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HISTORY AND MEMORY OF THE OLD EIGHTH WARD

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ABSTRACT: The City Beautiful movement in Harrisburg brought many improvements to the capital city, but it also brought destruction to the diverse neighborhood directly east of the capitol building, known today as the “Old Eighth Ward.” Even though this community no longer exists, newspaper accounts of its razing and digital mapping of the families of the Old Eighth Ward preserve this story of displacement within public memory.

KEYWORDS: Old Eighth Ward, Capitol Park, Fox-Tunis Act, displacement, City Beautiful, Harrisburg

The beginning of the end of the Old Eighth Ward was years in the making. The destruction of the community in order to extend Capitol Park began with the desire of urban reformers to make the city “worthy of the seat of government of a great Commonwealth.”¹ The previous capitol building burned in February of 1897, and at least one Philadelphia city council member made movements at the turn of the century to return the state capital to the City of Brotherly Love.² Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement reversed that course and several years later, on October 4, 1906, the commonwealth dedicated the striking new capitol building with special guest President Theodore Roosevelt. The magnificent complex was the pinnacle of the City Beautiful movement in Harrisburg, but it presented a subsequent problem—what to do with the densely populated neighborhood of lower socioeconomic households directly behind the grand structure (figs. 1 and 2).

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FIGURE 1. 1901 map of Harrisburg with 1901 building footprints, showing the location of the Old Eighth Ward. By Rachel Williams, based on data courtesy of the Digital Harrisburg Project.

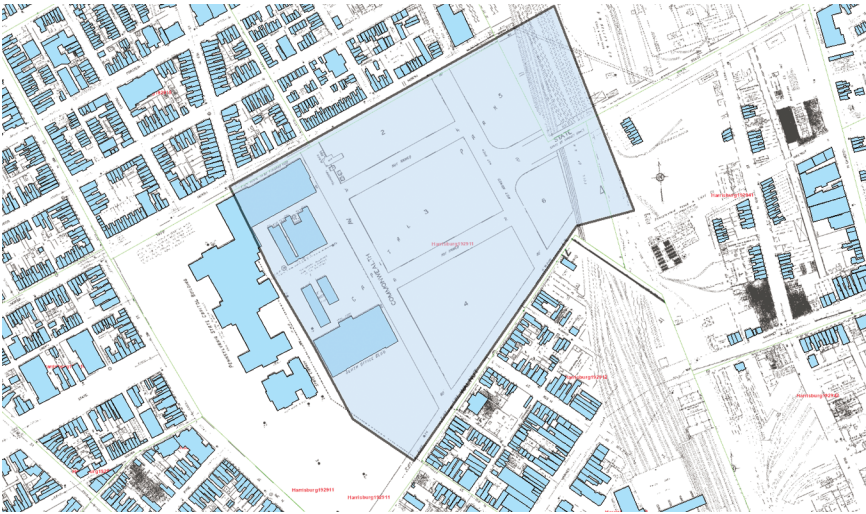


FIGURE 2. 1929 map of Harrisburg with 1929 building footprints, showing the former location of the Old Eighth Ward. By Rachel Williams, based on data courtesy of the Digital Harrisburg Project.

THE PASSING AND SIGNING OF THE FOX-TUNIS ACT

Even before the new capitol's dedication, Harrisburg and state government officials expressed their discontent about the Old Eighth. State Treasurer Frank G. Harris stated that "the splendid new Capitol should not be flush with any street, especially one that is so poorly built up adjoining the Capitol as Fourth street."³ One senator declared in 1911 that the beauty of this grandiose building is "marred by the frightful setting in which the gem is placed. It is like a diamond set in lead" and implored, "let us put around this building such environments in which we can impress those myriads of people who come here to visit this Capitol and who also pass by on the great highway."⁴ The man who spoke these words, state senator John E. Fox, of Dauphin County, is a significant figure in the story of the displacement of the Old Eighth Ward, and he was not alone.

After two unsuccessful attempts in 1905 and 1907, the Capitol Park Extension Bill, also known as the Fox-Tunis Act, passed the House and Senate in 1909 due to the tenacity of Senator Fox and his collaborator, Representative William S. Tunis, also from Dauphin County. Though the governor of the time, Edwin S. Stuart, did not sign the bill, the legislature tried again two years later. This time, the new governor, John K. Tener, signed the bill and the process of condemning the properties within the specified boundaries began.

The Fox-Tunis Act enabled Governor Tener to appoint three citizens of the commonwealth to serve on the Capitol Park Extension Commission, the group authorized to acquire all the necessary land and provide for the extension of Capitol Park. The district marked for demolition included that "on the west by the present eastern line of Capitol Park; on the north by the southern line of North street; on the east by the western line of the right of way of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company; and on the south by the northern line of Walnut street."⁵ The three individuals chosen to lead the commission were Archibald G. Knisely as president (succeeded by Spencer C. Gilbert after Knisely's death in 1913), Samuel Kunkel as chair, and Samuel C. Todd as secretary.⁶

With the power and responsibility of their new assignment, the three began the task of demolishing buildings. By late 1916 the work of the Capitol Park Extension Commission was nearly done. It had acquired most of the 537 properties in the park zone and even moved out of its office in the Kunkel Building in downtown Harrisburg to conduct the remaining business from

Secretary Todd's office in the capitol building.⁷ Most of the work had gone smoothly, although nine individuals resisted and did not abide by the "sense of fairness of Harrisburg people" hoped for by Governor Tener that would "prevent any steps from being taken which would in[t]erfere with the consummation of the project which has held State-wide attention for the last ten years."⁸

One woman in particular, Helen M. Lee, left her mark in the history of the end of the Old Eighth Ward, earning a half-page column in the *Evening News*. By late 1917, Lee still held the title of 428 and 430 Walnut Street and 100 and 102 Short Street, despite the properties being condemned two years earlier. To resolve this matter, the local sheriff began a search for Lee but was unable to find her. Her properties included four of the five last buildings the state government had to acquire to begin developing Capitol Park, so it pressed the local court to determine her ejectment suit, which could end in forced dispossession.⁹ As one of the last people to acquiesce her property to the commonwealth, Lee is a coda to this history, a history marked by both a desire for public beautification as well as community displacement. The razing of buildings and the severing of community ties impacted many important citizens and places in the Old Eighth Ward.

THE LOST COMMUNITIES OF THE OLD EIGHTH WARD

The neighborhood uprooted by the Fox-Tunis Act is difficult to locate and research precisely because it has vanished, but census records, city directories, photographs, newspapers, city maps, and even oral histories provide traces of the communities who lived there at the beginning of the twentieth century. These sources have allowed modern students of history to piece together a more complete history of an otherwise invisible community (figs. 3 and 4).¹⁰

The most affected were those who lived in the first and second (and a small part of the fourth) precincts of the Eighth Ward. Over the decades, this area was sometimes known by the "Bloody Eighth" and the "Tenderloin District," but those designations were outdated by 1911. These antiquated nicknames overlooked the positive features of a community that was unique for reasons other than its eventual leveling.

Other than its notoriety as one of the poorest Harrisburg neighborhoods, a significant aspect of the Old Eighth was its racial and ethnic character. The condemned area, one of the most diverse regions in Harrisburg at the



FIGURE 3. Cowden Street looking north from Walnut Street. Photo ca. 1911 from Record Group 17, Series #17.522, courtesy of Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, PA.

time, was 37% black and 63% white in 1910.¹¹ For comparison, another area known for its moderate diversity, the First Ward (reaching from Paxton Street to the southern border of Harrisburg), was in the same year only 7% black and 93% white, while the Tenth Ward (between Division Street and Maclay Street), one of the least diverse sections of the city, had an even smaller non-white population (1% black inhabitants to 99% white).

The Old Eighth also had a comparatively large foreign-born population. Immigrants from the Russian Empire, Hungary, and Italy comprised 10%, 3%, and 3% of the neighborhood respectively in 1910; only 80% of the ward's population were native-born citizens. In comparison, the First Ward also had immigrants from Russia, Hungary, and Italy in 1910, although there were more from Austria and Germany, 4% and 2% respectively with a native-born population of 89%. The Tenth Ward again proved to be the most homogenous, with a native-born population of over 97%.



FIGURE 4. Fourth Street and North Alley. Photo ca. 1911 from Record Group 17, Series #17.522, courtesy of Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, PA.

At the time of its razing, many Harrisburg residents remembered the “Bloody Eighth” as an area teeming with immorality, a reputation earned a half century earlier during the Civil War and Camp Curtin. Dr. Stough, a tabernacle preacher, went as far to say that it was “once a veritable plague spot,” and J. Howard Wert, a Harrisburg educator, wrote of the area’s history of gambling, speakeasies, and prostitution.¹² In a March 1913 *Harrisburg Patriot* article, Wert lamented,

It seems odd that so much sin and crime would be condensed within a space so limited as the cramped rooms of these little time-worn tenements.

However, he also acknowledged that

there have been at all times, a large number of honest, industrious, upright, God-fearing men and women in the Old Eighth Ward. . . .

Harsh conditions have often compelled them to dwell close to dens of depravity. All the more honor to these people, white and black, who have maintained a life of rectitude.¹³

Wert wrote extensively of the important and positive parts of the community, including prominent religious institutions and important businesses.¹⁴

One such religious institution that Wert named was St. Lawrence Catholic Church, a large, elegant brick structure on Walnut Street, meaningful both as a communal place of worship and as a testament to the devotion of a clergyman. Father Clemens A. Koppernagle labored on much of the interior on his own, dedicating years of his life to make the church a special place for his congregation. Wert recognized that his parishioners were able to relocate, but also reflected that “so many fond and sacred memories hover around the buildings which was their spiritual home for thirty-nine years that one can well believe some tears of regret will intrusively swell as the towering structure on Walnut street falls beneath the hands that are razing it to its foundation.”¹⁵

The neighborhood of the Old Eighth Ward also provided for the well-being of its community through a hospital and a special public school. In the large James Russ house at the corner of North and Fourth streets, the Sisters of Mercy managed St. Clare’s Infirmary, a nonsectarian hospital to aid those who did not have a regular place for medical treatment. Patients included the soldiers of Camp Meade during the Spanish-American War, who “had reason to bless its shelter and thank God for the ministering care of those devoted Sisters of Mercy.” Reverend Professor William Howard Day organized the Day School, originally known as the Lincoln School, which provided educational opportunity for African American children, who would otherwise fall behind due to the “well-defined scheme to sidetrack the admission of any colored pupils to the city’s high schools.” Day’s effort allowed many young Harrisburg residents to thrive intellectually and later make a positive impact on the city.¹⁶

Industry thrived as well in the Old Eighth, including both large factory plants and small family businesses. The W. O. Hickok Manufacturing Company, also known as “Eagle Works,” had expanded over several decades due to its success, and the Paxton Flour and Feed Company, organized in 1872, became known as “one of the leading grain shipping centers in Central Pennsylvania.”¹⁷ An advocate of small businesses, Wert asserted that Calvin

Etter & Son, founded during the Civil War by Calvin Etter, was “one of the best-known grocery and feed stores in Harrisburg, for more than half a century.”¹⁸

DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

After the razing of various homes, businesses, and churches of the Old Eighth Ward, hundreds of people had to find new places to live, conduct business, worship, and congregate. Many residents also were drawn to the work of remembering. By 1925 some former residents called the twenty-seven acres bought by the commonwealth for the park extension “the hole in the old Eighth.” The *Harrisburg Telegraph* noted that men still walked around the old neighborhood, trying to relocate buildings from their past, but “only old-timers remember many of these locations now.”¹⁹

Newspaper accounts help reconstruct the broad sweep of this story, but recently available digital sources provide a more detailed picture.²⁰ Using the data of the Digital Harrisburg project, it is now possible to trace 101 families put out of the Old Eighth Ward and look for migration patterns during the dynamic decade between 1910 and 1920. These families represent a total of 603 individuals, almost half of all 1,384 people living in the Old Eighth Ward in 1910. Of these 101 families, 64 were white, 36 were black, and 1 was “mulatto” (a term employed in the 1910 census for those of mixed racial descent).²¹ This breakdown is comparable to the overall demographic character of the ward (see above) (Here, the terms “family” and “household” are used interchangeably, although a “family” is a household of related individuals and a “household” includes whoever lives in the residence, whether related or not).

The three main ethnic groups of this displaced population were African Americans, Jews born in the Russian Empire, and native-born white Americans. Respectively, they comprised 37, 22, and 36 of the 101 families (the other six families include two English-born households, and one household each from Austria, Canada, Germany, and Ireland). Our study of the expelled inhabitants shows a trend of northern movement; most of those forced to move relocated eight or fewer blocks to the north from their former home. Movement to the south and east of the extension zone occurred, but less frequently than northern migration within Harrisburg.

Considering the spatial distribution according to ethnic backgrounds, only nonimmigrant white families were able to spread out across the city. Most of the African American population moved north, within ten blocks of the razed area, on the western side of the Pennsylvania Railroad, while several families relocated to the east of the railroad as well. The Jewish population showed similar movement in that the majority stayed within ten blocks north of the razed area; however, there was little eastern movement. Such patterns are consistent with observations made elsewhere in this special issue (see Albert Sarvis, "Mapping Urban Change in Harrisburg, 1900–1930" and Bruce Bazelon, "The Trek Uptown: The Migration of Harrisburg's Jewish Community in the Early Twentieth Century").

Since the people of the historical record were real families who endured a serious life change, it is meaningful and necessary to take a closer look at them. We have chosen six specific families to describe in more detail, tracing their northward movement across Harrisburg between 1910 and 1930 (figs. 5 and 6).

In 1910 the Cohens lived and owned property at 114 Short Street on the southern end of the Old Eighth beneath what is today the southwest lawn of the Forum Building. Louis Cohen, a Russian-born Jewish furniture merchant, was the head of the house and married to Lena, also born in the Russian Empire. They had seven children born in Pennsylvania who stayed with them in this house, along with a sister-in-law, two brothers-in-law (all three in-laws were from England with parents born in Russia), and a cousin born in Russia. By 1920 this family resided in and owned a house at 633 Boas Street five blocks (.38 miles) to the north. Louis, now a junk dealer, Lena, and all their children still lived together, but only one of the brothers-in-law remained and a nephew from Russia had joined them. Ten years later, the family owned a property two blocks (.15 mile) to the southwest at 812 North Sixth Street and had occupations such as agents, salesman, stenographer, and manager. Their property was valued at \$20,000, well above the median house value of \$5,500 (see Kostis Kourelis and David Pettegrew, "The Greek Communities of Harrisburg and Lancaster: A Study of Immigration, Residence, and Mobility in the City Beautiful Era" in this issue).

A block west of the Cohens, Hannah Jones, a widowed African American music teacher, owned property at 134 Tanners Avenue in 1910, now beneath the modern site of the Irvis Office Building. She lived with four grandchildren, and an African American lodger named Emma Williams, whose occupation was recorded as a domestic servant for some other private family.

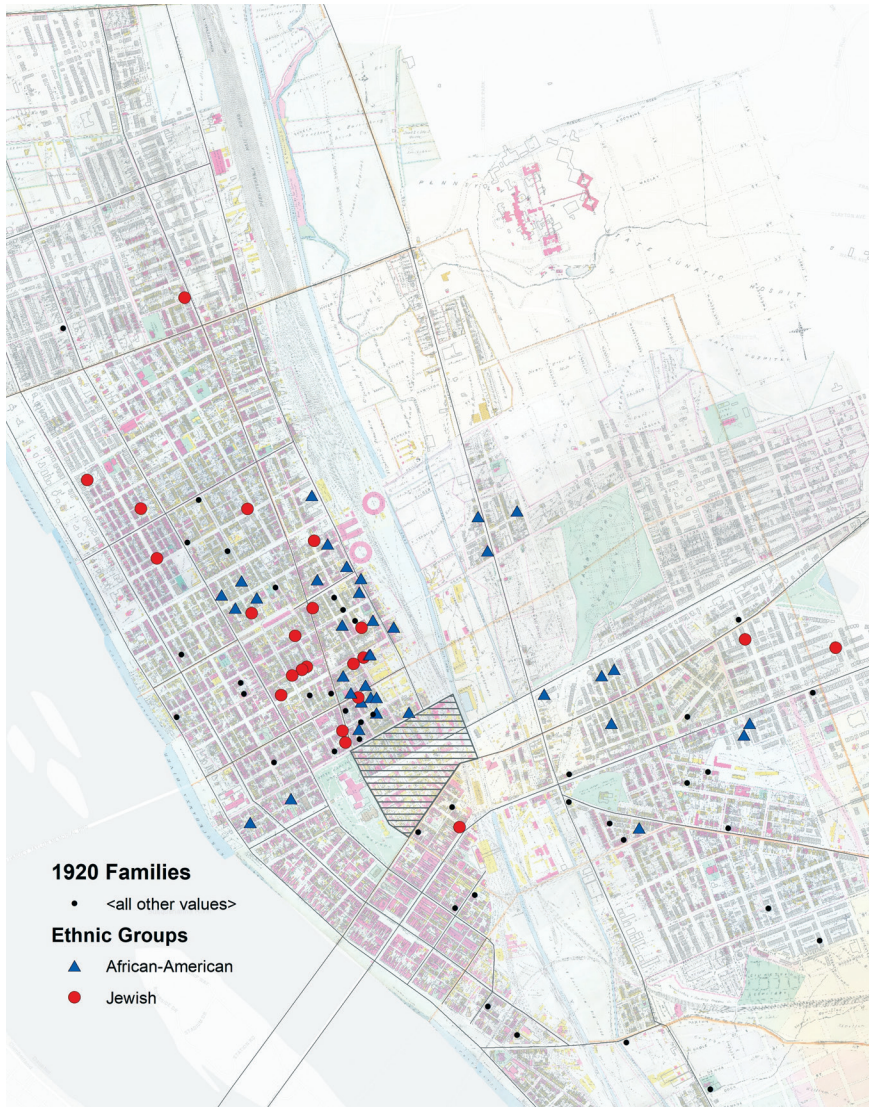


FIGURE 5. One hundred and one displaced households of the Old Eighth Ward highlighting migration from 1910 to 1920 of African American residents (triangles), Jewish immigrants born in the Russian Empire (large circles), and everyone else (small circles). Map and data courtesy of the Digital Harrisburg Project.

Hannah relocated a quarter mile west to 232 Liberty Street on the other side of the state capitol. She owned her property and shared this residence

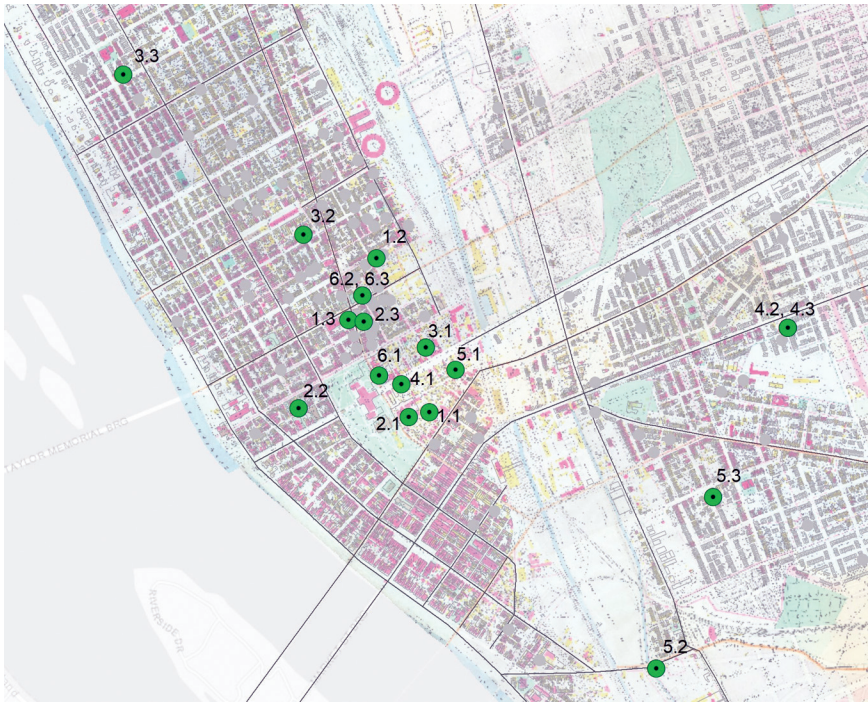


FIGURE 6. Residences of six families in three phases of residence; in 1910, 1920, and 1930. Family 1 = Cohen; Family 2 = Jones; Family 3 = Grand; Family 4 = Thomas; Family 5 = Sinkovitz; Family 6 = Crampton. Map and data courtesy of the Digital Harrisburg Project.

with two children, James and Mary, their spouses, and the three youngest grandchildren from youngest grandchildren from the previous residence. Her son, daughter-in-law, son-in-law, and eldest grandson were occupied in the restaurant industry, and Hannah herself was engaged in housework. Hannah had died by 1930, but Mary and her husband John owned the property on Liberty Street (now valued at \$9,000), while her son James and his family owned property a few blocks east-northeast at 602 Briggs (valued at \$6,500).

Prior to their ejection the Grands, a Jewish American family, owned a house at 509 Cowden Street on the north end of the Old Eighth (just south of the modern Finance Building). The head of the household, Abraham, and his wife, Rosa, born in the Russian Empire, had all six of their children in Pennsylvania. By 1920 they had purchased a house at 438 Cumberland Street six blocks (.35 miles) to the northwest. Abraham, still a tailor at his own shop but widowed, had his children to keep him company at the new residence.

In 1930 the family rented property for \$60 per month at 234 Kelker, six blocks to the northwest.

A well-known and respected African American undertaker in Dauphin County, Joseph Thomas, rented property in 1910 at 429 State Street with his wife, Marian, on the spot where the Memorial Fountain now sits at the Capitol East Wing. By 1920 Marian had lost her husband and lived at 14 South Sixteenth Street nearly a mile (.86 mile) due east near Market Street. Marian now owned her property, apparently half of a duplex, as she shared a building unit with a widowed white bookkeeper named Harry Millar, two of his daughters, and three of his granddaughters. Marian still owned the property, valued at \$4,500 in 1930.

In 1910 Alexander and Katie Sinkovitz, a married couple from Hungary, lived with their two Pennsylvania-born children, Alexander's sisters Dora and Mary Sinkovitz, and six Hungarian lodgers (two couples and two single individuals). They rented at 405 Filbert Street on the eastern end of the Old Eighth under what is today the northeast corner of the Forum Building. Alexander worked as a wagon maker in a factory. His sisters and one of the single lodgers worked as cigar makers, with the other lodgers holding various manual labor jobs. By 1920 they had rented a house at 1005 Paxton Street, .83 miles to the southeast where Alexander and Katie lived with their six children. Alexander remained a wagon maker, but now, after World War I, he and his wife (both German speakers) listed themselves as Austrian. By 1930 they were gone, but the children rented property at 311 Hummel, .38 miles to the northeast.

Charles Crampton, an African American general practice physician, rented property at 509 North Fourth Street in the northwest side of the Old Eighth in 1910, under the modern site of the Capitol East Wing. He shared his dwelling with an African American lodger, also single and working as a dentist, as well as a widowed boarder who worked for a private family. In 1920, still a physician, he now lodged two blocks (.2 miles) north at 600 Forster Street with an African American police officer, Eugene Whiting, and the officer's wife, Nettie. By 1930 he lived alone at the same property, now as the homeowner, with the realty valued at \$8,000.²²

Hannah Jones, Joseph Thomas, and Charles Crampton are three Old Eighth Ward residents from a list of 100 names of influential African Americans of the city in the early twentieth century. These individuals are being celebrated in 2019–2020 as part of the Commonwealth Monument Project, a directive of the IIPT Harrisburg Peace Promenade, a project of the Foundation for Enhancing Communities, fiscal sponsor. The project

is celebrating the 150th anniversary of black male suffrage with the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment and the 100th anniversary of female suffrage in the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment. Another component of the project, the “Look Up, Look Out” campaign, pairs a dozen of the 100 names with important locations in the Old Eighth Ward, some of whom were discussed above, and others covered elsewhere in this issue (see Andrew Dyrli Hermeling, “Look Up, Look Out: Discrepant Stories from the Old Eighth Ward,” and James B. LaGrand and David Pettegrew, “Harrisburg’s Historic African American Community: An Interview with Calobe Jackson Jr.”).

CONCLUSION

Our work in researching the Old Eighth Ward shows how voices and memory matter. The voices of the past endure, but they are sometimes more like whispers, which require an interested and patient listener to hear and interpret. Our form of listening, which began in the Digital Harrisburg Project with drawing shapefiles and inputting information for a digitized Harrisburg map from the turn of the twentieth century, transitioned to research about the history of the Old Eighth Ward and the historical community that was lost to create the Capitol Complex buildings and greenspace now known as Soldier’s Grove. We also have learned the importance of keeping the memory of this place and its inhabitants alive.

The Commonwealth Monument Project and the prior mapping and research on the Old Eighth Ward build on the foundational work of Professor Michael Barton and his students at Penn State Harrisburg, as well as the website created and designed by Stephanie Patterson Gilbert.²³ Their years of study in the early 2000s have inspired and aided us as we also investigate this topic and bring it further into the public sphere of knowledge and memory. It has been an honor to conduct research on these powerful voices as a part of the Digital Harrisburg team, in collaboration with Harrisburg University, and experience the unveiling of such a meaningful story. Because I am a recent graduate with a major in history, it is heartwarming to see a contemporary community engage with the past of their city as they have with the Commonwealth Monument Project. It is especially significant since it pays homage to a group of people who were temporarily lost in the time of City Beautiful. May their stories no longer be forgotten in our public memory.

RACHEL WILLIAMS is a recent graduate of Messiah College with a degree in history and politics. She is a long-time contributor to the Digital Harrisburg Initiative, and has worked with the Commonwealth Monument Project and the Messiah College Center for Public Humanities.

NOTES

1. "Capitol Park Extension," *Harrisburg Telegraph* (hereafter *Telegraph*), April 13, 1909, 6.
2. In 1899 Jake Seeds of Philadelphia's Common Council offered a resolution to not only move the Legislature, but even to provide the land and funds to build a new capitol. See "A Seed-y Proposition," *Telegraph*, March 23, 1899, 4.
3. "Gov. Pennypacker and His Cabinet Favor Greater Capitol Park: All Enthusiastic for Extension Except General Stewart Who Puts Armories for Guard First and Park Second," *Telegraph*, April 9, 1904, 1.
4. "Senator John E. Fox Tells Why Capitol Park Extension Bill Should Be Passed," *Telegraph*, March 23, 1911, 5.
5. "Capitol Park Bill Signed To-day By Governor Tener," *Telegraph*, June 16, 1911, 11.
6. "State Is Rapidly Acquiring Title to All Property Within Scope of Capitol Park Plan," *Telegraph*, November 21, 1913, 15.
7. "Park Work Nearly Done: Extension Commission Closes Offices in Kunkel Building," *Harrisburg Daily Independent*, December 2, 1916, 1.
8. "Governor Gives Close Attention to Park Extension," *Telegraph*, June 5, 1911, 1.
9. "Sheriff Seeks Woman in Vain: Capitol Park Zone Property Owner Evades Writ of Ejectment," *Harrisburg Evening News*, October 17, 1917, 7.
10. See the important website on the Old Eighth Ward created by Stephanie Patterson Gilbert and featuring the research of Dr. Michael Barton and Penn State University Harrisburg. The site is available via the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170629222353/http://www.old8thward.com/home.htm>, and is discussed in Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, "Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward: Creating a Website for Student Research," *Pennsylvania History* 72, no. 4 (2005): 419–27. See now the further contributions of the Digital Harrisburg Initiative: <https://digitalharrisburg.com/exhibitions/eighthward/>.
11. All statistics in this section are based on 1910 and 1920 census tables from the Digital Harrisburg Project.
12. "City Could Be Worse—Dr. Stough: Asserts His Belief That Harrisburg Is Cleaner Now Than It Ever Has Been Before," *Harrisburg Daily Independent*, November 11, 1914, 4.

13. Michael Barton and Jessica Dorman, *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2002), 74, 60.
14. "Capitol Park Zone Teems with Historic Associations," *Telegraph*, July 31, 1917, 8.
15. Ibid.
16. "Industries from Park Zone Widely Scattered," *Telegraph*, August 2, 1917, 17.
17. "Large Industrial Plants Moved from Park Zone," *Telegraph*, August 1, 1917, 12.
18. "Industries from Park Zone Widely Scattered."
19. "Short Walks in and about Harrisburg," *Telegraph*, September 2, 1925, 6.
20. See resources in n. 10 above.
21. These statistics derive from the 1910 and 1920 census tables of the Digital Harrisburg Project; see n. 11 above.
22. Dr. Crampton had local notoriety for performing abortions. His life is the subject of an historical novel, *The Blue Orchard* by Jackson Taylor (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).
23. Gilbert, "Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward."