

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Folsom, Burton W., Jr. *Urban Capitalists: Entrepreneurs and City Growth in Pennsylvania's Lackawanna and Lehigh Regions, 1800-1920*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981. Pp. xiv, 191. Tables, photos, maps.

Edward J. Davies, II

Volume 11, Number 3, February 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019029ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019029ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Davies, E. J. (1983). Review of [Folsom, Burton W., Jr. *Urban Capitalists: Entrepreneurs and City Growth in Pennsylvania's Lackawanna and Lehigh Regions, 1800-1920*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981. Pp. xiv, 191. Tables, photos, maps.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 11(3), 90–92. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019029ar>

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1983

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

use of oral testimony, by a man of whom Samuel in his foreword delights in telling us “his only professional qualifications ... are a failure to get ‘A’ level history.”

Through Harding’s words, Samuel relays an exceptionally vivid picture of life in a small, labyrinthine pocket of streets in Bethnal Green, much of it corroborated by the editor’s extensive cross-checking of contemporary sources. Among the most striking impressions conveyed is that of the almost Asiatic compress and traffic of bodies – the houses, yards and alleyways teemed with people (and not a few cows!). Remarkable too is the account of the complex permutations and contingencies of the mixed economy forced upon the poor in the low wage, overstocked, casual labour market of the East End. The Harding clan were relatively well placed in the drink and retail trades, but a combination of ill health and fecklessness drove Arthur’s immediate family into destitution. As a youngster, he was soon streetwise, passing almost imperceptibly from cadging, scavenging and odd jobs, to pilfering and petty crime. At sixteen, in the first of several spells in gaol, Harding perfected his criminal techniques, strong-arm style and knowledge of the law. Outside he picked pockets, passed counterfeit money, ran protection rackets, organized scabs and recruited street bullies for Mosley. On the one hand crime is represented as mundane. It is an inescapable and unremarkable occupational expedient – “to survive you’d got to swindle someone.” On the other hand it is part of a passionate nexus of loyalty and hatred, generosity and betrayal that enmeshed criminals, police and “ordinary” citizen alike. The “glamour of poverty” is a spurious, almost obscene concept, invoked only at a distance, but in the immediacy of Harding’s recollections slum life does take on the vibrancy of melodrama. Moreover this is not simply the nostalgia of hindsight but, paradoxically, an essential element in the book’s social realism.

No more than a half mile south of Harding’s domain lay the Rothschild Buildings, a model tenement built for the immigrant Jewish poor by the Four Per Cent Industrial Dwellings Company, “the ugly offspring of a reluctant paternalism,” as White puts it. Though bleak and barracks-like, the buildings represented a distinct advance in comfort and amenity over the rookeries and rough lodging houses that lay at their doorsteps. White provides a detailed reconstruction of life in this “island community,” its family and neighbourhood dynamics and, again, the various expedients of a mixed economy that countered the exigencies of poverty (and make nonsense of the frozen occupational categories of the decennial census). Readers of both books might care to speculate why White’s Jews none the less eschewed crime, whereas many of their co-religionists were deeply involved in Harding’s twilight world where crime and everyday life were interwoven. This is only one of the important questions raised by White’s sensitive consideration of both

complementary and competing determinants in tenement life – occupational, class and racial – over two or more generations, as Rothschild’s inmates lived out a telescoped version of the modern Jewish experience from the ghetto to a new diaspora.

We have there then two closely textured accounts of the relationships between social networks and the physical and economic constraints and opportunities of the urban village and its compelling sub-cultures, set within the *locus classicus* of contemporary social commentary and class anxiety, East End London. For the urban and social historian, there are rich pickings across the whole field of class and popular culture, and a ready-made exercise for themselves and their students in a comparative study with other notable personal and imaginative accounts of contemporary slum life – Robert Roberts’ *Classic Slum* and Arthur Morrison’s *Child of the Jago* in particular invite attention. Meanwhile, we can look forward to a companion volume from Samuel that will place Harding’s narrative more tightly in the local social context as well as the more general political economy of crime. On the evidence of White’s work, suggests Samuel, every street could be the subject of a book. Though one winces at the thought, these well-crafted works do much to advance the claims of local (and oral) history, and certainly justify the experiential rationale of the History Workshop.

Peter Bailey
Department of History
University of Manitoba

Folsom, Burton W., Jr. *Urban Capitalists: Entrepreneurs and City Growth in Pennsylvania’s Lackawanna and Lehigh Regions, 1800-1920*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981. Pp.xiv, 191. Tables, photos, maps.

Bold guys finish first, asserts Professor Folsom in his study of urban growth and leadership in the Lehigh and Lackawanna Valleys in eastern Pennsylvania during the years 1800 through 1920. Folsom effectively challenges social scientists who argue that environmental determinism is the key to understanding urbanization, not the individual. Folsom convincingly demonstrates that entrepreneurs overcame a lack of locational and initial advantages and even the absence of critical resources to promote city growth and an integrated urban order in the two regions.

Within the Lackawanna and Lehigh valleys, Folsom concentrates on the rise of Scranton and South Bethlehem as economic centres in their respective regions. Neither city had locational or initial advantages. In fact, both were founded long after settlement had begun in their valleys.

Both cities also had to import critical resources to sustain their vital industry, iron- and steel-making. The key to the success of Scranton and South Bethlehem was in the aggressiveness of their entrepreneurs.

In the Lackawanna Valley, the urban leaders ventured all their capital to create a thriving manufacturing industry which became the basis of Scranton. They also capitalized on nearby anthracite deposits to market coal in upstate New York. This success attracted entrepreneurs from other communities in the valley and the small commercial towns in northeastern Pennsylvania. Flexible and determined, the city's founders welcomed these newcomers whose capital, talent and technological innovation helped make Scranton the largest city in northeastern Pennsylvania by the 1870s.

South Bethlehem also relied on an aggressive leadership to overcome similar disadvantages. The origins of South Bethlehem can be traced to the locational problems of Mauch Chunk, situated at the headwaters of the Lehigh River. Led by ambitious men such as Asa Packer, Mauch Chunk's leaders had established profitable mining operations, salvaged a failing railroad and transformed the community into the economic hub of the Lehigh Valley by the 1860s. But, hemmed in by mountains, Mauch Chunk offered no room for expansion, despite the large financial and economic resources of its entrepreneurs. In response, Packer and his colleagues began to transfer operations to South Bethlehem in the centre of the valley astride the Lehigh River. The move was risky, however, since the new city would have to compete with the older and more established communities of Bethlehem, Allentown and Easton.

Despite these obstacles, Packer and his fellow entrepreneurs persevered and South Bethlehem became the industrial hub of the Lehigh Valley by the 1870s. The city grew rapidly after Packer made it the headquarters of his Lehigh Valley Railroad and built the thriving Bethlehem Steel Company within the city boundaries. Packer and his colleagues also brought huge amounts of capital which fuelled South Bethlehem's early growth.

As a regional study, Folsom's book also investigates the other communities in the Lackawanna and Lehigh valleys, for the rise of Scranton and South Bethlehem can only be understood in relation to neighbouring cities and towns. Long before Scranton achieved pre-eminence, leaders in older communities of northeastern Pennsylvania had similar hopes for greatness. In the early 1800s, commercial entrepreneurs had established a series of small commercial towns to capitalize on the growing agricultural base and newly constructed transportation routes. Entrepreneurs in Towanda, Montrose and Dundaff set up stores, taverns, grist and sawmills and even small factories, all of which attracted labour, capital and talent.

The development of coal-mining in the Lackawanna Valley and, specifically, the rise of Carbondale in the 1820s as a major industrial centre dashed the hopes of these men. The hub of an outside-financed anthracite industry, Carbondale drew population and capital away from the commercial towns and by 1850 became the largest city in northeastern Pennsylvania. Despite its initial advantage and excellent location at the terminus of the Delaware and Hudson Canal, the city eventually lost out to Scranton. Folsom makes clear that a weak economic élite, outside control of industry and an unattractive environment doomed Carbondale to a subordinate position in the new urban hierarchy Scranton built after 1850. As the author points out, the regional hub drained Carbondale of its capital and talent. By the 1870s, Scranton's leaders had taken control of many of the economic activities in Carbondale and most of the cities and towns in the valley.

In the Lehigh Valley, South Bethlehem benefited from the lack of entrepreneurial ability in the competing cities. Urban élites in the valley were more interested in preserving cultural, religious and educational institutions than in venturing out into the risky iron and steel business. In Easton, for example, the entrepreneurs were content with the commercial advantages the city enjoyed on the Delaware River and as the main point of contact with Philadelphia. In the Bethlehem, the German Moravian leadership eschewed industry and profits as a matter of principle. At first, this reluctance worked to the advantage of South Bethlehem, its nearby rival. But, as Folsom argues, its leadership later succumbed to this lethargy as well. After 1870, money was poured into Lehigh University and other cultural and social institutions, rather than industry. Following the death of Asa Packer in 1870, the enterprising spirit went out of South Bethlehem's élite.

Only with the arrival of Charles Schwab from U.S. Steel, did entrepreneurial aggressiveness return to South Bethlehem. Schwab took over Bethlehem Steel, reinvigorated the company, and, consequently, promoted urban growth throughout the region. By 1920, corporate leaders had successfully promoted consolidation of Bethlehem and South Bethlehem and transformed their new city into a co-regional centre along with adjacent Allentown.

Folsom demonstrates that the successes of the Scranton and South Bethlehem élites were short lived. Neither group persisted into the twentieth century. Lack of talent, out-migration and the splintering of family fortunes undermined the integrity of these élites. The aggressive spirit in the older families was gone by 1920. For Scranton, the deletion of talent was disastrous in the face of challenges by outside corporations which took over most of the local markets and forced many of the valley companies out of business. At the same time, the anthracite industry collapsed leaving Scranton totally unprepared to confront the hard times of the Depression.

Folsom's book is a valuable contribution to the scholarly literature on the city. First, he convincingly refutes social science theories as sole explanations for growth. The study demonstrates that communities with both initial advantage and excellent locations often fared poorly because of inadequate leadership while aggressive entrepreneurs were the key to success in other cities which en-

joyed none of these advantages. Folsom also moves away from the single-community study and focuses our attention on the broader regional society where the interplay of élites is critical in determining the fate of cities.

Edward J. Davies, II
University of Utah