What is presently called urban history originated as a sub-discipline in response to the so-called urban crisis of the 1960s. In 1932 scholars of Pennsylvania history interested in exploring Philadelphia’s past turned to Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott’s 1884 History of Philadelphia or Horace Mather Lippincott’s tome. Leland Baldwin produced a somewhat similar albeit more popular urban biography of Pittsburgh in 1937. Before 1968 scholars like Frederick B. Tolles and Struthers Burt did write about Philadelphia Quakers; Edwin Wolf and Maxwell Whiteman; about Philadelphia Jews; while Richard Wade and Carl Bridenbaugh (in the vein of Frederick Jackson Turner) strategically situated both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia on the cultural frontier of the young American civilization. None of this announced the emergence of a new historical discipline.¹

Sam Bass Warner changed all that. Warner’s pioneering 1968 The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth made “The City of Brotherly Love” a laboratory (“scaffolding”) for the
quantitative analysis of the “process of urbanization.” Influenced by the social
and political turmoil of the 60s, Warner branded “privatism,” i.e. capitalism
(the primary force he found historically shaping the American urban culture)
insufficient to equitably distribute scarce resources in a city increasingly
divided by “class, race, and ethnicity.” Following the British labor historian
E.P. Thompson (and armed with stacks of IBM cards) Warner probed the
history of Philadelphia from the bottom up, attempting to uncover the
importance of the lives of ordinary actors lost in most political history. 
Warner stood in the vanguard of a growing band of cliometricians, many
located at the University of Pennsylvania, who utilized the computer (the
giant IBM mainframes—not the desk and laptops of today) to analyze census
data, tax records, city directories, and other quantifiable data that might
bring ordinary, working-class lives more into historical focus. Led by among
others Theodore Hershberg, Bruce Laurie, Claudia Goldin, and Michael
Haines what became the Philadelphia Social History Project (funded by the
Metropolitan Center of the National Institutes of Public Health) produced a
landmark data base for exploring “work, space, family and group experience
in 19th-century Philadelphia.” These historians together with Stuart
Blumin, Lynn Lees, John Modell, Stephanie Greenberg, Billy Smith, and
Gary Nash, to name a few, launched significant and in many cases path-
breaking studies of Philadelphia “from the bottom up.” In Blumin’s case the
search extended to the origins of the middle class. More recently John Hepp
skillfully extended Blumin’s study by looking at how this middle class
re-ordered urban space through department stores, transit, and the use of
newspapers. Meanwhile, Simon Newmann revisited Philadelphia’s back alleys,
expanding Billy Smith’s portrait of the city’s 18th century “other half.”
J. Matthew Gallman’s superb Mastering Wartime: A Social History of
Philadelphia During the Civil War is in the same historiographic tradition, as is
John K. Alexander’s Render them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia,
Community, 1720–1840, and Ron Schultz’s The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia
Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720–1830.2

While hardly in the cliometric vein, Roy Lubove’s seminal study of
Pittsburgh, Twentieth Century Pittsburgh, deftly probed the urbanization
process in the Steel City, and, like Warner, Lubove discovered that over time
privatism, while achieving supreme technological efficiency, produced social
failure manifest in racial and ethnic segregation and squalid living condition.

But, Warner’s “urban scaffolding” begged an even deeper penetration into what Louis Wirth in the 1920s described as the “urban mosaic.” Indeed, Chicago School sociologists like Wirth beheld the city as an organism, a biologically functioning complex whose parts or segments, like the human body, could be scientifically analyzed. Social historians in the 1960s, like the University of Pittsburgh’s Samuel P. Hays, likewise understood the city as an organism shaped by myriad social, political and economic forces. In their scholarship Pennsylvania cities with their rich archives became laboratories for the meticulous study of social, economic, and political processes. This scholarly dissection of the urban organism has impelled much of the recent (and some earlier) work on Pennsylvania urbanism. What, therefore, can the Philadelphia experience tell us about the economic and social impact of textile industrialism? See Phil Scantlon’s work Figured Tapestry: Production, Markets, and Power in Philadelphia, 1855–1941 and Proprietary Capitalism: The Textile Manufacture at Philadelphia, 1800–1885. How did the economic trauma and the political transformation of the Great Depression impact Pittsburgh? See Bruce Stave’s The New Deal and the Last Hurrah. How did race and renewal reshape the social, political and physical landscape of postwar Philadelphia or Lancaster, Pennsylvania? See Bauman’s study of Philadelphia and David Schuyler’s monograph on Lancaster. What role have gays and lesbians played in the shaping of Philadelphia? See Marc Stein’s excellent City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972 (Chicago: 2000). How did urban planning as part of the city decision-making process shape the urban-industrial landscape of Pittsburgh? See John F. Bauman’s and Edward K. Muller’s Before Renaissance: Urban Planning in Pittsburgh, 1889–1943.
However, since the 1990s, eclecticism (more than Warner’s scaffold) has dominated Pennsylvania urban history. Indeed, Timothy Gilfoyle has concluded that recent urban history rejects a set paradigm. Increasingly, historians treat the city as a spatial arena for the study of a host of social, political and economic phenomenon from race relations explore how over time the city’s elite contorted historic memory to its uses. Peter McCaffrey’s challenge to Robert K. Merton, When Bosses Ruled Philadelphia: The Emergence of the Republican Machine, 1867–1933, is also in this vein. Philadelphia and Harrisburg have likewise been subjects of studies of industrialization, see Gerry Eggert’s excellent Harrisburg Industrializes: The Coming of Factories to an American Community, and James Farley’s Making Arms in the Machine Age: Philadelphia’s Frankford Arsenal, 1816–1870, and Harry C. Silcox, A Place to Live and Work: The Henry Disston Saw Works and the Tacony Community of Philadelphia.5

This eclecticism is especially visible in recent articles published in Pennsylvania History. In the past half-dozen years urban-oriented articles in the journal have focused on the highly contextualized image of Philadelphia’s Independence Hall (Mires), Dwight Moody’s late 19th-century revivals in Philadelphia, the location of passenger railway terminals in Philadelphia, the management of Philadelphia movie theatres during the Great Depression, Charter reform in late 20th Wilkes-Barre, World War II African-American activism in Philadelphia, and fire companies in ante-bellum Philadelphia.6

Scaffolding or no scaffolding, because of the extraordinary richness of urban archives found in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, and elsewhere in the state, the future of urban history in Pennsylvania is secure for the next seventy-five years.

NOTES


AN URBAN LOOK AT PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY


6. Articles by these authors appeared in Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies during the six years, 2000–2005 inclusive.