

Introduction

We are an urban nation and have been so, officially at least, since the early 20th century. But long before then, our cities played crucial roles in the economic and political development of the nation, as magnets for immigrants and as centers of culture and innovation. They still do. Yet, the discipline that we call “urban history” is really a phenomenon of post–World War II scholarship. And it was not until the 1970s that a body of research emerged to justify a journal—the *Journal of Urban History*—as a showcase for that scholarship. Now, after a generation of pathbreaking scholarship that has reoriented and enlightened our perception of the American city, an interdisciplinary group of scholars offers both a summary and a prospectus of the field in this *Encyclopedia of American Urban History*.

Ours is an interdisciplinary field. Architects, planners, sociologists, environmentalists, political scientists, and economists, among others, are better informed in their work if they are aware of the urban process in historical context. The interdisciplinary nature of the field is reflected both in the variety of entries and in the diversity of contributors. Although historians predominate, the Editors and Advisory Board of these volumes have invited individuals inside and outside the academy and social scientists from a number of disciplines.

It is fair to ask, then, if in fact, like our contemporary cities, the field has become the intellectual version of sprawl. Is it possible to make sense out of what seems to be a Jackson Pollock scholarly canvas? Not any more than in most other social science fields, the Editors believe; the difficulty of synthesizing burgeoning research is a common scholarly lament. It is, in fact, a reflection of dynamic scholarship: Urban historical research is so rapidly expanding into new

areas of inquiry and offering new perspectives and innovations in methodology and sources that a synthesis would at once be heroic and quickly out of date. The value of this encyclopedia is that it affords an opportunity to take stock, to see where we are in the field and where we might be going. Perhaps some scholar will find these entries useful in fashioning that long-awaited synthesis, but this is not the primary purpose of the volumes. Rather, the Editors and Advisory Board hope to expose the leading scholarship by both prominent and up-and-coming academics and practitioners as not only a state-of-the-art summary of American urban history but as a valuable reference work to guide future researchers.

Our distinguished Editorial Advisory Board has thought long and hard on these issues, and one member, Kenneth T. Jackson, has thought longer and harder than the rest of us, having directed the highly regarded *Encyclopedia of New York City* (1995). The complexity of the field reflects the complexity of the city, complicating the selection of entries. But the eclectic nature of the field and the entity we study has also allowed for wide latitude. Tim Gilfoyle, Associate Editor of the *Journal of Urban History*, and an Advisory Board member, has noted that cities are complex phenomena, requiring urbanists to break them down into constituent parts in their attempts to make sense of them. Cities, Gilfoyle avers, defy easy generalization and definition. Urban history thus remains a topic absent any totalizing theory or universal paradigm. For nearly 30 years, urban history has flourished in interdisciplinary chaos, with many of the works written by individuals who do not define themselves as “urbanists” or “urban historians.” Urban history benefits from the absence of a canon. While that means the field lacks a certain glue

to hold it together, the multiple methodologies and subjects encompassed by “urban history” make for a more invigorating field, albeit a more difficult one to teach or promote. The influence of nonhistorians and nonurbanists in the field of urban history presents an ongoing and historic tradition.

Much of this urban historical research has focused on the past 150 years of American urban history, and this is the emphasis of the encyclopedia. This is the time period when the American city came into its own, when the United States transformed from being a nation of shopkeepers and farmers to an urban industrial, and then postindustrial, society. This transformation was sudden (in historical terms) and dramatic. Henry Adams’s comment that “in the essential of life . . . the boy of 1854 stood nearer the year one than to the year 1900” underscores the metamorphosis. The scale of cities, the types of people living in them, the diversity of activities within and on the periphery, and the technology that drove these changes are the subjects of these volumes.

Carl Abbott, who is a contributor to these volumes and teaches in a city planning program, recalled that pioneering urban historian Richard Wade used to tell his students that urban history was not an independent subspecialty but an essential way to explore the development of the United States as a whole, and that scholars should think of themselves as U.S. historians first, urban historians second. The scholarship bears him out, especially recent work. The study of cities and groups within cities is thriving under the banner of many other “histories,” such as environmental, educational, ethnic, racial, immigration, gender, social, and regional. There is interesting work on historical aspects of urban development in sociology, political science, geography, urban planning, and other closely related disciplines. The journals surveyed and books read by urban historians are wide-ranging and interdisciplinary, as are these volumes.

Most members of the Advisory Board are identified with multiple subareas and do not identify themselves exclusively as urban historians. Thus, Raymond A. Mohl is identified with ethnicity and infrastructure, Joe Trotter with labor and African American history, Lizabeth Cohen with labor and social history, Becky Nicolaides with American

studies and gender, Maureen Flanagan with gender, and Tim Gilfoyle with sexuality and popular culture, but all happen to focus their research on cities. Ken Jackson’s most cited work, *Crabgrass Frontier*, is about suburbs. What binds these individuals together as urban historians is their interest in the interaction between the urban process—how and why cities grow—and the specific subjects on which they focus. As with most of our contributors, they view the city as a dynamic entity shaping and being shaped by an array of peoples and events. It is this interactive quality that the contributions to these volumes bring to the field of urban history.

As Carl Abbott has noted, new ideas, more often than not, come out of dissonance and conflict rather than consensus. Permeable disciplinary boundaries tend to be highly productive of new ideas and insights. A long tradition in social theory argues that people on the edges and frontier zones of social groups, those whose status and standing are uncertain and contested, are the most active agents of social change. In the realm of scholarship, new ideas also come from the margins. The interaction between urban and environmental history offers an example. It is a productive area of inquiry because urban historians are being drawn to environmental questions and because environmental historians are finding it useful to ask “urban history” questions that lead them toward the examination of social and ethnic groups, neighborhood dynamics, and local political power and institutions.

To study the history of cities, Abbott concludes, is essentially to study the creation and character of the modern, and perhaps postmodern, world. To make things manageable, urban historians have often focused on specific topics that repay concentrated analysis by many scholars. Topics such as intercity competition and rivalry, the origin of public services, and social and economic mobility were hot in the 1960s and 1970s, but are less so now. They have been replaced by equally interesting topics such as women’s urban experiences and institutions, cities as arenas for sexual choices, the complex character of suburbanization, and the symbolic meanings of the built environment. Because pursuit of these topics may take groups of researchers into different scholarly realms, the field can look fragmented—or it can look vital.

Selecting entries for such a broad field was our most challenging task. Members of the Advisory Board, chosen not only for their expertise in a particular subfield but also because of their comprehensive knowledge of the field in general, submitted entries in four categories, ranging from most significant (requiring at least 2,500 words) to important (entries of 500 words). Their suggestions totaled more than 1,000 entries. Eliminating duplicate and overlapping suggestions, the Editors of these volumes developed a list of more than 500 entries and then set about pairing the entries with contributors, again taking the suggestions of the Advisory Board members. Deciding which entries belonged in which categories was a daunting task as well and was accomplished after several months of consultations between the Editor and Assistant Editor and the Advisory Board members. The Editors and Board members have also defined *urban* broadly, including suburban environments, and even something new and, literally, far out, called *penurbia*. The approach was both referential and reverential: to produce a work that would function as a research tool and as a commemoration of scholarship.

The entries reflect not only an expansive view of “urban” but also the nature of American urbanization itself. American cities were not created by administrative fiat or royal command, but usually by economic forces and geographical imperatives. Their development was likewise not carefully controlled; it was driven by the desire for land and by the hunger of the huge markets that arose in that quest. Land speculation was a major factor behind the location and development of cities, the creation of urban wealth, the development of new transportation technologies, and the provision of city services (the value of land rose dramatically with the extension of water and sewer lines, paved streets, and police and fire protection). American cities are, perhaps to a greater extent than cities anywhere else in the world, the products of exuberant capitalism. The entries reflect the Editors’ view of cities as engines of development and of the great diversity of peoples attracted by the opportunities that development presented.

The entries also indicate the shifting nature of the field. During the 1950s and 1960s, urban biographies—historical analyses of major cities—dominated the

subject. With the rise of the “new urban history” of the 1960s and 1970s, more quantitative approaches gained favor, particularly those related to social and geographic mobility. Also at this time, historians made connections with geographers, sociologists, and architects to extend a multidisciplinary analysis to urban development that emphasized the evolution and allocation of urban space and structure. By the 1980s, urban historical research followed general historiographical trends using race, class, and gender as analytical categories, though with a continued awareness of how space and power interacted with those categories. At the same time, interest in suburban research grew, a reflection of the fact that the 1970 census indicated that more Americans lived in suburbs than in central cities.

In fact, urban historians have seemed to follow contemporary research trends. This should not imply we are “presentists.” But it is true that we believe that urban historical research definitely has contemporary policy implications. Many of the entries bear out that parallel. Public health, the environment, infrastructure, law enforcement, and the new immigration are prominent policy issues in the contemporary metropolis. In turn, they are also important topics for urban historical research. Such subjects also indicate how comfortable urban historians are researching and writing in an interdisciplinary milieu. It is really not a choice, it is a necessity, and the contributions to these volumes reflect that.

The entries also say a great deal about the contributions to the encyclopedia: that urban historical research is carried out in a variety of settings. While most of the authors are connected with colleges and universities, a significant number of writers represented here work for nonprofits, governments, and corporations. These settings have a significant stake in the urban process, and understanding that process is essential to their well-being. So, while the Editors and Advisory Board present this encyclopedia as history, these volumes are also reflections of the present day and of the future. In other words, if you live in a metropolitan area, regardless of what your professional interests might be, these volumes will help you to understand the place where you live and work, how it came to be that way, and what, perhaps, might

make it better. Urban scholars and practitioners deal with the urban process, the constantly changing nature of the city and of the people who compose it. For urban historians and our numerous fellow travelers in the social sciences and sciences, the Editors and Board members have fashioned this as a fundamental reference work to ground and inspire future research in our field. It is a measure of what we have

accomplished to this point, and what we may do in the future.

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