

BARBERSHOPS IN HARRISBURG'S OLD EIGHTH, 1890-1905

Julie Hurst

The Pennsylvania State University Harrisburg

Because barbershops were common in late nineteenth-century urban neighborhoods, they are helpful to the study of such communities, especially one as diverse and colorful as Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward.¹ The multi-ethnic and religiously-diverse Eighth Ward earned a notorious reputation for entertaining raucous canal boatmen in the early 1800s and had furthered that reputation during the Civil War, when Union soldiers from nearby Camp Curtin frequented its saloons to gamble away their wages. By the last quarter of the century, Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward had become the inevitable "scapegoat" neighborhood for the capital city's rather moderate troubles. The ward was exactly the sort of community where one would expect to find many lively hang-outs. Barbershops were just that. More than a place for a cut and shave, neighborhood barbershops at the turn of the twentieth century were visited for the jovial banter, gossip, camaraderie, and politics that occurred when men came together in the most unpretentious of circumstances.

In this brief study, the barbershops that existed in the Eighth Ward between 1890 and 1905 will be examined in an attempt to better understand the character and design of that community. Harrisburg city directories and federal census data were used to help fill in the gaps left when this ward was razed to make room for the Capitol Park Extension in the 1910s. This study will focus particularly on the location and longevity of the ward's shops and the ethnicity of its barbers.

A Brief History of Barbering

Before looking specifically at barbering in the Eighth Ward, it is important to understand barbering in its broader historical and cultural context. Throughout much of history, barbers have enjoyed significant status within their communities. Many early peoples and primitive cultures believed hair possessed power and the honor of cutting it was granted to the shaman or priest.² Barber's tools were employed not only for cutting hair and shaving faces but also for dressing wounds, performing minor surgery, and making wigs.³ King Edward IV of England granted that country's Barber's Guild distinctive status above lesser associations by giving barbers the right to carry a sword in public.⁴ The first barbers to organize in America were Dutch and Swedish settlers, bringing with them from the Old Country this highly-regarded position in a community. However, by the nineteenth century, many of America's elite were having their hair trimmed and beards shaved by slaves, thereby imposing a decline in the status of barbers among Caucasians.⁵

Barbering in the African-American community has an especially complex and notable function. In the Antebellum period, African-American barbers benefited significantly from the decline in white competition. The servile nature of the craft drove away white competitors, while at the same time, it encouraged patronage of white customers who felt blacks should serve them.⁶ The result of this shift was that barbering became an attractive profession for free blacks in the north and south. Ambitious African-American barbers earned a good living and became well respected within their communities.⁷ Ironically, in many instances, black barbers earned their money in elite barbershops that served an all-white clientele. The newspaper *Colored American* reported the story of a black man being refused a haircut and shave by a black barber so as not to offend his white clients.⁸ Although many black barbers were in the dubious position of becoming well-to-do by serving an

all-white clientele, most of these entrepreneurs used their wealth to strengthen their communities. Two affluent black barbers founded Wilberforce University, the first all-black university in America.⁹ Even so, African-American barbers were criticized in their communities for supporting a segregated system.¹⁰

After the Civil War, there was another demographic shift that affected African-American barbers in particular. An onslaught of German and Italian immigrants created competition for white clients, so that by the turn of the century, most black barbers were serving black clients.¹¹ In 1901, Booker T. Washington wrote in his autobiography, "Twenty years ago every large and paying barbershop over the country was in the hands of black men, today in all the large cities you cannot find a single large or first class barber shop operated by colored men."¹² In spite of this shift, barbering remained a popular business enterprise for African Americans. In 1900, the National Negro Business League Convention reported that the number one business in which "colored men are engaged in as a proprietor is that of barbering and hairdressing."¹³ In the twentieth century, as industrialization created jobs for blacks in northern cities, the barbershop became a focal point for black unity and community activism.¹⁴ When race was difficult to identify by one's skin color, the texture of one's hair often served as means of identification. It was in black barbershops, where an all-black clientele was all but assured, that activist newspapers, like the *Chicago Defender*, were sold and discussed; thus, black barbershops provided both an expected service to paying customers and



At Anna Shein's premises, at 123 and 121 Chestnut Street, smokers once had their choice of Polar Bear, Claret, Debonair, Havana Ribbon, or Union Leader tobaccos. (PSA)

FIGURE 1: The pole to the left of Anne Shein's store in the Eighth Ward is an example of an early free-standing barber pole, common before the 1920s. This address does not correspond with any in the study and probably comes from a later date.

Photo: Historical Society of Dauphin County

promoted unity and activism within the community in the face of racial injustice.

By the early twentieth century, the trend was moving towards culturally-imposed segregation of barbershops. Of course there were always exceptions. In small cities, such as Harrisburg, it is likely that the trend of white elites leaving black barbers may have been slow to arrive. It is just as likely that the first-class, black-owned barbershops found in Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago never came to Harrisburg in the first place. However, it is fairly certain that if prestigious, black-owned barber shops did exist in Harrisburg, they would not be found in this lively little neighborhood.

With increased urbanization and industrialization, the neighborhood barbershop became a place for bolstering ethnic and racial identity as well as disseminating local and national news and information. To some degree, barbershops and other neighborhood "hang-outs" all have the potential to serve as community unifiers, regardless of the race or ethnicity of their owners or patrons. The degree to which the barbershops in Harrisburg's Old Eighth were places that served their community in such a manner can only be guessed. Harrisburg was a rather typical example of a mid-sized, industrial, turn-of-the-century city in its ethnic makeup and economic development.¹⁵ Therefore, it is safe to assume that the sort of social interaction described above also took place in the Eighth Ward's neighborhood barbershops.

Stability of Barbering in the Eighth

Between 1890 and 1905, eighteen men living in the Eighth Ward identified themselves as barbers. The peak years were 1900 and 1901, when seventeen men claimed barbering as their vocation. According to the Harrisburg directory, Charles L. Barns had the shortest tenure as a barber at two years. John Boone and Nicholas Butler both operated their shops for the full course of the study. However, these two were by far the exception to the rule. Figure 2 provides a quick overview of the eighteen barbers and the years they were operating. All but a few of the barbers were listed either in the classified section of the city directories or in the residential pages as "barber" for more than five consecutive years.

BARBERSHOPS IN HARRISBURG'S OLD EIGHTH, 1890-1905

Names	1890	1895	1900	1905
Fredrick Bair			B	
Horace Bair		B	B	
William Bair		B	B	
Sylvester Bair			B	B
Charles L. Barns		B		
John Boone	B	B	B	B
Nicholas L. Butler	B	B	B	B
Edward Brenneman		B	B	
John Cunningham		B	B	B
Fredrick Darow			B	
William Donohoe		B	B	
Joseph Fisher			B	B
John A. Gaitor			B	B
Elias Grey		B	B	B
William Loser			B	B
Edward Moss			B	
Daniel Rose			B	B
John Snyder			B	

* "B" denotes that the individual was a barber during that year.

FIGURE 2: Barbers of the Eighth Ward, 1890-1905*

Racial Milieu of Eighth Ward Barbers

Of the barbers who were positively identified in the 1880, 1890, or 1900 federal census, eleven were black and four were white. Two were not positively identified but had names that were predominately associated with white families. Charles L Barns had no identical match for his Harrisburg address, and his surname is found frequently in both black and white families. As Figure 3 shows, the number of black barbers was almost double the number of white. The noted nineteenth century trend toward culturally-imposed segregation of barbershops appears to be evident in the Old Eighth. If Harrisburg ever had a monopoly of black-owned barbershops like larger cities, that trend too was clearly being transformed. A working-class white man, like those living in the Eighth Ward, preferred to patronize white barbers rather than feel condescended to by a black barber who was perhaps wealthier than he.¹⁶

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY

White Barbers	Black Barbers	Unknown
Edward Brenneman	Fredrick Bair	John Boone
John Cunningham	Horace Bair	William
William A. Loser	William H.S.Bair	Donohoe
Daniel M. Rose	Sylvester Bair	Charles L. Barns
	Nicholas Bulter	
	Fredrick Darow	
	Joseph Fisher	
	Elias Grey	
	John A. Gaitor	
	Edward Moss	
	John M. Snyder	

FIGURE 3: Race of Eighth Ward Barbers

Source: 1890 and 1910 Federal Census

African-Americans presumably preferred black barbers for several reasons. Racial segregation tended to operate on a “sliding scale.” A black man trying to get a haircut in a white man’s shop was likely to cause a local scandal. Barbers provide a service and serving a black man in the eyes of most turn-of-the-century white men was unacceptable. Also, black hair care had its own unique rituals and vocabulary distinctive to black life experience.¹⁷ As Harris-Lacewell points out, “Black barbers and hair stylists free their clients of that need to explain. Barbershops are a place where black men can retreat into a racialized and gendered world where they are not the ‘other.’”¹⁸ In a predominately black, Irish, and Jewish neighborhood, the barbershops mirrored the race and ethnicity of the inhabitants.

Location of Eighth Ward Barbershops

The majority of barbers in this study lived and worked in the Eighth Ward; in fact, most reported the same address for both business and residence (Figure 4). In a few cases, home addresses could not be located in the city directories but could be located using federal census as being in the Eighth Ward. This is noted by the non-descript “Eighth Ward” under home address. This pattern suggests that the residences of barbers coincided with their business addresses, but this could not be confirmed for this study. From this group of barbers, only Charles L Barns clearly indicated separate residence and business addresses.

BARBERSHOPS IN HARRISBURG'S OLD EIGHTH, 1890-1905

In the fifteen year boundary of this study, there was considerable relocation reported among the barbers. Five out of eleven moved their shops to a new location within the Eighth Ward during this time period. Charles L. Barns kept his shop location fixed but moved to a new home three times in a three-year period. There are several variables that could account for this mobility. Immigrant and working-class neighborhoods almost certainly had considerable transience, as their residents were often forced to respond quickly to job and housing opportunities that arose. Barbering, with its few, small tools-of-the-trade, lent itself to easy travel. Also, with close to eighteen ward inhabitants claiming to be barbers in 1900, perhaps the market forced some to close or move on.

Figure 5 lists those barbers whose residences were in the Eighth Ward but either did not list their business address or had their business outside of the

Names	Home Address	Business Address
Charles L. Barns*	1892: 412 South St 1893-94: 110 Short 1894-95: 665 Briggs	1892-96: 500 ½ South St.
Nicholas L. Butler**	1890-96: 500 South St 1897-1905: 513 South St	1890-96: 500 South St. 1897-1905: 513 South St.
Edward Brenneman†	1895-1905: Eighth Ward	1895-1905: 421 State
John Cunningham†	1893-95: 509 Filbert 1896-1905: 702 State	1893-94: 509 Filbert 1895-1905: 702 State
Fredrick Darow**	1900-03 Eighth Ward	1901-04: 437 State
Joseph Fisher**	1898-99: 135 Short 1900-05: 403 N. Fifth	1898-99: 135 Short 1900-05: 403 N. Fifth
John A. Gaitor**	1889-1902: 111 ½ Tanners 1903-04: 507 N. Fourth	1898-1902: 111 ½ Tanners 1903-04: 507 N. Fourth
Elias Grey**	1895-1905: 405 State	1895-1905: 405 State
Edward Moss**	1900-05: Eighth Ward	1900-05: 509 State
Daniel M. Rose†	1898-1905: 401 Filbert.	1898-1905: 401 Filbert
John M. Snyder**	1900-03: 410 Cowden	1900-03: 410 Cowden

* Race unknown

**Black

†White.

FIGURE 4: Barbers with Homes and Shops in the Eighth Ward

Source: Boyd's Harrisburg Directories

Old Eighth. The Eighth Ward was Harrisburg's ghetto. J. Howard Wert wrote eloquently of its humble character while acknowledging that its residents were

poor, its reputation tarnished, and its infrastructure dilapidated.¹⁹ No doubt it was good business acumen to set up shop in a more prosperous ward; however, it is plausible that these barbers did have shops in the ward but chose not to advertise as such.

Plotting the aforementioned business addresses reveals that all of these barbers had shops south of North Avenue. Only three shops were found on the block between State Street and North Avenue. The prime location for barbershops in the Eighth Ward was State Street, where a total of five barbershops were found. Three of these were on the 400 block between North Fourth Street and North Fifth Street. South Street had three barbershops—two near the corner of North Fifth and Short and one on the corner of South and Filbert. Another shop was located just south of South Street on Short, making the intersection of South and Short Streets another key site for barbering. Marketers knew that proximity to other businesses, even direct competitors, was good for all enterprises. Photographs taken of State Street and J. Howard Wert's descriptions of its intersections reveal a once-bustling business district, which would have been the ideal location for a lively barbershop.²⁰

Names	Home Address	Business Address
Fredrick Bair **	1898–99: 707 State 1900–02: 116 Angle 1903–05: 707 State	No business address
Horace Bair**	1898–99: 707 State	No business address
Sylvester Bair**	1898–1905: 707 State	412 ½ Verbeke
William H.S. Bair**	1898–1901: 612 South Ave	No business address
John Boone*	1890: 426 North Ave. 1891: 333 Colder 1892–95: 426 North Ave. 1896–98: 408/09 N. Fifth 1899–1905: 436 South Ave	No business address
William Donohoe*	1899–1902: 504 Cowden	No business address
William Loser†	1899–1905: 518 North	22 S. Dewberry
*Race unknown		
**Black		
†White		

FIGURE 5: Eighth Ward Barbers with Shops Outside of Ward

Source: Boyd's Harrisburg Directories

Who's Who Among Eighth Ward Barbers

Being identified merely by address, race, and longevity does little to flesh out the individuals behind the striped pole. Barbers are mythologized in films

and popular culture as affable, chatty, and composed men; they are portrayed as the sort of people who could be trusted to graze a sharp razor across men's necks. No doubt, behind many long-lived barbershops is a man (or a woman) who has established a loyal client base with skillful haircuts and warm self-assurance. Harrisburg city directories and the federal census disclose nothing beyond the bare facts; however, even this minimal information provides enough background to begin to sketch just who these men were.

The Bair family is an especially fascinating component of the barbering community in the Eighth Ward. Black Sylvester Bair was born in 1844, in Wrightsville, York County, Pennsylvania. The 1850 federal census, which listed his surname as "Bear," found him living in Marietta, Lancaster County, with his family.²¹ In 1880, he was listed as being married and living in Bloomfield, Perry County, Pennsylvania. He identified his occupation as "barber," and he had one daughter and three sons, twins, William and Horace, and Fred.²² Sometime in the mid-1890s, the family appears to have migrated to Harrisburg's Eighth Ward. Sylvester Bair set up shop on 412 ½ Verbeke Street and lived at 707 State Street.²³ The three boys, all in their mid-twenties by 1900, were establishing their own homes. The 1900 census reported Fredrick as head of his own home on Angle Ave.²⁴ William and Horace both lived on State Street with their parents until 1902, when they both moved out of the ward. All three recorded their occupations as "barber," like their father. Sylvester advertised his Verbeke Street barbershop in the business classifieds; however, none of the boys included a business address even in the residential pages of the directory. It is very probable that this family worked together at the Verbeke Street shop. The Bair family, spelled Bear and Baer in different sources, would make interesting material for further study, for it seems likely that a barbershop with four barbers all from the same family had the potential to leave a distinct impression on the community.

Several of the other black barbers were born in the South prior to the Civil War. John Gaitor, the oldest barber in this study, was born in Virginia in 1821. At age 79, he ran the lone barbershop on Tanners Alley. Nicholas Butler was born in 1849 in Maryland. The two shops he operated on South Street had the longest duration of any in this study. Born in Maryland in 1853, Edward Moss made his way to Harrisburg by the turn of the century. His barbershop had a prime location on State Street. These three men may have been trained in the antebellum tradition of black barbers servicing Southern whites. The location of Butler and Gaitor's shops suggest that their northern enterprises accommodated black clients.

All of the white barbers were Pennsylvania natives, and from the sound of their surnames, they were likely of German, Irish, or English descent. With the exception of William Donohoe, who could not be accurately identified in the census, they were a relatively young bunch compared to their older, black competitors. Their average age was thirty-three. This supports Harris-Lacewell's observation that the trend in the late nineteenth century was white barbers competing more directly with their black counterparts.²⁵

Unfortunately, this data leaves us with more questions than answers. There remains much to be examined. Financial and tax records would provide deeper insight into the economic viability of barbering, and newspaper obituaries and birth and death records would help to flesh out the barbers themselves.

Conclusion

The barbers of the Eighth Ward are both a reflection of their local community and an expression of broader, national trends at the turn of the twentieth century. Other studies of the Eighth Ward note the considerable transience that took place within the neighborhood.²⁶ There is a sense of restlessness about the community that is typical of a neighborhood where the residents are economically vulnerable. Many of the barbers in this brief study relocated businesses and/or homes, both in and out of the Eighth Ward, several times over the course of fifteen years. Even barbers like Nicholas Butler and John Boone, whose shops were open for the duration of the study, moved at least once. These barbers do not fit the image so many of us may have of the quintessential barber—the omnipresent man down the street who cut our father's and grandfather's hair. It is only natural in a community prone to movement and dislocation that the barbers, too, would be affected.

For the majority of these barbers, the Eighth Ward was the location of both their homes and their businesses. This implies a trend towards culturally-imposed racial and class segregation of barbershops that was evident in Harrisburg as well as in other parts of the country. The twentieth-century perception of a barbershop as a comfortable place one goes for light conversation and relaxation with men at or near one's social position was not necessarily always the case. For a period of time in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the role of barber was fraught with racial and class implications that assumed deference on the part of the barber towards his customer.²⁷ The shift towards a twentieth-century view of barbering is apparent, however, for the barbers of the Eighth Ward. Evidence indicates these barbers were part of the community they served,

contributing to the economy, providing a necessary service, and offering space which relaxed the social interactions that help knit a community together.

NOTES

1. This paper was completed in fall 2004 as part of Professor Barton's Local History undergraduate course and has been edited by Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, webmaster of Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward found at <http://www.old8thward.com>.
2. Mic Hunter, *The American Barbershop: A Closer Look at a Disappearing Place* (Face to Face Books, 1996), 103.
3. Hunter, *The American Barbershop*, 107.
4. Hunter, *The American Barbershop*, 107.
5. Hunter, *The American Barbershop*, 107.
6. Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (Pantheon, 1974).
7. Melissa Victoria Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 164.
8. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles and Bet*, 164.
9. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 165.
10. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 165.
11. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 165.
12. Booker T. Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work* (Napererville: J.L. Nichols, 1901).
13. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 166.
14. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 166.
15. Gerald Eggert, *Harrisburg Industrializes: The Coming of Factories To An American Community* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 328.
16. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 165.
17. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 167.
18. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 169.
19. Michael Barton and Jessica Dorman, eds., *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2002).
20. Barton, *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward*, 101 and 102.
21. 1850 Federal Census.
22. 1880 Federal Census.
23. W. Harry Boyd, *Boyd's Harrisburg Directory: Names of Citizens, Map, and a Compendium of Government and of Public Institution* (Boyd's Cousins, 1898).
24. 1900 Federal Census.
25. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 166.
26. For details, see other Eighth Ward student research on the Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward website, <http://www.old8thward.com/research.htm>.
27. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and Bet*, 166.