

Harrisburg, the City Beautiful: Recasting the History of Urban Reform in a Small American Capital

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HARRISBURG, THE CITY BEAUTIFUL

RECASTING THE HISTORY OF URBAN REFORM IN A SMALL AMERICAN CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT: In 1980 William H. Wilson published an important essay in *Pennsylvania History* that defined Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement as “successful.” In his analysis, reformers galvanized citizens to vote for civic betterment. A package of amenities—pavements, clean water, drainage, and parks—improved the state capital. On this fortieth anniversary of Wilson’s publication, in a year commemorating significant federal amendments granting suffrage to African American men (1870) and women (1920), this special issue takes a closer look at early twentieth-century Harrisburg, its “successful” movement for urban reform, and the clear and consequential losses. This particular article highlights recent scholarship on Harrisburg; new studies of the Old Eighth Ward; novel geospatial and demographic datasets; and exciting public history projects that reclaim forgotten voices. While not a definitive answer to understanding Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement, this issue is a case study in how historians can recast locally significant problems in Pennsylvania history.

KEYWORDS: Harrisburg, City Beautiful, digital history, public history, spatial history

This special issue on Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement originated from collegial conversations between the editors about the value of digital approaches for mapping the spatial and social histories of American urban reform. In 2013 David Pettegrew, an archaeologist and historian of the ancient Mediterranean world, was preparing a new course called “Digital

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History” at Messiah College and was seeking an interesting local case study for his students to explore using new digital technologies. James LaGrand, an American historian with specialization in urban and public history, proposed revisiting Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement, an important but underexplored topic in US urban history that had also, on a local level, inspired City Beautiful 2.0, a community-based grassroots initiative dedicated to improving Pennsylvania’s capital city.

Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement marked a potentially fruitful subject for a digital and public history project in several respects. There was, first of all, no doubt of its historical significance. The reform programs of larger cities such as Washington, DC, St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit, and Baltimore are better known today, but Harrisburg’s improvement movement was among the very earliest progressive reform movements in the nation and clearly influenced other urban plans. As William H. Wilson concluded in his pioneering study on the subject in this journal forty years ago (1980), Harrisburg’s movement was also among the most successful in galvanizing the population to reform. A compelling lecture by the conservationist Mira Lloyd Dock to the Harrisburg Board of Trade in December 1900 incited the city’s elite to organize the League for Civic Improvements, assemble a group of renowned city planners, and rally citizens to vote in favor of a bond issue in February 1902 that funded an extensive program of urban revitalization. In less than a decade, they remade the filthy industrial center along the Susquehanna River a modern and beautiful city with extensive green spaces, miles of freshly paved roads, water-filtration systems, and a glimmering state capitol.¹ Harrisburg’s unique position in the history of urban reform, together with its smaller population and built environment, made the city ideal for a digital project that could tackle major questions surrounding the Progressive Era. These questions include the relationship between developing ethnic subcultures and American political and economic power structures, and the social location of the elite, workers, and immigrants who led and supported urban progressive movements.²

Harrisburg’s improvement campaign was also an ideal case study because it presented our students with a series of unresolved historical problems. Wilson’s treatment of Harrisburg’s urban reform program concluded that the movement was a successful one spawned and driven by white Protestant businessmen. Yet the fact that Mira Dock, a woman, inaugurated the campaign for civic improvement, and a multitude of activist women, African American

educators and pastors, and Jewish notables rallied the citizenry, demanded a closer look. Wilson, moreover, reached the limits of his resources in placing the movement's leaders into a social, economic, or spatial context, or explaining why certain parts of the city voted in favor of the bond issue while others did not. It was clear also that not everyone could have benefited, or benefited equally, from this successful movement. Those who dwelled in and around the section of the Eighth Ward immediately east of the state capitol—an ethnically and racially diverse neighborhood—would experience the losses of homes, businesses, synagogues, and churches to the new Capitol Park. We considered that digital approaches might give our students an opportunity to construct the online architecture of Harrisburg's City Beautiful movement through websites and archives while also encouraging them to think in new ways about an urban population through demographic and spatial datasets placed alongside historical documents, letters, and photos.

The City Beautiful movement was also a rich topic for investigation because of the impressive array of historical scholarship since the 1970s that drew attention to Harrisburg's industrial and progressive periods. In setting out on a new project, we found a host of good local guides to the history and historiography of the region. Beyond the work of William Wilson and some valuable primary accounts, our students quickly became acquainted with Gerald Eggert's important analysis of industrial Harrisburg (1850–70) and John Bodnar's groundbreaking study of immigrants in neighboring Steelton (1870–1940), both of which made early uses of demographic studies of census data.³ As important was the work of Michael Barton and his students and collaborators at Penn State Harrisburg who were our constant starting points for the history of early twentieth-century Harrisburg. The paths which they had tread through the Old Eighth Ward—a special issue of *Pennsylvania History* (2005), a resource-rich website on the subject created and designed by Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, and a collection of primary sources (the newspaper columns of Howard Wert)—prompted our students to explore and rethink the history of this diverse and ordinary neighborhood in the shadow of the Capitol, blighted by an image of density, filth, and crime that was used ultimately to justify its removal.⁴

On this foundation we launched the Digital Harrisburg Project in 2014, a student-centered, course-driven initiative based in the digital humanities and directed to telling interesting stories of Harrisburg history. Like other digital history projects, we took students to the archives of the state and county to conduct research and scan primary sources (in our case, related

to the City Beautiful movement), which they used to fill the content of blogs and websites (in WordPress), digital archives (Omeka), and Story Maps (ArcGIS).⁵ But the more novel part of our project was a collaborative venture between history and GIS faculty and students at Messiah College and Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, to place the entire population of Progressive Era Harrisburg on digitized contemporary maps of the city. To do this, history and work-study students digitized analog records of the federal census of the city in 1900 to create a massive database of names and demographic attributes. GIS teams georeferenced and digitized high-resolution Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of the city in 1901, digitally tracing all buildings to create thousands of individual building footprints. Through a common geocoded fieldname, namely, the property address (e.g., 12MARKET, corresponding to 12 Market Street, Harrisburg), the teams eventually linked one set of data—the demographic information in the federal census recorded at the level of individual households—with digitized residence polygons in ArcGIS. Eventually we digitized other years of the federal census and historical maps of Harrisburg and Steelton for 1900–1930, as well as selected wards and populations of Lancaster. Beyond the census, we created other datasets that could contribute to a history of urban reform: the membership rolls of the three most important reforming organizations from the turn of the century (the Board of Trade, the Civic Club, and the Municipal League for Civic Improvement) and selected property values for the city in 1900 and 1910.

The result of these efforts was a steady output of online materials through a student-run blog, websites, and Omeka archives that showcased how digital approaches might shed light on the city's historical population and its spatial configurations. We took the project to the highways and byways through presentations at universities, historical societies, public libraries, digital humanities conferences, and history conferences. Several of the team participants—the editors of this issue, as well as Professor Albert Sarvis, and Rachel Carey—put together their initial observations about City Beautiful for a session at the Pennsylvania Historical Association (PHA) annual conference in 2015. Their data-driven papers highlighted the networks of women and men who led the campaign for beauty; the spatial character of the vote; the relationship between demographic attributes and support for improvement; and the long-term displacement of the populations of the Old Eighth Ward and the redrawing of the city's racial and ethnic boundaries. Faculty presented similar kinds of analysis at the Modern Greek Studies symposium

of 2017 and the American Historical Association annual conference in 2018. Students produced posters related to Harrisburg's City Beautiful movement for the PHA conference in 2018. When invited by *Pennsylvania History* editor Linda Ries to put together a special issue on the subject, we accepted, imagining a myriad of ways of mining the data to address problems in US social and urban history.

Between the time when we originally conceived of this special issue and its publication, the project unexpectedly developed public dimensions that demanded we rethink our approaches. The mapped census data initially took on new public life after Albert Sarvis published online searchable and interactive maps of the city which (1) allowed current inhabitants to compare aerial images of the city today with the 1901 map and note changes in urban topography; (2) "browse" any house at the turn of the last century to see who was living there; and (3) search for ancestors by last name.⁶ The maps were positively featured in local news outlets and intrigued Harrisburg residents. At the same time, Professor Jean Corey, a colleague in English and the director of the Center for Public Humanities at Messiah College, began hosting poetry-writing workshops for Harrisburg middle-school students that centered on the vanished people of the Old Eighth Ward recorded in the census (see Corey, "Reimagining Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward Through Poetry," this issue). Finally, in 2018, Mr. Lenwood Sloan, who was planning a grassroots project to commemorate the anniversaries of the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, and celebrate the city's historical African American community, invited us to collaborate and devote our digital resources to the study of the Old Eighth Ward.⁷ The evolution of a digital research initiative into a public history project naturally changed the kinds of questions we asked about Harrisburg and the City Beautiful.

As we look back on the ways in which this project has developed over the past several years, some themes emerge that help explain the growing energy behind the project, its appeal for both students and community members of diverse backgrounds, and the shape of this special issue of *Pennsylvania History*. First, the project has encouraged student and faculty participants to hone their skills in new digital tools and methodologies and apply these skills to the history of Harrisburg. Collaboration has been especially central to this digital initiative and has fostered new ways of seeing historical questions. Second, as the data of the project has increased, so has the tremendous potential for rethinking major questions about progressivism, immigration, and society. The reader will find in this special issue some initial attempts to

use data to address vexing historical questions about the nature of progressive urban reform, and its origins, advocates, and effects. Finally, the project has helped both undergraduate students and Harrisburg residents engage one another as neighbors. We certainly do not claim to have solved the “town-gown divide,” but we have found that approaching this project through the identity of neighbor (along with that of student or researcher or scholar or eyewitness) has been beneficial and enriching. In this respect, what might have remained a purely scholarly historical project has become an ongoing digital public history and public humanities project. The combination of these attributes of our ongoing project—its pedagogical, digital, analytical, and public orientations—has driven it forward to this point and, we hope, will help it to answer new questions, uncover new data and evidence, and reach new audiences in the future.

The collection of articles that follow aim to draw attention to and recast Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement in these different facets: in terms of novel digital tools for describing and mapping space and society; new scholarship over the last generation related to the people and places of the city’s improvement campaign; topics and angles neglected by earlier histories; and public perspectives about the city a century or more ago. The special issue is divided into four parts that conclude with a response by Dr. Lisa Krissoff Boehm, urban and social historian and dean of the College of Graduate Studies at Bridgewater State University.

Part I, “Reframing City Beautiful,” introduces our issue and provides context for what follows, in terms of how Harrisburg fits into the historiography of urban reform and the new social history (James LaGrand).

The second part (“Rethinking City Beautiful”) offers case studies that explore how urban improvement in Harrisburg both reflected and affected the populations of the early twentieth-century city. The opening chapter by David Pettegrew and Albert Sarvis describes the Digital Harrisburg Project and datasets in greater detail, while two subsequent chapters mine data to consider historical questions about the city’s urban improvement campaign: the consequences of reform on urban planning and populations (Albert Sarvis) and the question of long-term social and economic mobility among the city’s new immigrant populations (Kostis Kourelis and David Pettegrew).

The third part (“Remembering City Beautiful”) offers a series of short reflective pieces on the important people, places, and moments of

urban improvement including the industrial background before reform (Michael Barton), important programs of architectural development (Matthew Frederick Singer, Samuel D. Gruber), parks, green space, and suburbs (Joseph R. McClure, Matthew Frederick Singer), the leaders of reform (Susan Rimby, Linda A. Ries, Molly Elspas and Anna Strange), and health and disease (Sarah Wilson Carter).

The final section (“Reimagining City Beautiful”) looks beyond the reformers’ vision to the vanished communities razed to create Capitol Park. It focuses especially although not exclusively on a community-based initiative known as the Commonwealth Monument Project directed by Lenwood Sloan and organized by the IIPT Harrisburg Peace Promenade and to which the Digital Harrisburg Project is actively contributing in 2019–20.⁸ Articles discuss: displacement of the populations of the Old Eighth including the Jewish community and African American residents (Bruce S. Bazelon, Rachel Williams); efforts to remember the neighborhood through poetry workshops and biographies of significant African American citizens and other former residents (James B. LaGrand and David Pettegrew, Jean Thompson Corey); a public project promoting the ward’s history to state employees (Andrew Dyrli Hermeling); and a bronze-cast monument that will commemorate the neighborhood and the important people who inhabited, visited, and influenced it (Becky Ault).

The articles that follow, then, mark a reframing of Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement from diverse perspectives and angles: the analysis of data and space, the potential of digital-born interdisciplinary collaborations, reappraisals of reform through fresh perspectives, the enthusiasm of secondary and undergraduate students for local history, and community-based public memory. We offer them not as a final answer to understanding the historical problems of Harrisburg’s involvement in City Beautiful, but as a case study in the varied ways historians can recast locally significant historical problems through new digital tools and connections with public audiences. We hope that others may make use of our available datasets for their own ends as they carry out the analytical, historical, pedagogical, and public work of local history.

DAVID PETTEGREW is Professor of History and Archaeology at Messiah College. He coordinates and directs the historical projects of the Digital Harrisburg Initiative.

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NOTES

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Well over one hundred students have made some contribution to the Digital Harrisburg Initiative through fellows internship programs, work-study positions, and course projects. Students who have completed work for the

project should know our debt of gratitude to their contributions. While it is not possible here to thank all contributors by name, we do want to call attention especially to the work of several students who did the yeoman's work in the project: Rachel Morris and Rachel Carey, former students at Messiah College, initially developed, respectively, the 1901 geospatial data and the census databases of 1900 to 1930; Rachel Williams and Sarah Wilson, whose articles appear in this issue, worked extensively to develop and refine datasets, and connect this work to public ends; and Mary Culler, Molly Elspas, Anna Strange, and Rachel Williams developed the elements of the project for the Commonwealth Monument Project.

1. William H. Wilson, "Harrisburg's Successful City Beautiful Movement, 1900–1915," *Pennsylvania History* 47, no. 3 (1980): 213–33; William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 126–46. See also Michael Barton, *Life by the Moving Road: An Illustrated History of Greater Harrisburg* (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, 1983), 83–89.
2. On the relationship between ethnic subcultures and American political and economic power structures see, e.g., John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990); David M. Reimers, *Other Immigrants: The Global Origins of the American People* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). On the social location of the elite, workers, and immigrants see, e.g., Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy during the Progressive Era* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Robert D. Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
3. John Bodnar, *Immigration and Industrialization: Ethnicity in an American Mill Town, 1870–1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); Gerald G. Eggert, *Harrisburg Industrializes: The Coming of Factories to an American Community* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).
4. Barton, *Life by the Moving Road*, 67–73; Michael Barton and Jessica Dorman, eds., *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2002); Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, "Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward: Creating a Website for Student Research," *Pennsylvania History* 72, no. 4 (2005): 419–27.

5. The exhibits and websites are available through <https://digitalharrisburg.com> and a student blog site <https://digitalharrisburg.wordpress.com>.
6. See <https://digitalharrisburg.com/exhibits/harrisburg1900/>.
7. For an overview of the Commonwealth Monument Project, organized by the IIPT Harrisburg Peace Promenade, a project of the Foundation for Enhancing Communities, fiscal sponsor, see: <https://www.tfec.org/harrisburg-peace-promenade-15th-amendment-project/> and <https://digitalharrisburg.com/commonwealth/>.
8. See <https://digitalharrisburg.com/commonwealth/>.