

## ***Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward: Constructing a Website for Student Research***

Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, M.A.  
Webmaster and Site Editor  
Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward

*“Here, in a small space, is a land value running in the millions, whilst the events that have occurred upon the 29 acres under immediate consideration, would fill volumes. The aim of this series is to rescue some of them from obscurity.”*

J. Howard Wert, 1912

Educator and journalist J. Howard Wert wrote the quote above in his introduction to a series of newspaper articles intended to document the passing of Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward after it had been slated for destruction by the Pennsylvania state government.<sup>1</sup> By the time this first article appeared in a local Harrisburg newspaper in November 1912, the ethnically and racially diverse community laying to the immediate east of the state capitol building, known as the Eighth Ward, was being demolished. In his thirty-four subsequent articles, Wert attempted to secure the history and folklore of the ward from, what he called, “obscurity.”

The Eighth Ward fell victim to city reformers who were trying to modernize and bolster Harrisburg's position as Pennsylvania's capital city. Reformers, such as J. Horace McFarland, campaigned against this community, claiming it detracted from the beauty and grandeur of the new state capitol completed in 1906.<sup>2</sup> By 1912, the state government had approved a plan to extend the capitol complex, and the ward became literally extinct around 1920, as the over 500 properties which comprised it were systematically purchased and razed by the state to make way

---

1 J. Howard Wert, “Early History of the Old Eighth Ward,” *The Harrisburg Patriot*, 18 November 1912, as quoted in Michael Barton and Jessica Dorman, eds., *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2002), 21. I would like to thank Michael Barton, a steady friend and mentor, for trusting my vision for the *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* website and allowing me the opportunity to work alongside him on the Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward Project. I would also like to thank my children, Georgie and Tommy, and my husband, Harlon, for their patience while I was glued to my laptop during the major construction of the *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* website.

2 William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 141.

for the Capitol Park Extension.<sup>3</sup> Although myths about the “Bloody Eighth” continued to circulate among Harrisburgers throughout the twentieth century, Wert’s attempts to salvage the ward from obscurity proved unsuccessful as all but a few of the ward’s stories were buried by the same soil and concrete that covered the physical remains of the neighborhood after demolition.

For the most part, the individual residents of Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward were forgotten until recently. Before the advent of the “new history,” the people who lived in the ward were exactly those people whom historians overlooked, deeming them insignificant. In the Eighth, first and second-generation immigrants walked the same streets as former Southern slaves and “native” Americans. Most residents lived in shoddy tenements crammed one beside the other, which they shared with several other large working-class families. Although small-scale entrepreneurship was prevalent in the neighborhood, a majority of the residents were tradesmen, laborers, and factory workers. Frequent changes in occupations and domiciles were common, giving a sense that numerous people in the ward lived unsettled and uncertain lives. Residents worked, shopped, socialized, worshiped, and slept within the confines of the ward, making their sphere of existence seem rather small by twenty-first century standards.<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps appropriate then that the Old Eighth Ward is currently being reconstructed on the World Wide Web, the very technology many credit for making the world seem a much smaller place.

*Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward* website, found at [www.old8thward.com](http://www.old8thward.com), is an interpretative digital history website designed to showcase the story of Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward. In an article in the *Journal for the Association of History and Computing*, John Lee defined interpretative digital history websites as sites that “contain some description, explanation, analysis, and/or evaluation of historical primary sources as well as original digital

---

<sup>3</sup> Barton, *Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> These generalizations have been drawn from Eighth Ward research that has already been completed and appears on the website’s Resident Directory tables that can be accessed at <http://www.old8thward.com/residentdir.html>.

historical narrative or analytical works.”<sup>5</sup> The Eighth website strives to document the development and destruction of the neighborhood, which existed roughly between 1820 and 1920, while discovering individual personal histories of the people who lived there. The Eighth Ward website joins other social history projects currently online in their efforts to “build and restore a history of previously overlooked people.”<sup>6</sup>

My first exposure to Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward came in early 2004 when I was a graduate student in one of Michael Barton’s seminars at Penn State Harrisburg. In his seminars, Professor Barton exposes students to primary source research at local archives, encouraging them to delve into Eighth Ward topics. Although Barton had originally intended to publish a book of student essays on the ward as a companion piece to his book, *Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward*, I realized that such a work would provide a very limited picture of the neighborhood and that a more accommodating format was needed in order to offer a more detailed view of the ward and its residents to readers. After completing the class, I convinced Professor Barton that a website, which would have the flexibility to grow as new research became available and the ability to publish all student research papers, was the appropriate method of disseminating Eighth Ward research.

I undertook the total design and creation of the *Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward* website as an independent study during the fall of 2004. Professor Barton handed over his Eighth Ward files to me, and I began the task of organizing the data into categories that would later become pages on the website. The visual design of the site, which features tones of gray, black, and

---

5 John K. Lee, “Principles for Interpretative Digital History Web Design,” *Journal of the Association for History and Computing* 5, no. 3 (2002), 1, as accessed at <http://mcel.pacificu.edu/JAHC/JAHCV3/K-12/lee.html> on 15 May 2005.

6 William G. Thomas, “In the Valley of the Shadow: Communities and History in the American Civil War,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, (September 1998), 2, accessed at <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/thomas.vmhb.html> on 3 June 2005.

white, was chosen to complement the coarse images of the Eighth that have survived, and the lack of website “bells and whistles” was intentional. I wanted the photographs and texts to take center stage, not the web design. My website development skills are self-taught, but I was able to synthesize the information, which included hundreds of photographs, student research papers, census data, and maps, into a comprehensive working website that included all information on the ward available at that time.

My goal was to present the research in such a way that it would communicate the milieu of the Eighth to those unfamiliar with nineteenth-century, urban neighborhoods and/or Harrisburg, while providing scholars with primary and secondary source information. To accomplish this, many original background articles, picture captions, and introductory texts had to be researched and written. In addition, every tidbit of information contained within the student papers had to be extracted and placed into business, institution, and resident directories that could provide an inclusive look at individual streets and industries. Nearly every one of the student papers currently on the site had to be standardized, expanded, and professionalized. Most papers did not attempt to contextualize or analyze the data contained within them, and adding these has been the most time-consuming portion of the editorial process. Further, the nearly two-hundred photographs in Barton’s files had to be scanned, edited, properly identified, and placed on the site so that they conveyed an overall visual concept of what the ward once looked like. Before even a quarter of this work was finished, I had completed the hours necessary to fulfill my independent study, but I continued to develop the site and went on to log hundreds of additional hours of work by the time my original plan was achieved. When the website went live in January 2005, it numbered nearly 200 individual pages on which visitors can now find interactive maps, street directories, student research, photographs, and much more.

Websites are uniquely suited for history projects like Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward. Because they can be easily updated and can accommodate large amounts of data, websites allow ongoing projects to grow as new information becomes available, and they can handle the level of complexity required of doing social history well. Edward Ayers, the director of the *Valley of the Shadow* project and digital history pioneer, believes that "history may be better suited to digital technology than any other humanistic discipline."<sup>7</sup> Traditional modes of publication, such as printed books and journals, are static in nature. Once printed, these publications become dead, so to speak, and the cost of producing subsequent editions prevents these texts from evolving. Publication costs and word counts place limits on what can be presented in either of these formats. Even exhaustive footnotes and appendices cannot begin to complicate the historical picture beyond "a fraction of the complexity of the past," according to Ayers.<sup>8</sup> Projects such as the *Valley of the Shadow* and *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* have unlimited growth potential as new research is conducted and alternative avenues are explored. The Eighth Ward project expands each academic semester as graduate students uncover more history on the ward and its residents. Print media simply cannot accommodate such frequent additions of information and would be incomplete, and therefore, inadequate for such a project. Websites, however, can be added to and updated almost instantaneously, allowing historians to present new information as it reaches their hands.

Moreover, websites offer the ability to fuse the variety of data available on projects, such as Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward, into a comprehensible and interactive presentation. The flexibility of web development software allows history to be shared "in a unique and highly

---

<sup>7</sup> Edward L. Ayers, "The Pasts and Futures of Digital History," (1999), 1, accessed at <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/PastsFutures.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Ayers, "Pasts and Futures of Digital History," 2.

integrated format” on the World Wide Web.<sup>9</sup> For example, the *Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward* website features a virtual walking tour of the ward. After viewing a plat map of the neighborhood, a visitor can click on various places and be taken to period photographs of those locations accompanied by explanatory texts. These explanatory texts often contain additional links that will take visitors to street or business directories or related photographs. By following links throughout the site, visitors are transported around the community and can explore it as if they were walking around the neighborhood. Presenting history in ways such as this “allows for a more . . . non-linear approach to historical interpretation.”<sup>10</sup> Visitors are able to interact with the information they are reading in a highly dynamic way and can create their own unique texts as they link through the website instead of having to follow the pre-determined path of an author. At this time, only digital media can link readers to historical texts from multiple paths, giving them the opportunity to examine a narrative in a more involved way.

Because the World Wide Web is truly global, history websites have the potential to reach far more people than other modes of publication. The Eighth Ward website showcases our research to millions of potential visitors for relatively low operating costs, and like most other history websites, there is no fee for web surfers to use our site. Making history available to all people is essential, and I have kept this in mind as I created the Eighth Ward website. Although urban history scholars will hopefully find the site useful in their quest for new data, the website has been designed to allow anyone, from a family genealogist to an acclaimed historian, to access and understand its content. By reaching such diverse and large audiences, digital history

---

9 Jessica Lacher-Feldman, “Presenting Historical Resources Information on the World Wide Web: A Case Study of the Development of the New York State Office of Cultural Education’s Website and the OCE History Advisory Council History Resources Web Pages,” *Journal of the Association for History and Computing* 5, no. 3 (1999), 2, accessed at <http://www.mcel.pacificu.edu/JAHC/JAHCII2/LACHER-FELDMAN/Lacherindex.html.HTML> on 15 May 2005.

10 Lee, “Principles for Interpretive Digital History Web Design,” 2.

websites are “democratizing the practice of history.”<sup>11</sup> Without having to travel beyond their own home or institution, anyone with an interest in a particular history topic can find primary source information presented on websites such as ours simply by performing a web search.

Although articles such as this will expose the website to other scholars, search engines such as Google.com will publicize the website to everyone else. The *Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward* website has been indexed by numerous search engines and utilizes Google.com’s whole-site search interface to allow visitors to quickly query the entire website by keywords. Recently the site received an email from Australia in regards to a resident who appears on a street directory. The sender had simply googled the name and found the site, which provided the sender with information to which he would never have had access without traveling to Harrisburg. This Australian provided insight about these same ancestors to me, clarifying the relationship between several ward residents that was previously unknown. Digital technologies, specifically the existence of the Eighth Ward website and the marvel of email, facilitated this global exchange of information between reader and author, allowing each to obtain a better understanding that would not have occurred otherwise. Such reader-author interaction is again, another advantage of presenting history on the World Wide Web.

Other history websites provided some guidance in the development of *Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward* website. The most influential site, the *Valley of the Shadow*, administered through the University of Virginia, explores two counties on opposite sides of the Civil War conflict and has been online for about ten years.<sup>12</sup> This site seeks to explore the individual histories of the residents living in the two counties covered in the study and strives to explore the “meaning of community” during the war by exposing the “connections and complexities” between residents

---

11 Lee, “Principles for Interpretive Digital History Web Design,” 2.

12 The *Valley of the Shadow* website can be accessed at <http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu>.

throughout the war period.<sup>13</sup> The *Valley* website has been heavily funded and staffed and covers a period of American history that is highly exposed, permitting it to present a vast amount of public documents and first-hand accounts, such as diaries and letters, to its audience.

Looking at community is also an essential goal of the Eighth Ward website. Understanding where residents came from, how they interacted with one another, and where they moved will undoubtedly lead to a broader appreciation of the neighborhood. Community is built through small actions—buying meat from the local butcher, playing baseball in the street, sharing a church pew with neighbors. Unfortunately, first-hand accounts written by persons living in the ward are nonexistent (or have not been discovered), so this community's interactions will have to be examined through other means. Establishing patterns of residency, employment, and ethnicity are some of the first goals of the website, and these are slowly being realized as the ward's streets are being re-populated. What we do know about the ward three years into the project is vastly outweighed by what we do not know.

Covering the time frame of the ward, which spans nearly 100 years, is made even more difficult because as of June 2005 our project and website had no funding. In-depth research projects and the development of more elaborate web features are put aside for now in favor of gathering basic demographic information. The ward's population must be rebuilt using census data, city directories, and other public records, which is a time-consuming process fraught with problems. For example, women have been difficult to locate within the ward using city directories. The city directories focused on heads of household and those who were employed. Most married women and all young children are absent from their pages. Although entire households can be reconstituted using United States Federal Census records, they are only available every ten years.

---

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, "In the Valley of the Shadow," 1.



Using the city directories to enumerate the entire Eighth Ward population between 1881 and 1899 has been especially problematic because the 1890 census for most portions of the country was destroyed, including Harrisburg. The gender split for Pennsylvania, according to the federal census report for 1890, is forty-nine percent women and fifty-one percent men.<sup>14</sup> However, the women on the 400 block of Walnut Street in the Eighth, for example, are grossly underrepresented in 1890 because of their exclusion in the city directories. Student research in the city directories has women accounting for only twenty percent of the street's population in 1890, so if this is representative of what is found on other streets, the project will eventually be missing large portions of its adult female population despite our best efforts.<sup>15</sup> This, however, is not the worst scenario; enumerating young children who lived in the Eighth Ward during this same period is nearly impossible.

Eventually, the Eighth Ward website should be able to address the major themes of the nineteenth century, such as immigration, industrialization, modernization, and urbanization, on a microcosmic level. Patterns have emerged from the research that has already been completed. The neighborhood was affected by migration and immigration, which altered the face of the community over its lifetime. Although certain European immigrant populations seem to have replaced one another, the African-American community remained a steady presence. As factories entered the ward's economy, certain independently-owned businesses began to decline. Other occupations, such as butchering and baking, seem to have been monopolized by a few

---

14 *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*, Volume 1, Part II (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1897), 78-79, accessed at [http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1890a\\_v1p2-08.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1890a_v1p2-08.pdf) on 1 June 2005. For this purpose, children under fourteen were considered young children.

15 Walnut Street data was taken from Paul MacPhee, "The 400 Block of Walnut Street in Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward, 1890-1893," (2005), accessed at <http://www.old8thward.com/pdf/MacPhea2005.pdf> on 5 June 2005.

individuals and newcomers were pushed out quickly.<sup>16</sup> Efforts to keep up with Harrisburg's growing urban population in terms of sanitation and other services seems to have led to the ward's ultimate demise. Other questions, such as whether the ward actually deserved its reputation for debauchery or whether the ward's residents attempted to reconstitute their neighborhoods after the passing of the Eighth, are yet to be answered.

But for all the troubles involved with researching a neighborhood like the Eighth Ward and presenting that work on a website, the project thus far has been extremely rewarding and promises to continue to be so. Through this project, Professor Barton's graduate students have been exposed to archival research and local history in order to produce scholarly papers, an experience many have had for the first time in his seminars. These students have begun to understand the wealth of American history yet to be uncovered, much of which can be found within community archives, by their participation in this project. In addition, the inclusion of their papers on the Eighth Ward website has given most of them their first publication credit on their curricula vitas. Professor Barton has been able to share his students' work on the Eighth Ward with a broader audience than he previously imagined and has received a crash course in what digital technology can do for historical research.

As for me, my graduation from Penn State Harrisburg has not ended my involvement with the Eighth Ward, and I continue to develop the website and to research the ward on a volunteer basis. *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward* website keeps growing as new history is offered to the public. Several design ideas for the site, such as the inclusion of lesson plans and the creation of individual resident profiles, have only begun to be implemented. In fact, the site may

---

<sup>16</sup> See John D. Myers' "The Butcher Shops of Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward, 1860-1916" and Stephanie Patterson Gilbert's "Bakers and Confectioners of Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward, 1890-1917," which can both be found later in this issue and on the Student Research page of the Eighth Ward website, accessed at <http://www.old8thward.com/research.html>.

never reach completion, and that is, perhaps, one of the most valuable parts of the project. As a researcher, the ward continuously challenges me to seek new sources in order to flesh out the story told on the website, a fulfilling, if not slightly obsessive pursuit. I can only hope that one day the site will be as document-rich and inclusive as other digital history sites, such as the *Valley of the Shadow*. But for now, I have the satisfaction of knowing that the website has realized the most important reason for doing research on the neighborhood—that of rescuing the Old Eighth Ward’s residents from obscurity by giving them a voice on the World Wide Web.