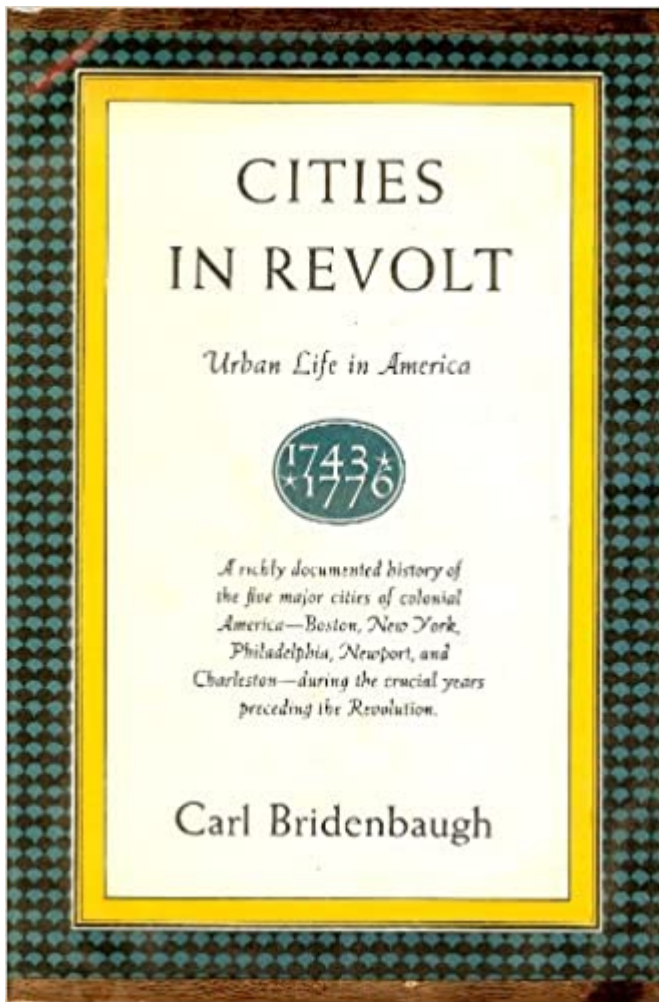


## Cities in Review



Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1938. 500 pp.

Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1955. 526 pp.

Re-reading by Benjamin L. Carp

The act of giving Carl Bridenbaugh's *Cities* volumes another look is unlike a similar exercise for, say, *White Over Black* or *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Neither of the *Cities* works will ever be the proverbial "book I read in grad school." No pair of current graduate students will sip beer at the AHA ten years from now and reminisce about the nights they slogged through a thousand pages of sewage, turtle frolics, and underwriters. Few professors, even among the harshest comps directors, would be so cruel and exacting. Nevertheless, the two books will long continue to stare up at scholarly texts from the footnotes, and their merit in that respect is worthy of historians' renewed notice.

The principal reason why we should continue to read Bridenbaugh's books, after

all, is their encyclopedic coverage of British America's five largest cities—Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston—over a 150-year period. *Cities in the Wilderness (CW)* and *Cities in Revolt (CR)* present a comprehensive overview of the cities' growth, economic conditions, urban problems, society, and cultural ferment. Bridenbaugh covers a staggering scope of material, impossible to delineate fully. Suffice it to say, however, that the two volumes contain everything you ever wanted to know (and sometimes more) about the problems of porcine infestation, quack practitioners, and retailing at auction. Though such topics may seem trivial, together the details give one a vivid sensory experience of the city dwellers' worlds. Bridenbaugh delves into his subjects' minds to illuminate their inspirations, resentments, and civic pride, even as he studiously chronicles the drier elements of urban regulations, economic patterns, and demography. There are surprising gems even in the indices, where one finds "Nothingarians," Ezra Stiles's handy term for the irreligious. Organizing these vast piles of evidence (and providing generous footnotes so that readers can track them down) was Bridenbaugh's most impressive achievement. One need not read the books from cover to cover to benefit from their findings. Bridenbaugh adheres to a strict organizational regimen, allowing readers to find with ease all references to fuel procurement or religion.

In some ways, the cities Bridenbaugh chronicles were nothing special in their day. They owed their growth to physical advantages that fostered trade, they gradually developed specialized economic functions and crafts, and they did their best to ward off fire, crime, vice, poverty, and disease. They had multiple taverns, public buildings, houses of worship, mobs, sophisticated entertainment, and intellectual opportunities—and while these factors differentiated them from the countryside, they were unexceptionable in Europe. The cities did, according to Bridenbaugh, have some uniquely American characteristics. They lacked the traditions and inherited aristocracy of European cities. Instead, especially in New England, new traditions of town government helped raise revenue, build infrastructure, and solve urban problems—often more efficiently than their Old World counterparts. Their rapid progress was remarkable. The North American cities contained diverse populations whose religious beliefs (or level of religious belief), ethnic and racial backgrounds, and social class achieved a variety that would have been less familiar back East. They dealt with wars, economic downturn, debt, taxation, imperial unrest, and eventually a revolt against the British crown. Urban associations and intercity alliances comprised a social capital (though the author did not use this term) allowing the American cities to meet these economic and political challenges. Bridenbaugh put forth a model for early American urbanization (if not explicitly), and few scholars since have picked up the threads of his narrative.

Bridenbaugh's themes are worthy of consideration and debate among those interested in early America. The author charts the growth of the five cities from seaside villages to bustling towns to increasingly sizeable cities. Once they reach this extent, Bridenbaugh expresses his belief that for each city,

the sum was greater than its constituent parts. No mere aggregations of people, these communities cultivated a growing civic consciousness, responsibility, and power. In this respect, Bridenbaugh believes the North American cities were superior to European models in dealing with urban problems. Furthermore, the sum of colonial urban life became greater than the five cities themselves, as "Constant communication . . . served to forge these communities into an integrated urban society" (CR, 418). The American cities produced a shared, rich culture that depended upon their characteristic "interchange and companionship of social living" (CW, 464). With the cities' growing political awareness and new methods and ideas, Bridenbaugh celebrates them as the seedbeds of a nascent American identity, the Enlightenment in the New World, the American Revolution, and its concurrent social transformations.

Critics recognized many of these conclusions as grossly oversimplified or too narrowly applicable. While Bridenbaugh assures us that the cities diverged from the countryside in significant ways, he provides his readers with no way to make substantive comparisons between the culture of his cities and that of the Chesapeake region, the Appalachian backcountry, and the rest of rural America. While the author claims that *Cities in Revolt* is "not a history of the American Revolution" (vii), the conclusion of that volume contains a number of bold pronouncements about the events of that era. His final remarks about the Revolution are not necessarily incorrect; nevertheless, the conclusion feels as if the author tacked on arguments about the Revolution to the end of the book about urban life. These criticisms may be unfair. Many works of history, before and certainly after the publication of the *Cities* books, address the lingering questions that Bridenbaugh left unanswered. A macrohistory to shame all microhistories, the author undertook a project of tremendous breadth and returned with a veritable treasure trove of vibrant detail.

A curious paradox strikes the reader of Bridenbaugh's books. In the introduction to *Cities in Revolt* the author announces his conviction "that it is people who make history" (vii), yet in a way there really aren't any people in the *Cities* books. Certainly a variety of characters, from Benjamin Franklin on down (as he saw it), flit in and out of these thousand pages. Printers became "civic leaders and molders of public opinion" (CR, 385). Lawyers "became indispensable in American cities" (CR, 95). Doctors and scientists disseminated their new discoveries. Seamen, limners, prostitutes, dancing masters, hawkers, booksellers, watchmen, schoolteachers, criminals, clergymen, scavengers, stray animals, immigrants, retailers, and artisans populate every page. Bridenbaugh drops familiar names such as Henry Laurens or George Whitefield as readily as he immortalizes more obscure ferrymen, tavernkeepers, and orphan apprentices. The five main characters in the *Cities* volumes, however, are Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. The cities themselves, as we chronicle their growth from infancy to maturity, take on a life of their own. One gets the impression of five driven schoolchildren in competition with one another to see who can build the strongest prisons, offer the widest variety of retail goods, and harbor the most musicians. Bridenbaugh applauds their achievements and scolds their lapses.

We encounter further difficulty with Bridenbaugh's books as we discover that his sources and his discussion skew heavily towards city dwellers from the uppermost social echelon. This elitism is sometimes difficult for the contemporary reader to stomach. He has a few too many disparaging references to "country yokels," and some of his remarks about women are needlessly chauvinistic. He calls blacks and Indians "the most dangerous threat to law and order," since both groups "more readily adopted the white man's vices than his virtues" (CW, 379). He utters such pronouncements as, "it is the upper classes who determine the characteristics of any society" (CW, 464), or "most members of both middle and lower classes in the towns accepted with cheerful awareness their assigned stations in life" (CW, 256). Whenever he discusses the urban poor, Bridenbaugh spuriously minimizes their numbers as well as their suffering, unless it is to praise elite overseers for taking care of them. Indeed, whenever he sees a colonial aristocrat rumble past in a carriage or announces a marriage of great families, Bridenbaugh is patently unable to contain his excitement.

In this celebration of urban life, the wealthiest city dwellers are eventually joined by members of what Bridenbaugh calls the middle class. Largely shopkeepers and artisans, this group plays a small role in *Cities in the Wilderness* and then assumes its revolutionary mantle of importance in the second book. By the middle of the eighteenth century they are "[b]y far the largest proportion of urban population" (CR, 146). He describes them as "[s]ensible, shrewd, frugal, ostentatiously moral, generally honest," public spirited, and upwardly mobile (CR, 147). Their economic strivings led to "democratic yearnings" (CR, 332) for political power, and the city's printers became their influential spokespersons—artisans who made sure that when a shot was heard, it would be heard 'round the world. The author both elevates the middle class and identifies its members with the Whig movement—they become the heroes of the prerevolutionary decade just as they were the putative heroes of the Eisenhower era in which Bridenbaugh wrote.

The merchants and printers, Bridenbaugh asserts, were primarily responsible for the intercolonial culture he discovers. Commerce prompted the important social and cultural interchanges of the eighteenth century. The merchants, as the engines turning that commerce, became the only "distinct social group" in the colonies with a common outlook. "Under their leadership the spirit of commerce pervaded the towns, infecting even the womenfolk and children" (CW, 340). By the 1760s and 1770s, the printers "developed a sense of common purpose equal to if not exceeding that of the colonial merchants" (CR, 391). Of course, as Gary Nash and Marcus Rediker remind us, the wheels of commerce could not have turned without the seamen of the Atlantic world. This group, too, formed an intercolonial social group with a common, distinct outlook. Such networks of colonists, inside and outside the cities, pervaded the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, and it is to Bridenbaugh's discredit that he focused so narrowly on the men of the counting houses and print shops. At the same time, the author's instincts were correct to emphasize the cities as the key points of exchange for these networks.

It may be unfair to criticize Bridenbaugh for his elitism; after all, in 1938 the *Social Register* held a lot less irony for academics than it does for us today. Nevertheless, such language will strike many historians as offensive as they recall [Bridenbaugh's ignominious presidential address](#) to the American Historical Association in 1962. In this address, Bridenbaugh not only repudiated what his cities (and society generally) had become, but inveighed against "urban-bred scholars," which his listeners interpreted as unseemly ethnic prejudice. This was a particularly incongruous thing for Bridenbaugh to say, given that he celebrated cosmopolitanism and disapproved of nativism when he found it among his historical subjects (*CW*, 477). Possibly the author internalized a few too many of Benjamin Franklin's screeds against immigration.

Bridenbaugh's AHA address as well as his *Cities* books evince a yearning for a bucolic, organic American society—one characterized by a growing consensus rather than fragmentation. Daniel Boorstin cites Bridenbaugh in the bibliography of *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1964) and mentions him in his acknowledgments. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Boorstin's counterprogressive, triumphalist history found its reflection in Bridenbaugh's *Cities* books. Look at how these pragmatic city fathers paved the streets and built architectural wonders! Look at how they developed a tight-knit sense of community amidst creeping urban problems! Look at how these budding villages ultimately came to rival the cities of Europe!

On the other hand, Bridenbaugh also spawned Boorstin's ideological adversaries in the New Social History (a phrase now as hoary as "New Coke"). Bridenbaugh paid attention to demography, economic cycles, participatory republicanism, artisans, women, workers, and slaves. Certainly many of his conclusions were simplistic, his aims descriptive rather than analytical, and his methods neither as quantitative nor as comprehensive as those of his successors. Still, in 1995 Alfred F. Young allowed that the *Cities* books were among the very best of the old social history monographs. Bridenbaugh paved the way for subsequent generations interested in social and cultural history, the everyday life of early Americans.

Whatever superlatives (or expletives) we might use, the fact remains that the *Cities* books are no longer in print. Although time and markets have dictated that this be the case, a glance around the field reveals that almost no book has given us reason to supplant Bridenbaugh entirely from our shelves. We have followed early American historians to the Maine frontier, around scores of New England villages, up the Southern backcountry, and back across the Atlantic. Certainly we have also enjoyed masterful works on individual cities, regional groups of cities, or specific thematic treatments of cities; rarely, however, has any scholar attempted to capture the urban experience on so broad a scale. Gary Nash complained in 1979 that no one had done it since Bridenbaugh; now we in turn should lament that no one else has taken up the task since Nash's *Urban Crucible*.

Apparently historians no longer regard the urban experience as central to

colonial life. Perhaps this stems from a Jeffersonian impulse (though it is based on a misunderstanding of Thomas Jefferson's thinking) to revile the cities as sores on the body politic. Many historians may favor the national myth that casts the true American as a yeoman farmer. On that note, although America was a rural country through the end of the nineteenth century and an urban country when Bridenbaugh was conducting his research, the United States was a suburban country by the 1990 census. Raised in suburban tracts and employed in sleepy college towns, it is possible that few academics have a sense anymore of the urban dynamic that inspired Bridenbaugh's work.

Certainly there appears to be a valid demographic rationale for neglecting colonial urban history: after all, 95 percent of Anglo-Americans lived outside of cities on the eve of the American Revolution, to say nothing of the Indians. Scholars now approach the past with a more egalitarian mindset than Bridenbaugh did. Therefore, just because the cities and their elite inhabitants yield a rich plurality of sources does not justify undue attention to the wealthy *literati* who penned those sources, particularly when we still have so much catching up to do in documenting the lives of women, blacks, rural people, Indians, and the poor. Yet we are forced to contend with Bridenbaugh's claim that the cities, despite their small size, had a disproportionate influence on the lives of colonial Americans and on the American Revolution.

Thus, given the dynamism of colonial cities and their significant influence on the lives of other colonists, it is high time we looked to Bridenbaugh for cues and clues in a renewed study of colonial American urban life. In many ways, such a study would correspond with current cultural trends as well as scholarly approaches. Many downtown areas have become resurgent meccas for an urbane, cosmopolitan crowd (David Brooks's "Bobos in Paradise") in search of the dynamism and multiculturalism that only cities can provide. As academics sit down at their tables in these areas armed with latté and laptop, they are sure to find Bridenbaugh a compelling basis for new lines of research. The variety of historical schools and methodologies that the profession has developed since 1955 will present fascinating possibilities for this urban revival in early American history.

Much work has already been done. Some of Bridenbaugh's chosen topics—intellectual life, entrepreneurship, taverns, disease, town planning, con artists, firefighters—have received more updated treatment since the books were written. Other topics have been neglected (quick: name five books on municipal governance in colonial America). Meanwhile, historians have pursued new subjects largely absent from the *Cities* books, including urban slavery, parades, and consumer culture. If Benjamin Franklin personified colonial urban America for Bridenbaugh, then surely since 1981 the shoemaker George Robert Twelves Hewes has claimed a greater share of our conception of the Revolutionary cities. Other scholars have made use of new and vital methods to add fresh dimensions to the urban centers, from material culture or new archaeological digs to theories of the public sphere or the imagined community. The current emphasis on the Atlantic world surely will shed further light on

the cities, those crucial nodes of exchange of commodities, culture, and people. Many young scholars have used space as their rubric for exploring a number of early American history topics. Bridenbaugh regarded the proximity of city dwellers to one another—"the marrow of urban existence"—as a major theme of his work (*CR* 419), and the colonists' interaction in public and private spaces is fruitful material for scholarly research in a number of thematic directions. For scholars interested in political culture, it would be interesting to verify Bridenbaugh's claim that a widespread sense of civic responsibility characterized the face-to-face cities of the colonial period. Whatever their methods, the researchers currently working on Faneuil Hall, waterfront life, coffeehouses, natural disasters (the "catastrophists"), and other promising subjects have no doubt checked with Bridenbaugh on their way to the archives.

Bridenbaugh's two volumes on the *Cities* are out of print but not out of mind. While their suitability in the classroom setting might be limited, their utility in research commands notice. The cities of early America are rich with possibilities for study, and the archival resources are vast. Bridenbaugh provides an initial guidepost to these sources. If his methods have become outdated and his attitudes strike us as retrograde, his conclusions still bear further exploration. The very heft of these tomes reminds us of the cities' outsized importance in the society, economy, politics, and culture of early America.

This article originally appeared in issue 3.4 (July, 2003).

---

Benjamin L. Carp is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia. He has written articles for *The William and Mary Quarterly* and *Civil War History*, and his dissertation explores political mobilization in Carl Bridenbaugh's five cities during the years leading up to the American Revolution.