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Reviewed Work: Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward by Michael Barton, Jessica Dorman

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BOOK REVIEWS

*M*ichael Barton and Jessica Dorman, eds., *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2002, The Making of America Series. Pp. 2, 160, bibliography, index.)

At the onset of the twentieth century, Harrisburg city boosters brimmed with optimism. The capital city was a national model for city beautiful design, a vibrant experiment in the nascent field of urban planning. Major streets were paved for the first time. New parks were constructed. Sewers and other infrastructures were modernized. The police and fire departments were professionalized. The symbolic epicenter of this urban renewal was Henry Ives Cobb's magnificent new capitol building completed in 1906 and modeled after St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. President Theodore Roosevelt called it "the most beautiful state Capitol in the nation."

But just behind the new architectural edifice was the notorious Eighth Ward, the Five Points of nineteenth-century Harrisburg. Several years later, municipal officials elected to

expand their city beautiful plan with the Capitol Park Extension; the Haussmanization of Harrisburg was at hand. Shortly thereafter, Harrisburg *Patriot* journalist J. Howard Wert set out to chronicle the impact of the Eighth Ward's demise in a series of thirty-five articles written from November 18, 1912 to July 14, 1913. Michael Barton and Jessica Dorman have dutifully reproduced these publications along with an insightful commentary and rare photographs.

For Wert, the neighborhood's tangled labyrinth of crooked streets and blind courts replicate scenes from Charles Dickens' London, Eugene Sue's Paris, or Jacob Riis' New York. Wert portrays the Eighth Ward in images of light and darkness. Within the razed shacks, for example, "linger legends of deeds of bestiality and depravity that seem almost unbelievable" (74). During the Civil War, the ward furnished "a fruitful calendar of crime," with "orgies by day, and fiercer orgies by night" (62). The State Street Bridge gang "held high carnival; and riotings fights, robberies, and a miscellaneous line of debaucheries were the concomitants of their orgies" (79). Teenage girls enticed off the farms of Central Pennsylvania only found a life "of horror, remorse, degradation, disease and death" (121). For Wert, Harrisburg's problems are the nation's, prostitution and "white slavery" "the menace . . . to national vitality and moral growth" (119).

Wert's Harrisburg evokes Herbert Asbury's *Gangs of New York*. Both journalists present sensational images of neighborhoods full of rough-and-toughs, speakeasies, gambling dens and brothels. The sex-crazed denizens of the Red Lion hotel compare to counterparts in Gotham. Predictably, Wert quotes St. Paul's letter to the Romans: "The wages of sin is death" (135).

Wert's Eighth Ward, however, was not simply a hotbed of vice and contagion. The neighborhood was populated with "honest, industrious, upright, God-fearing men and women . . . who have reared their families in the paths of virtue and rectitude" (60). Canal boatmen and lumber raft Yankees appeared in the antebellum years. Tanner's Alley served as a way station for the "underground railroad." Worshipers at the First Freewill Baptist Church thrived for a time, only to be later outnumbered by Jewish immigrants who transformed the church into Synagogue Keshet Israel. The "Eagle Works" of the W.O. Hickok Manufacturing Company was Harrisburg's forgotten global enterprises, producing bookbinding machinery used in government printing offices in thirteen different nations. Prostitutes and gamblers may have ruled the night, but in daylight businesses like the E.N. Cooper foundry, the Paxton Flour and Feed Company, and the State Street Market sustained the city's industrial economy.

Wert recognized that Harrisburg was losing something, but he never precisely articulated what that something was. Barton and Dorman do that. By illustrating Wert's articles with over 100 photographs from the Pennsylvania State Archives and the Historical Society of Dauphin County, readers are introduced to a social and architectural forgotten Harrisburg. An introduction contextualizes Wert, linking him to the turn-of-the-century journalism of Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell and Stephen Crane.

At times, however, the catalogue of streets, churches, institutions and individuals—many for only one time—make Wert difficult to follow without an intimate familiarity with Harrisburg. The absence of a detailed map of the neighborhood only accentuates this weakness.

A larger message, however, concerns the multiple levels of lost history. Wert indirectly acknowledged that poverty, crime, and violence typified only one ingredient of the nineteenth-century Eighth Ward. Beneath the veneer of "vice" was a more complicated reality. The Lincoln School was a physical reminder of the racially-segregated education system found in most northern cities. Harry Cook's Lafayette Hall was not only the city's premier gambling den, but one of the city's premier mansions. The destruction of the Wesley Union A.M.E. Zion Church and the Bethel A.M.E. Church on State Street represented not only a bygone architectural heritage, but also, according to Wert, "trophies of the perseverance of a race whose pathway to the light of freedom's day was strewn with thorns and baptized with blood and tears" (45). Such was progress in Progressive-era Harrisburg.

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Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds. *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Pp. 435, contributors, index, cloth \$59.95, paper \$24.95)

More than a generation ago a group of bright, young historians proposed a new way of understanding the early republic period in American history. Labeled "New Political History" the interpretation employed many of the analytical tools and methods associated with political science. While the New Political History offered some fresh insights, their opponents criticized its