

WEB-SITE REVIEW  
HOORAY FOR CRAZY PROJECTS:  
HARRISBURG'S OLD 8<sup>TH</sup> WARD  
[HTTP://WWW.OLD8THWARD.COM](http://www.old8thward.com)

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You'd have to be crazy to think up a website project like "Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward." Once a shabby working-class neighborhood, containing natives and newcomers, black and white citizens, the Eighth had no notoriety to keep it in historians' memory. It may have been a ward that only its residents could love; those have dwindled to a precious few since the ward was demolished in the early 1900s. The Capitol Complex that replaced it has its own sordid history—not recounted here. So who could have the slightest interest in photographs of bygone streets, maps of vanished territory, business directories of enterprises long departed, and postcards of nowhere? Who would bother to patronize one, much less glance over the names of all, the barbers into whose shops no living person's grandparents could have gone?

The answer, as a brief dive into the website itself shows, is, practically anybody: historians, archivists, genealogists. The idea of Professor Michael Barton and Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, a

graduate student at Pennsylvania State University in Harrisburg, the project built on a class project that focused on the ward before its destruction in the first decade of the twentieth century. Dr. Barton and a host of students did research into who lived in the ward, what they did, what the community looked like, how it thrived, and what replaced it. Creating a website with all of this information, they wrote articles listing the butcher and barber shops, studied the career of a state senator from the ward, and collected a cluster of newspaper articles relating to events in the "old Eighth." Now anyone, for the price of admission (gratis) can take a "virtual walking tour" of the ward. A press of a key reveals a photograph of what it must have looked like. A business directory lists who did what kind of work; a residential directory tells who lived at which house, and tells something about them: ethnicity, occupation, and sometimes a little more. One can find small entries for institutions: fire companies (sometimes with a picture of their location), the Kelsey Institute for the treatment of liquor and drug addiction, the St. Clare Infirmary for treating victims of typhoid fever in the Spanish-American War, the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and others. A Then and Now site allows viewers to compare photographs of the same spot today and a century ago, and permits a refreshing splash of color to a black and white site. A series of articles go into detail about the people on individual streets. There is even an article about saloons!

Small things come in small packages, necessarily. This site is no mammoth project like the comparative study that Edward Ayers and the University of Virginia have produced. The Historical Society of Dauphin, the Pennsylvania State Archives, the dozen or so books, and the census returns can only go so far; and coverage is strongest at the turn of the century. Indeed, before 1880, there is just about nothing to be found about anyone or anything in the ward, though it must have existed. Of individual people, there are no photographs, and, apparently, no tax rolls or financial records exist to show how well they were doing or how they lived. Did any of the residents enlist in the Union Army (even in the Confederate)? When was the ward laid out, how did its border lines change, and how did it compare, ethnically and economically, with other neighborhoods? How did the ethnic mix change? How did black and white residents get along, or did they? What happened to the people, beyond their fleeting moment of glory, mentioned in the manuscript census, and caught at one instant in time? Only the most cryptic hints seem to survive. And yet, one would imagine that by pouring through the newspapers of Harrisburg all the way back to 1812, answers to these and

many more questions might be found. It should be quite possible, for example, to find how the ward voted, and for whom, who its aldermen were, and who all of its representatives in the legislature were, back to B. C. (which in Pennsylvania politics would be, Before Cameron).

Strike the key for the "postcards" entry, and only one comes up; for "photographs," and nine appear—none of them very interesting, and all virtually unpeopled (the walking tour has these and many more; and presumably the many more will be added to the "photographs" site in future); strike it for newspaper articles on prostitution, and only two are transcribed. There are just six maps, one of them from the late twentieth century, of the capitol complex as it stands today. Necessarily, the articles say no more than the students could express. They have all the defects and limitations of students' own work—stylistic as well as substantive, and some of them are positively exasperating in how very little they chose to glean. Barely half a dozen pages cover the career of the one state senator limned, and many other papers lack any analysis at all. The whole site has an unfinished quality, as if much more remains to be done—and probably will be done in future. Indeed, many scholars tuning in may feel tempted to do some of the work themselves, based on the promising beginnings here: a sort of wikipedia of the Eighth Ward may result, in time.

What, no seconds on good corned beef? These criticisms only emphasize how good the site is: instead of asking, once you are done, why the project was done at all, browsers will ask, why couldn't there be more of it? And when will that "more" be added? And . . . even more to the point . . . why aren't other institutions doing the same thing for other city wards and neighborhoods just as compelling: for Five Points in New York City, for the Levee in Chicago, or even for particular congressional districts?

If the "8<sup>th</sup> Ward" is a crazy project, then hooray for crazy projects! Any half-serious scholar, with time to spare, would be crazy not to take a look within and stay a full hour or two.