

The Urban Crucible as *Urban History*

IT ALMOST SEEMS QUIXOTIC TO STUDY early American urban history—to spend your precious days in the archives pondering a handful of slightly outsize preindustrial towns, each one smaller than the current student population of the University of California at Los Angeles. Yet UCLA's Gary B. Nash recognized, as Carl Bridenbaugh had before him, that the cities were densely packed, dynamic places where a wide range of peoples congregated, and, more importantly, that these cities had an influence on colonial America (and on the American Revolution) that outweighed their meager size.¹

While any advanced graduate student can do an intensive study of a single locality (especially now that they have Nash's example to follow), Nash aggregated and compared research on the three largest and most complex population centers in the thirteen colonies, covered an eighty-five-year span of history, and zeroed in on the people who wrote the least about their own lives. His extensive archival work and ambitious quantifications are evident from the bounty of tables that grace the book's appendix, as well as the generous (and often discursive) endnotes. Nash's book doesn't just help us to understand the specific social, economic, and political developments of each city, but it binds together a narrative that helps us to understand the colonial American urban experience as a whole.

As he shuttled between a discussion of the cities' changing economic conditions and his own take on urban politics, Nash illuminated the lives and actions of a broad spectrum of city dwellers, and not just those of the elite. He revealed widening socioeconomic inequalities that clearly put strains on the American cities (and on the thesis that a "consensus" existed among the colonists). He showed us Leisler's Rebellion, the Land Bank controversy, the Keithian schism, the Knowles riot, and new dimensions of the Stamp Act crisis all as part of a wider story with a new twist. He

¹ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625–1742* (1938; repr., New York, 1971); Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743–1776* (1955; repr., New York, 1971).

investigated the peaks and troughs of economic cycles (looking at wages and employment levels, credit and currency, commerce and prices), the effects of war, changes in poor relief, and demographic shifts. Nash cracked open a world of urban poverty, urban workers, popular political movements, and crowd action that most eighteenth-century elites had scorned to acknowledge. Most historians prior to the late 1960s, following the paper trail of those elites, had also largely dismissed these important subjects.

Nash wrote that “urban people” did two things: first, they “upset the equilibrium of an older system of social relations”; secondly, they “turned the seaport towns into crucibles of revolutionary agitation” (viii). Few scholars would disagree with the latter half of this statement—indeed, the metaphor that Nash used for his title still has extraordinarily powerful resonance. Yet the snag comes with the first part of the sentence: Nash’s Neo-Progressive focus on social processes and transformations. This interpretative angle made Nash the enduring target of anti-leftist historians and raised the eyebrows of moderate scholars as well.

For instance, at the end of a Festschrift for Nash, Richard S. Dunn recalled some of the reservations he had voiced when he first read *The Urban Crucible* in manuscript form: that the focus on class struggle was “overdrawn,” that the author was a little too gleeful about the destruction of Thomas Hutchinson’s home and papers (the man was a *historian!* those were his *research notes!*), that Nash’s interpretation left too little room for religion and ideology, that poverty was perhaps not so deep in the 1760s and 1770s, and that Nash did not quite explain why the oppressed poor signed on with Harvard graduates like Samuel Adams and John Hancock. In particular, Dunn wrote, “I found him too much of an economic determinist,” a comment that Jon Butler refuted, however, in his review in this journal.²

While Dunn was a friendly private critic, too many of Nash’s public detractors went on to question *The Urban Crucible* (or even his entire oeuvre) on the basis of his affiliation with leftist ideas.³ This was irresponsible. Yes, class categories were slippery enough in the eighteenth

² Richard S. Dunn, “Reminiscences of Gary B. Nash,” in *Inequality in Early America*, ed. Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger (Hanover, NH, 1999), 301–2; Jon Butler, review, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 104 (1980): 385–86.

³ See John Patrick Diggins, “The National History Standards,” *American Scholar* 65 (1996): 495–522.

century that any invocation of a nineteenth-century “working class” makes for a poor fit (although the differences between ruler and ruled, wealthy and impoverished were often quite clear). Yes, there is less evidence than Nash hoped to reveal of people “who in terms of economic interest had a natural affinity for each other” (307) (though Nash is usually careful to qualify statements like this). And yes, the Revolution was a complex event with many factors in play (which Nash also admits). Yet Nash did so much laboring in the archives, crunched so much useful data, and crafted such an elegant, complex interpretation of urban history that his work cannot be simply dismissed or ignored.

Debates over class too often descend into semantic sniping over the definition of the term, accusations of reductionism and presentism, or pointless squabbles over how much emphasis class ought to receive compared to other historical factors like kinship, race, ethnicity, gender, ideology, institutions, religion, geography, contingency, or (in the traditional view) the triumphant march of progress and democracy.⁴ Besides, Nash acknowledged that nineteenth-century class stratification does not apply neatly to preindustrial cities; he refused to ascribe unity or uniformity to his broad and flexible definition of the “laboring classes”; and he did not see class as a rigid, “objective,” or ahistorical category (xi). Still, Nash tried to have it both ways: he introduced the caveat that not “all ship captains or all caulkers thought alike,” but also argued that the people in colonial port towns “arrived at certain common understandings of their social situations” and that “ideological principles and economic interests are . . . intimately conjoined” (x, xiii, 339). This is tricky ground, and it is no wonder that unsympathetic reviewers accused him of stretching his evidence or making unwarranted assumptions about the motives of city dwellers.⁵

But in any discussion of the Revolution, someone needs to flirt with economic determinism. Someone needs to set the elites aside (at least as a temporary measure) so as to focus on the inarticulate. Someone needs to suggest that working people did not just blindly follow their leaders and those leaders’ political principles. Someone needs to look at the level

⁴ For a vibrant set of essays that rely on class-based interpretations, see Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith, eds., *Class Matters: Early North America and the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2008); for further historiography, see the book’s introduction and its citations.

⁵ Gerald Gunderson, review, *Journal of Economic History* 40 (1980): 425–26; Marc Egnal, review, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 37 (1980): 655–58.

of economic suffering and test whether those hardships contributed to imperial unrest in the 1760s and 1770s. That person may not be able to answer every question about eighteenth-century American history or the coming of the American Revolution—we would want to know more about culture, institutions, and the exercise of power—but the perspective is still a useful one. As Jacob M. Price wrote, “One must begin somewhere.”⁶

The critical wars over Nash’s book have therefore done a disservice to the subsequent historiography of the Revolution, forcing scholars to take political positions on Nash as a controversialist where they should be paying attention to Nash as a researcher by following either the example of *The Urban Crucible* or its leads. Ultimately, scholars owe Nash their gratitude: he highlighted the ways in which a broad spectrum of city dwellers lived and acted in the eighteenth century. History happened not just in the halls of power, but in church pews, alleyways, taverns, workshops, markets, residences, public spaces, and on the waterfront. Given the sometimes flexible and often unstable nature of city life, urban Whig leaders faced significant challenges besides those posed by the British parliament (327).

Bridenbaugh and Nash each illustrated the texture of the cities, but where Bridenbaugh tended to focus on the wealthy and articulate, Nash gave us “laboring” peoples, from artisans and day laborers to apprentices and indentured servants. In the years that followed, historians (many of them Nash’s students) widened this picture even further in their exploration of urban slavery and other forms of unfree labor, women of all ranks, children, mariners, and other skilled and unskilled workers, as well as poverty, crowd action, parades, and taverns.

But given this expansive definition of the “laboring classes,” although we can grant a widespread political consciousness, we might find it harder to locate a class consciousness spurring the revolutionary movement of 1763–76. Nash ably demonstrated that economic hardship and a growing awareness of inequality contributed to the revolutionary ferment, but this perception of conflicting class interests was not the only basis for political mobilization. Rich folk and poor folk forged temporary political

⁶ Jacob M. Price, “Economic Function and the Growth of American Port Towns in the Eighteenth Century,” *Perspectives in American History* 8 (1974): 123–86, quote 124. Nash (vii) was rightly dissatisfied with using Bridenbaugh’s books as the sole starting point; see also Benjamin L. Carp, “Cities in Review,” *Common-place* 3 (2003), <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/cp/vol-03/no-04/reviews/carp.shtml>.

alliances during the prewar period that were (at times) more important than class antagonism.⁷ What does seem clear is that the political views of working people were, for at least a moment, harder for the new American elite to ignore. Gouverneur Morris admitted as much: “These sheep, simple as they are, cannot be gulled as heretofore.”⁸

The later chapters of *The Urban Crucible*, particularly the last chapter, “Revolution,” present nagging problems. Nash sometimes relied too heavily on evidence from Loyalists, “friends of government,” and conservatives, who (like Morris) often lashed out at city dwellers with venomous labels like “rabble” or “reptiles”—but whose political enmities muddled their perceptions of social conflict. Nash’s discussion of ideology, while suggestive of new directions, is also a bit hazy—an attempt to burst beyond older rigid categories by creating newer rigid categories. In his foray into religion, Nash’s reach ultimately exceeded his grasp. Nash argued that the Great Awakening advanced a “shattering of the habit of obedience” (384), yet recent work on the role of religion and the Revolution has been much more nuanced, while still paying attention to social changes.⁹

Now that he is being feted on the thirtieth anniversary of *The Urban Crucible*, Nash might take up a new challenge: to put down his arms (nicked after plenty of fights with his critics) and reflect on where early American urban history might go. The first step would be for scholars to take the core of Nash’s arguments as a given: we should capture the lives of as broad a spectrum of historical actors as possible; we should study conflicts and not just stultifying myths and consensus; and we should pay attention to radical, alternative movements where they unfold—even those that failed—and preferably integrate those movements into the larger story.

With these shared goals, historians could take advantage of this particularly promising moment to revisit the early American city. New technology, methodology, and evidence will allow for new revelations amid the economic and demographic data. The fields of Atlantic and global history encourage us to link the American cities—nodes in the global net-

⁷ Seth Rockman, “Review Essay: Work in the Cities of Colonial British America,” *Journal of Urban History* 33 (July 2007): 1021–32, esp. 1027–28.

⁸ Gouverneur Morris to Thomas Penn, May 20, 1774, in Jared Sparks, *The Life of Gouverneur Morris, with Selections from his Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers . . . In Three Volumes* (Boston, 1832), 1:24.

⁹ Charles W. Akers, review, *New England Quarterly* 53 (1980): 259–61.

works of trade, migration, and ideas—with developments abroad. Cultural studies (especially work on consumption, language, memory, and identity) provide us with new vectors for evaluating city dwellers, their modes of thought, and their daily activity. The cities will continue to provide valuable perspectives on the issue of inequality, as places where power differentials and diversity (ethnic, religious, cultural, ideological, and socioeconomic) made themselves most apparent. The cities were also aggregations of buildings and material objects, and so environmental history, material culture, geography, cartography, archaeology, and art and architectural history have given us new ways of thinking about the physicality of urban places. Finally, then as now, the cities were engines of change; advances in the study of institutions, political power struggles, political culture, and popular religion would surely give new dimensions to the themes Nash tapped thirty years ago.

All this scholarship would potentially be grist for Nash's mill if he were to take up the study of the city today. Scholars on the trail of this subject have always appreciated Nash for the evidence he compiled and the argument he articulated. Early American urban history—and the broader study of early America—will continue to flourish so long as we keep in mind the key insights that were first fired in *The Urban Crucible*.

Tufts University

BENJAMIN L. CARP