UNTAPPED HISTORY: A public works historian calls for a closer look at America's infrastructure
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"One of the first things that dismayed me, as I tried to put pen to paper with a view of relating historical events, was to discover the hopeless open-endedness of the subject of history itself. Its multidimensional quality, its lack of tidy beginnings and endings... No matter what you told, there was always something that had gone before, or came afterward, which you didn't have time to tell about, or which you didn't know about, and which was nevertheless essential to the completeness of the tale."


Public works have long been a part of America's heritage and, perhaps for that reason, are hardly noticed and generally taken for granted. Clean, clear water at the turn of a tap, light and power at the touch of a switch, wastes disposed of with a short walk to the curb or alley—these and many other public works services have become accepted as customary in the daily lives of most Americans. Only when they fail to function properly or to meet continually rising expectations do they become the object of concern.

Not unlike the public at large, historians have neglected to direct their attention to the nation's infrastructure, especially at the local level. By ignoring this multifaceted aspect of community building, they have overlooked a dimension that could contribute substantially to a fuller and more coherent interpretation of the role and impact of the local community in American development.

During the 1970s the history of life at the local level emerged as one of the most lively and promising areas of historical inquiry in the United States. This phenomenon resulted in large part from the sustained encouragement given to the study of local history by historians in the late 1950s and 1960s. Prior to this time, historians had often examined the local scene only to particularize their generalizations about national developments. But during the 1960s, in response to the growing social, economic, political and environmental problems that surfaced in American society, historians increasingly recognized that important elements of the American past, particularly at the grass roots, had been overlooked, and they rehearsed a call for historical studies of American life "from the bottom up."

The advent of the computer coincided with the awareness that historians needed to develop new approaches to studying the past. They knew full well that the research methods used in analyzing leadership groups could not be successfully employed in examining the lives of the statistically numerous, non-dominant groups. Adapting behavioral and social science models and drawing on procedures developed by European scholars, a number of historians began experimenting with the available computer technology to collect and process huge amounts of data on vast numbers of the ordinary and inarticulate.

During the 1970s, as committees and organizations throughout the nation prepared to celebrate the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, local history received a further impetus. More conscious
of its heritage and more disposed to reflecting on its past, large segments of the American public participated in or experienced a whole range of local history projects. Responding to the popular mood, historians directed even more of their attention to units of society at the local level, particularly during the period between 1750 and 1825. But in many instances they extended their research efforts into other time frames and subject areas as well. There was, for example, a burst of interest in urbanization—especially the processes of city building and the impact of the physical environment on city dwellers. Although many historians chose to examine such forces as mobility, ethnicity, “social control” and politics, others preferred to examine the less traditional fields of public works and “urban technology.” In addition to the American Public Works Association's 200-year survey of public works in the United States, numerous other studies appeared tracing the development of sewers, street pavements, mass transit, aqueducts, waste disposal systems and other public improvements.

A definition

Public works, broadly defined, are those physical structures and facilities developed or acquired by public agencies to house governmental functions and to provide water, waste disposal, power, transportation and related services. Each year federal, state and local governments spend billions of dollars to plan, design, construct, operate and maintain the nation's physical infrastructure. They do so because public works make human settlements possible and are indispensable to commerce and industry. When public works function effectively, they contribute to the overall quality of life and the balanced growth of local communities; when they do not, the public's health is endangered as are basic community services such as public transportation, fire protection and flood control.

In the past year, articles in Newsweek, Time, Business Week, Wall Street Journal, New York Times and U.S. News and World Report have attested to the essential nature of public works by featuring the serious consequences of a neglected and decaying infrastructure. The New York Times reported, for example, that in Pittsburgh the United States Steel Corporation was paying “at least $10 million a year to detour its trucks 26 miles around a major bridge the state closed two years ago for lack of repair.” U.S. News and World Report noted that in Jersey City, N.J., “the water supply ran out in midsummer for the city's 223,000 residents with a rupture in a main of the 82-year-old water system” and that during the same month in Colorado “80-year-old Lawn Lake Dam gave way sending 250 million gallons of water cascading through the Rocky Mountain resort town of Estes Park”—four people were killed, and property damage from the flood amounted to $21 million. Co-authors of America in Ruins Pat Choate and Susan Walter, who have analyzed in detail the widespread effects of an erosion of America's underpinnings not only in older cities but also in suburban and rural communities, contend that “deteriorating public facilities reduce the quality of life of virtually every American” and “prove a critical bottleneck to national economic renewal.”

Since public works have long been and continue to be significant in determining the contour of American life, it is unfortunate that historians have largely ignored the key role played by them in this process. While transportation routes and sewer systems have been recognized as critical in the development of nearly every American community, the location and construction of parks, public schools, landfills, hospitals, fire stations, docks and the like have been equally important in defining the shape of towns and municipalities across the country. In varying degrees these projects have politicized groups of citizens, employed numerous contractors and engineers as well as hundreds of thousands of workers, and depended heavily for their financing on local funding institutions and businesses. With so many local groups affected, there is little doubt that the study of public works history can contribute substantially to a better understanding of how the American people have lived as individuals and as communities.

Where to begin

But where to begin? In 1976 the American Public Works Association published a 736-page, 200-year History of Public Works in the United States that covers a broad spectrum of public works ranging from roads, highways, waterways and airports to flood control and irrigation projects, community water supplies and sewer systems. Military installations, parks and recreational facilities, and public buildings also receive extended treatment. A “most convenient and reliable reference,” according to one review, the history has had wide appeal and has stimulated considerable interest in this relatively new field. In the summer of 1982 the American Association for State and Local History published Suellen M. Hoy and Michael C. Robinson's Public Works History in the United States: A Guide to the Literature. Nearly 500 pages in length, this bibliography (prepared by the staff of the Public Works Historical Society and funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities) contains more than 4,000 annotations of published sources related to the historical development and management of public works systems and their environmental impacts. Equally important in assessing the current state of research is Eugene P. Moehring's “Public Works and Urban History: Recent Trends and New Directions,” a long piece in the Public Works Historical Society's series, Essays in Public Works History.

Public Works History in the United States and "Public Works and Urban History" are especially instructive for anyone considering the study of a particular community through its public works. Both publications indicate clearly the areas that have received the most and the least attention from historians. One of the most popular scholarly topics has been the campaign for sanitary reform that swept across the United States in the period after 1850. Indeed a number of recent monographs and articles have examined aspects related to the construction of sewer and water supply systems; the evolution of solid waste management practices and programs; and the role of sanitary engineers, public health officials, landscape architects, citizen groups and politicians in supporting these projects.

Yet a good deal of historical research in the area of sanitary reform remains to be done. While it is known that municipal engineers were influential in initiating and
implementing many reforms, what has not been documented is the precise nature of the relationship between the experts—engineers, landscape architects and health officials—and reform groups and politicians in local communities; nor is very much known about the sanitary policies of municipal, county and state governments. What determined the location of dumping sites on land and in water? When, where and why were reduction plants and incineration facilities built? What were the reasons for the expanded efforts to purify water and build large filtration plants following World War II? And, since 1945, what has characterized the relationship between cities, counties and states and the federal government regarding the issues of waste disposal and wastewater treatment?

Besides questions related to sanitary reform, there are many others that beg for answers. For example, what has been the role of the real estate industry in the community building process and the relationship between land values and public works? Almost nothing is known about the large-scale reclamation projects undertaken by cities and counties after 1850. What impact did the construction of levees and the filling in of shorelines have on real estate and industrial growth? And, in large cities, how did promises of sewer and water systems affect annexation campaigns and the subsequent growth of suburbs? How did racial factors influence the location of critical public works, particularly in the rebuilding of towns and cities in the South following the Civil War? In the 20th century, to what extent were freeways and expressways routed through inner-city neighborhoods, and how did these routings change land use and commercial patterns? Did the placement of parks and recreational facilities affect land values? What elements determined the number and kinds of parks built by park districts, and what role did commissioners, neighborhood associations and realtors play in the decision-making process? And, finally, what has been the effect of military bases and airports on local economies and values? People as individuals and groups are an integral component in the community building process. But there are few biographies of “builders”—especially public officials in engineering and health departments and private citizens in neighborhood and professional groups. It is generally known that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries women, concerned about their families and homes, took on the important task of “municipal housekeeping” largely through municipal leagues and civic clubs. Although some women have been identified, many have not—who were they, how did they operate, what did they accomplish? Who, too, were those unique women who served as public officials (elected or appointed in cities, counties and states across the country, and how did they function as builders?

While not every community has had a figure equal to the stature of New York City’s Robert Moses (who served as that city’s parks commissioner from 1934–1960), there were in nearly every locale those individuals—“power brokers” they have been called—who worked behind the scenes in public agencies, financial institutions, planning and zoning commissions and who played a large part in determining the development of waterfronts, the availability of power, the expansion of mass transit and so on. Who are they, what did they do, how did they do it and why? Until questions such as these have been answered, Americans’ understanding of their past is incomplete.

Since public works structures and facilities are physical investments that will eventually deteriorate even if they are properly maintained, each generation of Americans will be faced with choices regarding public works construction, maintenance and management similar to those confronted by their predecessors. Thus, in an era when citizens are more active participants in the decision-making processes of government, Americans—young and old—would be well served if historians in historical societies and museums, colleges and universities, professional associations and governmental agencies, and archival repositories and libraries were to direct their attention and resources beyond the traditional fields of historical inquiry to the physical and social setting of local communities. In such an educational effort, the multi-dimensional nature of public works history would also contribute to the “completeness of the tale” of the American experience.