Introduction: A Worm's Eye View

SPECIAL ISSUE
Early Cities of the Americas

Baltimore | Boston | Charleston | Chicago | Havana

| Lima | Los Angeles | Mexico City | New Amsterdam | New Orleans
Paramaribo | Philadelphia | Potosi | Quebec City | Salt Lake City
Saint Louis | Santa Fe | San Francisco | Washington, D.C.

This special issue of *Common-place* on the early cities of the Americas offers several opportunities. First, the nineteen individual essays invite *Common-place* readers to make comparisons about the character of life in the early years of cities spread throughout the Americas—south to north, from Lima, Peru, to Quebec City, Canada; and east to west from Boston to Los Angeles. By adopting an Americas-wide approach, we hope to stimulate your thinking about comparisons among Spanish, English, Dutch, and French cities. Almost one third of the featured cities were Spanish (two of which, Los Angeles and Santa Fe, are now American cities). Three of these cities were French at the time of their founding (two of them, St. Louis and New Orleans, are now American cities). Two were Dutch (New Amsterdam is now New York). It will surprise many

readers that two of these Spanish cities—Potosi and Tenochtitlan/Mexico City—attained populations of 150,000 or more, a scale that put them near the top of a list of the world's most populous cities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some others, such as Lima, were larger in the mid-sixteenth century than Boston and Philadelphia in the age of Jefferson. None of North America's urban villages would reach the population levels of the major cities of Spanish America until well into the nineteenth century.

Second, though these nineteen cities were founded, variously, over a very long period of time—from about 1500 to 1860—they were each very young cities at the point where our authors examine them. Some of the adolescent cities our authors look at were very small indeed; Boston, New Amsterdam, Quebec, St. Louis, Havana, Paramaribo, and Washington, D.C., were really only overgrown villages, not even attaining populations of ten thousand, at the point we paint their portrait. Our attempt is to look at the dynamics of urban life when these cities were in their second generation or so from founding: a moment when they were by no means fully formed; yet a point by which they had acquired characteristics that continued to shape them for a long time.

Third, our authors have consciously adopted an untraditional approach to urban history, illustrating the social, legal, and political workings of these young urban societies by writing about a particular incident, a place, an encounter, a person, or a group of urban people. Think of these essays as worm's eye views: moments in the early history of each city that convey the feel what it was like to live in these places hundreds of years ago. For example, Claudia L. Bushman and Richard Lyman Bushman ask readers to stand in the cemetery in Salt Lake City where Dick Bushman's grandparents are buried. Joyce D. Goodfriend introduces us to New Amsterdam with the story of an African father who is bringing his newborn twins to the Dutch Reformed Church in 1647 to be baptized. In another case, Christine Hunefeldt shows us Lima, Peru, as María Dolores Quispilloc and her husband Antonio Martínez entered the city on a mule in the early 1760s. And Billy G. Smith has the indentured servant William Moraley take us on a tour of Philadelphia in 1729, when the city founded by Quakers in the 1680s had attained a population of about seven thousand. In all the essays, vignettes of this sort lead us into considerations of the dynamics of urban political life, of cities' economic workings, their cultural efflorescence, and, especially, the social relations that city life fostered between man and woman, master and slave, parent and child, employer and worker, priest and parishioner, plaintiff and defendant.

It needs remembering that these early cities were all founded in overwhelmingly agricultural societies where the hoe and horse, the field and the farmhouse, and the rhythms of life followed sidereal rather than clock time. Yet cities were the cutting edge of change in the early Americas. It was there that almost all the alterations associated with the advent of modern society first occurred and then slowly radiated outward to the small farming communities of the hinterland. In the early cities of the Americas, people first made the transition from a predominantly oral to a largely written culture, from a

medieval economy where most transactions were regulated with an eye to the public good to a market economy where entrepreneurial freedom privileged the individual over the group, from a social order where status assigned at birth was displaced by a competitive scramble for rank, from a community-centered to an individual-centered orientation, from a hierarchical and deferential polity to a participatory and contentious civic life, from a deeply religious to a more secularized outlook.

Readers will learn about several elements of early urban life in the Americas that were ever present: violence, racial fluidity, and disease. As we worry about SARS and the possible reappearance of smallpox as killer epidemics, ravaging diseases that have always flourished in urban settings because of population density, we can put our concerns in historical perspective and see how modern medicine has mitigated, if not eliminated, one of the most lethal aspects of early urban life in the Americas. And of course today, we worry about urban violence, and rightly so. But reading these essays cannot but help readers gain some historical perspective on this modern condition. By seeing how violent were the early cities, where no such thing as the modern police force existed to dampen urban vice, we can quickly set aside romantic notions of a simpler and more placid quality of life.

Finally, as several of the essays show, racial slavery was a major part of urban violence in the Western hemisphere, and vice versa. Richard Price's chilling description of what he calls "a veritable theater of terror" in early Paramaribo, Suriname, is another reminder of how brutal life was in the early modern era. In other essays, including those on New Amsterdam, Tenochtitlan, Potosi, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and St. Louis, readers will get vivid portraits of the mingling of peoples from Africa, Europe, and the Americas at a time when the concept of "race" was still forming (and indeed when the main use of the word was to describe contests of speed). It is much to our benefit, in a day of rapidly rising interracial marriage, to revisit early cities when this was not unusual or thought improper.

As readers will discern, life experiences in the early cities of the Americas varied widely depending on climate, religion, racial composition, and other factors. Life in early Lima and early Boston, for example, was not the same. A Spanish Catholic and Indian mountain mining town such as Potosi and a river-oriented, Quaker-dominated commercial town such as Philadelphia were worlds apart. Readers are invited to make contrasts and comparisons. In the "strange new world," as Europeans often described the Americas they reached in the late fifteenth century, urban societies developed along a variety of trajectories that these essays begin to explore.

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