of saloons that operated successfully along its main streets.

Amelia Yeomans (nee LaSueur) was born in Montreal on 29th March, 1842. She married Dr. Augustus Yeomans who practiced near Belleville, Ontario at the age of 18. Augustus became a surgeon in the Northern Army and the family left Canada around 1862. When Augustus died in 1878, his widow and eldest daughter began the study of medicine at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). At that time, women who wanted to become doctors faced considerable opposition. It is therefore particularly significant that two women from the same family would graduate within a year of each other. It is also notable that these two women would open a medical practice in Winnipeg, specializing in “Midwifery and Diseases of Women and Children.”

Amelia’s strong social conscience soon led her into the ‘foreign quarter’ of the city where the poorest immigrants lived. She toured the factories and the prisons, spoke out against the ‘deplorable’ living conditions and counseled better treatment of non-English immigrants. With the assistance of her friend, E. Cora Hind, who described Amelia’s experiences in local newspaper articles, she advocated far-reaching social reform, temperance and enfranchisement for women. Her intellect, in addition to her persuasive and genial character, galvanized local politicians, clergymen and business leaders in the crusade for reform.

Although her sometimes explicit discussions on the evils of prostitution offended some Victorian sensibilities, Amelia remained a respected and appreciated community leader who worked tirelessly as an advocate for “social medicine,” linking issues of public health with social justice. Ultimately, Amelia’s work in the suffrage movement helped lead Manitoba to become the first province in Canada to grant the vote to women.