

McMurtry — in common with many Houstonians — has tried to come to grips with city life in general and with its particular style in the city of Houston. Dixon suggests that this is a difficult and not always successful challenge.

Beverly Lowry, a novelist living in Houston, presents her image of Houston today. The staccato pace of her writing suggests something about the nature of a place that is no longer a "dusty village" or a regional center, but an international metropolis. Her essay is too suggestive to summarize, but the most encouraging idea she offers is that Houston is ready to leave its awkward, "teen-age" stage and emerge as a mature city, confident and sophisticated.

This issue also presents the second and concluding installment of John Milsaps's diary during his 1910 visit to Houston. A charitable description of Milsaps would emphasize his natural curiosity; a more accurate label might be "nosey." Whichever label is applied, his image of Houston in 1910 is lively and informative. The final piece presents an image of Houston that has not yet clearly been formed. Don Carleton describes the resources available for a study of the life and times of Oscar Holcombe, one of Houston's most important contemporary political figures. Before this image becomes very clear, it will require a historian to bring it into truer focus. *The Houston Review* hopes to play a role in sharpening these blurred images.

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IF YOU'VE SEEN ONE, YOU HAVEN'T SEEN THEM ALL: RECENT TRENDS IN SOUTHERN URBAN HISTORY

By BLAINE A. BROWNELL

In a 1977 book review, Zane L. Miller commented about "a group of younger scholars with an abiding interest in Dixie's past" who, since 1964, "haunted the halls of the AHA, OAH, and SHA convention hotels," sharing information on the development of southern cities. "For almost a decade they remained underground, marginal figures among southern historians more concerned with traditional topics. Yet the young urbanists persisted, pursuing their research and gradually insinuating themselves into back rooms and basements in the mansions of southern history. Now," Miller noted, "the group is coming out."

If southern urban history has not, by this time, invaded nearly every room of the house, it has at least become a polite subject for drawing room conversation. Courses in the subject exist at many regional universities, and interest extends even into the colder climes, where urban themes are perhaps more familiar and less exotic than plantation lore. "Traditional" southern historians seem to have accepted these new interests with equanimity, and urban historians concentrating on New York, Boston, and Chicago have been quite generous in tolerating the strange notion that cities and urbanization occurred in the southern states before 1950. What all this means for southern or urban history is impossible to say for sure at this point. One can say, however, that urban historians are less inclined than before to generalize about the national urban experience from data gathered only in the Northeast and Midwest. And the rising "urban dimension" of southern studies has made it much more difficult in times ahead to ever again think of the South as purely rural.

¹Zane L. Miller, review of Blaine A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield (eds.), *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1977), in the *American Historical Review*, 82 (June, 1977), pp. 760-761.

Urban themes have not been entirely neglected, of course, in southern historical literature. Works on labor, race relations, violence, and politics (even in the familiar framework of rural vs. urban), among other things, touched on cities and urban life in the region long before the publication of Richard C. Wade's influential book *Slavery in the Cities: The American South* (1964). But this investigation was rarely undertaken, or its results presented, within the context of *urban* history, with the city as the major focus and not primarily a backdrop against which southern culture is sometimes, almost accidentally, displayed. Thus, the origins of southern urban history must be sought not so much in the vacuum left by previous scholarship as in the rising interest in urban history generally among younger historians in the 1960s, and the extent to which southern cities were promising targets of opportunity for those interested in tracing issues of truly national as well as regional magnitude.

If southern scholars have not encountered to the same degree the drama of massive foreign immigration that existed in Philadelphia and Chicago, they have been able to fix much more readily upon urban themes of race, which was a major element of the southern experience literally centuries before blacks moved northward and westward in significant numbers. The quantitative techniques and exotic new sources of the "new" urban history were applied with virtually equal vigor and imagination to southern cities. Beyond this, the swirling and perennially refreshed currents of antebellum and reconstruction historiography have swept closely upon regional urban studies, giving them an especially strong relationship with broader themes of southern history and rendering them even more influential and widely acknowledged than their counterpart studies for the rest of the country.

This essay will focus primarily on historical studies of the urban South since roughly 1975, with reference to certain other work published prior to that time. Even for such a brief period, and in dealing with such a limited arena of urban scholarship as history, this effort does not pretend to completeness. This is especially true in the area of "urban studies," where political science, sociology, economics, and geography jostle history for predominance. The purpose here is not to compile bibliography but rather to discuss the state of the urban historical enterprise as it has focused on the American South.

One does not proceed very far in the labyrinth of southern studies without running up against a very considerable obstacle that must be dealt with. "The South" and what it is to be "southern" are at one and the same time crucial conceptual questions that must be pursued, and traps to impale the unwary. "What is really the answer to the riddle, what is at bottom the foundation of southern distinctiveness has never

been established with finality," George B. Tindall wrote, "but the quest for a central theme of southern history has repeatedly engaged the region's historians."² Perhaps southern urban historians are at an advantage, since whatever is at the core of "the South" is not likely to be found primarily in cities. On the other hand, the urban dimension may tell us quite a bit about regional identity after all, in much the same way that objects are perceived more clearly in darkness when on the periphery of one's field of vision.

Most studies in southern urban history have concluded that southern cities are very similar to cities elsewhere in the United States. They were shaped by similar forces, suffered the same basic problems, and adjusted to new technologies. After a point, of course, this approach becomes meaningless. Human civilization appears insignificant and uniform from the perspective of the next galaxy, but that does not prove it is unimportant or indistinguishable. To a very great degree, popular images of the South, and some more sophisticated scholarly definitions as well, link regional identity with a rural landscape. Without entering a very spirited debate that is somewhat tangential to our interests here, it is probably true that whatever the degree of booster capitalism that existed below the Mason and Dixon Line prior to the Civil War, it was far less influential in shaping the character of southern culture than a rural, pre-industrial, even semi-feudal tendency. Many "southern" values and cultural phenomena — attachment to place, the importance of church and family — have clear rural associations.

It is far from clear, however, that urbanization, industrialization, or "modernization" comprise a climate destructive of "southernness." Kenneth T. Jackson's important book on the Ku Klux Klan revealed, for example, that the hooded order was neither overwhelmingly southern nor rural.³ We can probably now conclude, on the basis of existing evidence, that "southernness" is not completely dependent on an agrarian setting, even if its roots lie in the countryside. We shall return to some of these themes later. For now, it is perhaps enough to say that southern identity cannot be thoroughly revealed by focusing on any single "central" theme and that a totally rural South is a partial South: cities were simply too important throughout southern history, regardless of the size of the regional urban population, to be ignored in defining the region and its culture.

The most traditional approach to urban history is the *urban biography*, which, as the name implies, is an effort to recount and put

²George B. Tindall, "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History" in Tindall, *The Ethnic Southerners* (Baton Rouge, 1976), p. 36.

³Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York, 1967).

in perspective the "life experience" of a particular city. This genre is, however, highly variable, cast in a spectrum ranging from the pedantic and antiquarian to the innovative and pathbreaking. One variety is the familiar "mug book," or collection of biographical sketches of local notables (and their likenesses), sometimes woven together with a bit of historical narrative. The fact that such volumes were subscribed by the subjects they portrayed has undermined their objectivity, to say the least. But some were actually fairly accurate, and continue to be of use even today. Another version might well be classified with promotional literature, and the worst examples perhaps with fiction. Here, cities are founded by worthy adventurers, survive various crises (usually meteorological or inflicted from without), rise from the ashes of war (or bankruptcy or epidemic), and achieve a place in the sun alongside other great cities in the country or even the world.

The urban biography draws its greatest strength from its focus on a single local area, and from its effort — in the best examples — to trace the development of that particular place in a broad context, touching upon every significant element from economic patterns to leadership and street layout. The interplay of varied elements, the weaving of many threads over time in a single area, has a compelling appeal. Surely, neither author nor reader is afflicted with doubts about the proper boundaries of the study, and this approach also has the virtue of appealing — or, at least, potentially appealing — to scholars and local history buffs alike. The greatest weakness of this approach, even in imaginative hands, is that it often tends to preclude an essential comparative dimension, leaving us instead with an exaggerated sense of local uniqueness. Beyond that, as Theodore Hershberg has recently written in the *Journal of Urban History*, "Most studies in this genre, though carefully researched and well-written, lack any significant conceptual framework or fail in their periodization scheme to distinguish adequately between urban and national history."⁴

Ironically, the South, noted as a region for its intense localism, has not been blessed with many first-rate urban biographies. When one thinks of the "classic" works in this genre, studies by Bessie L. Pierce on Chicago, Constance McLaughlin Green on Holyoke, Blake McKelvey on Rochester, and Bayrd Still on Milwaukee come first to mind.⁵ While these works suffer from one or more problems afflicting

⁴Theodore Hershberg, "The New Urban History: Towards an Interdisciplinary History of the City," *Journal of Urban History*, 5 (November, 1978), p. 4.

⁵Bessie L. Pierce, *A History of Chicago* (3 vols.; New York and London, 1937-1957); Constance McLaughlin Green, *Holyoke, Massachusetts: A Case History of the Industrial Revolution in America* (New Haven, 1939); Blake McKelvey, *Rochester* (4 vols.; Cambridge and Rochester, 1945-1961); and Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City* (Madison, 1948).

urban biographies generally, they are unquestionably more interesting, revealing, and lasting in their importance than histories completed for even major southern cities like Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans, and Nashville.

One reason for this may be that fewer southern historians were interested in writing urban biographies when they first became popular among professional historians, in the 1930s and 1940s. In any event, some good, "basic" studies of several southern cities exist, on urban places ranging in size from Natchez to Houston, and the history of many other southern cities has been chronicled in dissertations.⁶ The proliferation of local source materials, the rising interest in local history, and the development of new methodologies and techniques associated with previously neglected local data — like manuscript census schedules — have encouraged continuing work in this vein, especially directed toward small or medium-sized cities.⁷

An intensive focus on a particular local scene holds the greatest promise for urban scholarship when it is consciously aware of broader, comparative themes and tracks generic issues of interest to urban historians generally. Put another way, this is local history as *case study*. This approach runs a wide gamut as well, from the social mobility assessment, which fixes on one city or another mainly out of convenience or utility, to very ambitious endeavors that render a single city into a microcosm of urban America. The former variation has tended to be much more common than the latter. The best local studies are fashioned in such a way that they can be meaningfully compared with others. The principal issues to be addressed, the methodologies to be employed, indeed the very organization of the studies themselves should reflect as much a concern with illuminating these broader

⁶Among some of the better "urban biographies" familiar to southern urban historians are: D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge, 1968), though this study obviously is limited to a single, but important, era in the city's past; David G. McComb, *Houston: The Bayou City* (Austin, 1969); Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *Norfolk: Historic Southern Port* (Durham, N.C., 1931); Gerald M. Capers, Jr., *The Biography of a River Town: Memphis, Its Golden Age* (Chapel Hill, 1939); and two doctoral dissertations that portray Atlanta in the nineteenth century: Grigsby Hart Wotton, Jr., "New City of the South: Atlanta, 1843-1873" (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1973), and James M. Russell, "Atlanta, Gate City of the South, 1847 to 1885" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1972).

⁷Some recent examples include: James R. McGovern, *The Emergence of a City in the Modern South: Pensacola, 1900-1945* (DeLeon Springs, Fla., 1976); Grace H. Gates, "The Making of a Model City: A History of Anniston, Alabama, 1872-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1976); Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr., "Tupelo, Mississippi, from Settlement to Industrial Community, 1860-1970" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1976); Harry M. Ward and Harold E. Greer, Jr., *Richmond During the Revolution, 1775-83* (Charlottesville, 1977); Jay Higginbotham, *Old Mobile: Fort Louis de la Louisiane, 1702-1711* (Mobile, 1977); Mary S. Jackson, "The People of Houston in the 1850s" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1975); and Arthur J. Mayer, "San Antonio, Frontier Entrepot" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1976).

themes — urban class patterns, the impact of industrialization and technology, the influence of elite groups, the shifting elements of urban structure — as concern for cataloging local events and personalities.⁸ Without these larger concerns, we are apt to know much more about New Orleans or Knoxville or Dallas, and less about urban history. Perhaps the most successful such investigation yet completed (unfortunately, not of a southern city), is Michael H. Frisch's *Town into City: Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Meaning of Community, 1840-1880* (Cambridge, 1972).

Promising efforts along these lines are underway in the South. One thinks first of the handful of historians associated with the Atlanta History Project. Their purpose is not only to chronicle the past of the Southeast's greatest city, but to approach their investigations in such a way that larger questions, which apply to most cities, can be illuminated. They also contend, incidentally, that these broader, comparative questions are doomed to abstraction, and "scaffoldings" to fragility, without the thorough knowledge of the specific local scene that comes with intensive immersion in a particular city's experience.⁹

Scholars who ventured into southern urban history, usually with grandiose notions of sophisticated analysis, have often encountered an unanticipated though essential detour along the way: the necessity to seek out and preserve the source materials themselves. This has doubtless deterred the progress of scholarship in the short-term; the Atlanta History Project, among others, shifted its emphasis quite early from the production of books and studies to the preservation of documents and materials and the proper ways to undertake and coordinate research. Unquestionably, these efforts will pay off handsomely in the long run. Indeed, they have contributed a legacy of perhaps even greater significance.

Virtually every southern urban historian has some "horror story" about the loss or abuse of local source materials — such as manuscript collections shredded and carted off for scrap. The situation is perhaps not much better elsewhere in the country, but poor municipal budgets and a lack of appreciation of the value of certain papers and documents (like neighborhood newspapers and receipts for licenses) appear all-too-prevalent in southern cities. But the emphasis has, thankfully, been changed. Manuscripts and documents lying untended and deteriorating in city hall basements, storage bins, and the back rooms

⁸One of the clearest statements of this argument is contained in Sam Bass Warner, Jr., "If All the World Were Philadelphia: A Scaffolding for Urban History, 1774-1930," *American Historical Review*, 74 (October, 1968), pp. 26-43.

⁹See Dana F. White and Timothy J. Crimmins, "Urban Structure, Atlanta," *Journal of Urban History*, 2 (February, 1976), pp. 231-252.

of old firehouses are now in many instances under professional archival care; newspapers given up for lost, especially the Afro-American press, have been discovered in unexpected places (underneath a stadium in Birmingham, for example!); family photograph albums and letters have been gathered; and literally miles of recording tape have chronicled the oral recollections of average citizens and key urban leaders. The Atlanta History Project, the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (the most ambitious, and so far most successful, of these ventures), and the rapidly growing archives in Birmingham, New Orleans, Nashville, and other cities are a rich store of data and source materials that those of us studying the urban south were not so fortunate to have available even five or ten years ago.

The so-called "new urban history" has dominated the field since roughly 1970 until only a few years ago, not through the volume of work produced (since only a handful of historians were involved, and not even all of these could be genuinely classified as urban historians) but through the dramatic new methodologies which were employed, the emphasis on "common" people rather than on leaders or upper-class types, and the great promise this approach held out for the whole discipline.¹⁰ Social and geographic mobility studies — tracing the movements of "average" citizens through space and along the "ladder" of "social status" through the use of samples drawn from manuscript census schedules — received a tremendous impetus from Stephen Thernstrom's book, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, 1964). "Mobility studies" were subsequently attempted for a wide variety of American cities, to the point where replication became increasingly meaningless. The main reason was that the same basic facts kept emerging. The populations of all nineteenth-century American cities were tremendously volatile; the motion of people from residence to residence within individual cities, and among cities, was indeed staggering. And there seemed in virtually all cities to be more upward than downward social movement, especially for later generations. "Success" was particularly pronounced among those who remained in a particular city (*persisted*, in the parlance of these studies) for one, two, or more decades.

While most of this "new urban history" concentrated upon northeastern and midwestern cities, the South has hardly been neglected. Richard Hopkins' work on Atlanta is especially notable.¹¹ In our

¹⁰The new approach was heralded in a collection of essays edited by Stephen Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, *Nineteenth Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History* (New Haven, 1968).

¹¹See Richard J. Hopkins, "Status, Mobility, and the Dimensions of Change in a Southern City: Atlanta, 1870-1910," in Kenneth T. Jackson and Stanley K. Schultz (eds.), *Cities in American History* (New York, 1972), pp. 216-231; Hopkins, "Occupational and Geographic Mobility in Atlanta, 1870-1896," *Journal of Southern History*, 34 (May, 1968), pp. 200-213. Also

concern with comparative dimensions, it is important to note that the South fits in very nicely with the experience of the rest of the country. In most respects, in fact, the patterns in southern and non-southern cities seemed almost interchangeable. Determining the significance of this must await further analysis, however, for the limitations of these mobility studies are becoming increasingly apparent.

One very large problem is the lack of any widely accepted definition of social status, and what constituted, in the nineteenth century, upward social mobility. The ownership of real property and the "rise" from manual to non-manual occupations are important, but true social mobility was probably composed of much more than just these variables. A second problem is perhaps equally troubling: the inability to trace the people who left the city, and thus the sample. Those who remained in a locality were most likely to "succeed," but over a period of twenty or thirty years the great majority of the original sample was gone. It appears that the least "successful" departed, but what precisely happened to them remains unknown. We also have recurring doubts about the census data employed in such studies. Some census reports are known to be much less accurate, on the whole, than others; but there is a growing suspicion in some quarters that the exceptionally high rates of geographic mobility may be due as much to the failure to locate accurately individuals from one census count to another as to the actual movement of these people from place to place. Mobility studies also failed, in most instances, to treat the city as anything more than a *site* and — in their focus on technique — ignored the larger ecological context in which mobility occurred, and largely gave mobility its true meaning.¹²

The influence of social history cannot be measured by mobility studies alone. The broader emphasis upon unearthing new social data and subjecting it to careful analysis, and of looking beyond the lives of leaders and intellectuals and the framework of "political" and military history, have had a massive impact on the entire historical enterprise. It would be very difficult to write nowadays in the vein of the "old"

see Paul B. Worthman, "Working-Class Mobility in Birmingham, Alabama, 1880-1914," in Tamara K. Hareven (ed.), *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), pp. 172-213; and Alwyn Barr, "Occupational and Geographic Mobility in San Antonio, 1870-1900," *Social Science Quarterly*, 51 (September, 1970), pp. 396-403.

¹²These observations are made with particular eloquence in Laurence Vesey, "The 'New' Social History in the Context of American Historical Writing," *Reviews in American History*, 7 (March, 1979), pp. 1-12; and Hershberg, "The New Urban History," pp. 15-29. For a brief discussion of possible errors in the census data, see Richard Jensen, "History From a Deck of IBM Cards," *Reviews in American History*, 6 (June, 1978), p. 233. A very perceptive recent survey of the "state of the art" is Edward Pessen, "Social Mobility in American History: Some Brief Reflections," *Journal of Southern History*, 45 (May, 1979), pp. 165-184.

intellectual history, with ideas and attitudes floating in some indeterminate universe, unattached from the realities of economic imperatives and social structure. It has even become somewhat embarrassing to speak of "the citizens" of a city or the "public interest," knowing as we do that urban populations were extremely varied and the connections among them complex and shifting. This may, in fact, be the most important and lasting of the contributions of the "new" social history — the variety and complexity of the urban experience, seen in human terms. This new approach is reflected in much recent historical writing about the urban South.¹³ Studies of urban leadership, political processes, and city planning, among others, have become in very real ways efforts in social history. The southern urban elite, for example, can no longer be usefully discussed in terms of biographical sketches or genealogy, with principal reliance on personal memoirs and newspaper clippings. The historian must now examine census schedules, tax records, and even credit reports in order to get the job done. The approach needs, above all, to be reasonably systematic, with reference not only to the specific group or individuals studied but to their role in the larger social and economic context.¹⁴

Political history, a pillar of southern scholarship, has likewise been imbued with the emphases of social history and the fascination with local settings. Recent work in urban politics has looked carefully "behind the scenes" of elections, analyzed political activity in a broad cultural and social context, or focused systematically on the bases for political movements and electoral behavior. It is no longer enough, in other words, to write about parties and more-or-less formal coalitions of political interests, based on information gleaned solely from newspapers and tabloids. The social status of both political leaders and followers, their economic positions and prospects, and the "hidden"

¹³Examples of work since 1975 include: David T. Kearns, "The Social Mobility of New Orleans Laborers, 1870-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1977); Harriet E. Amos, "Social Life in an Antebellum Cotton Port: Mobile, Alabama, 1820-1860" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1976); and Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820-1860: A Quantitative History* (Chicago, 1976), of which more will be said later.

¹⁴One effort in this vein has been launched by Don H. Doyle, whose monograph, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825-70* (Urbana, 1978), provides some insight into what we can expect from his forthcoming study of urban elites in three southern cities. Examples of studies on a wide variety of themes which reflect elements of social history include: Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Women in the Work Force: Atlanta, New Orleans, and San Antonio, 1930 to 1940," *Journal of Urban History*, 4 (May, 1978), pp. 331-358, and Blackwelder, "Quiet Suffering: Atlanta Women in the 1930s," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 61 (Summer, 1977), pp. 112-124; Louis J. Marchiafava, "Institutional and Legal Aspects of the Growth of Professional Urban Police Service: The Houston Experience, 1878-1948" (Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 1976); Keith L. Bryant, Jr., "Cathedrals, Castles and Roman Baths: Railway Station Architecture in the Urban South," *Journal of Urban History*, 2 (February, 1976), pp. 195-230; and Joan N. Sears, "The First Hundred Years of Town Planning in Georgia," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1977).

restraints and imperatives of political behavior have attracted more interest, and even central attention, in some recent works.¹⁵ The emphasis has shifted quite markedly to questions of "who governs and how," with investigations probing the "real" story behind formal political rhetoric and activity.¹⁶ Particularly intriguing are periods in which urban political systems were subjected to unusual pressures, either from high rates of urban growth and expansion or from racial conflict.¹⁷

Studies of urban "boosterism" — which, ironically, have found their richest lode in southern cities — are, of course, closely related to political history and also to elite studies and even intellectual history. Perhaps southern historians are particularly fascinated with the booster, since he seems the very opposite of the inefficient, sophisticated, gentlemanly planter, and he is, indeed, a major character all-too-often ignored in traditional studies. In the South, the booster was the catalyst for urban promotion who came into his own in the antebellum era and again later in the century at the center of the New South movement. The booster was not simply a public relations fanatic, but a principal policy-maker and probably the major exponent of pro-urbanism in the predominantly agrarian South.

If for no other reason, boosters should be included in studies of urban leadership because they often enliven the tale. But they also usually had status and wealth — the twin pillars of influence — and even when the actual importance of boosters is exaggerated, their activities and writings often formed the framework for establishing local goals. Booster rhetoric was a consistent justification of capitalist entrepreneurial behavior and priorities, even during a time when the pro-slavery, plantation ethos demanded lip-service and overt support. While the existence of urban boosterism by no means disproves the pre-industrial, agrarian character of the antebellum South, it is nonetheless curious, and significant, that southern urban boosters saw no

¹⁵See, as examples, Samuel M. Kipp, III, "Old Notables and Newcomers: The Economic and Political Elite of Greensboro, North Carolina, 1880-1920," *Journal of Southern History*, 43 (August, 1977), pp. 373-394; Kipp, "Urban Growth and Social Change in the South, 1870-1920: Greensboro, North Carolina as a Case Study" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1974); and Harold Platt, "Urban Public Services and Private Enterprise: Aspects of the Legal and Economic History of Houston, Texas, 1865-1905" (Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 1974).

¹⁶See especially Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham, 1871-1921* (Knoxville, 1977); Eugene J. Watts, *The Social Bases of City Politics: Atlanta, 1865-1903* (Westport, Conn., 1978); and Watts, "Property and Politics in Atlanta, 1865-1903," *Journal of Urban History*, 3 (May, 1977), pp. 295-322. Watts' analysis employs the concept of the "social filter" to examine the electoral politics of the city, focusing on the principal social variables characterizing more than eight hundred candidates for city office. The emphasis, then, is distinctly not on the candidates so much as on the social context in which the political system operated.

¹⁷See James C. Cobb, "Politics in a New South City: Augusta, Georgia, 1946-1971" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1975).

incompatibility between growing, prosperous cities and the "southern way of life." A number of recent books and articles explore this theme, including Charles P. Garofalo's essays on boosterism in Atlanta and David R. Goldfield's much more ambitious examination of urban promotion in the context of urban-rural relations and the antebellum sectional crisis in the region, with a focus on Virginia.¹⁸

The issue of race in southern history, and its manifestations in cultural patterns, folklore, social conflict, literature, and political decisions, has been the most compelling and in many respects the most revealing area of investigation in southern studies. If race is not *the* central theme of southern history, it is the major concern of southern historical scholarship. This has certainly been no less true of work in the past fifteen years, and of works in the genre of urban history. While some of the very best scholarship decorates this bibliography, the quality of all work in this area varies widely. Also, many of the studies which deal with urban blacks are near-classic examples of investigations which focus on events and personalities within cities but not on cities themselves or on the urbanization process.

Some studies have focused on the urbanization of blacks generally in the region¹⁹ while others focus on the black experience in specific cities in particular periods.²⁰ A major contribution of Afro-American history, especially since 1960, was the emphasis on the multifaceted experience of blacks, and the detailed examination of black communities, customs, language, and literature, rather than on the role of blacks as simply victims of white oppression or as one element in social and political conflict. This emphasis has guided a substantial portion of the work concerning blacks in cities, and it has provided a significant opportunity for the methods of social history.

¹⁸Charles P. Garofalo, "The Atlanta Spirit: A Study in Urban Ideology," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 74 (Winter, 1975), pp. 34-44; Garofalo, "The Sons of Henry Grady: Atlanta Boosters in the 1920s," *Journal of Southern History*, 42 (May, 1976), pp. 187-204; David R. Goldfield, *Urban Growth in the Age of Sectionalism: Virginia, 1847-1861* (Baton Rouge, 1977); and Goldfield, "Urban-Rural Relations in the Old South: The Example of Virginia," *Journal of Urban History*, 2 (February, 1976), pp. 146-168. Also see Gary Bolding, "Change, Continuity and Commercial Identity of a Southern City: New Orleans, 1850-1950," *Louisiana Studies*, 14 (Summer, 1975), pp. 161-178; Justin Fuller, "Boom Towns and Blast Furnaces: Town Promotion in Alabama, 1885-1893," *Alabama Review*, 29 (January, 1976), pp. 37-48; and Gregory A. Greb, "Charleston, South Carolina Merchants, 1815-1860: Urban Leadership in the Antebellum South" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1978).

¹⁹See John D. Reid, "Black Urbanization of the South," *Phylon*, 35 (September, 1974), pp. 259-267.

²⁰See, as examples, John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago, 1973); David C. Rankin, "The Forgotten People: Free People of Color in New Orleans, 1850-1870" (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1976); Jerry L. Thornberry, "The Development of Black Atlanta, 1865-1885" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1977); and John Kelllogg, "Negro Urban Clusters in the Postbellum South," *Geographical Review*, 67 (July, 1977), pp. 310-321.

Studies of southern urban race relations have been among the very best and most innovative examples of scholarship in recent years. Classic cases of violence revolving around the issue of race have received due attention, as "windows" into the southern white mentality and prevailing culture and the dilemmas faced by blacks.²¹ Howard N. Rabinowitz examined patterns of race relations in the post-bellum South within the context of both cities and national politics. His discovery that segregation was in fact a substantial improvement over exclusion, which had largely prevailed before, and a reform brought to the South by Reconstruction policies, is a major corrective to our understanding of the origins of racial segregation, the degree and nature of black participation in southern society, and statutory regulations of racial contact.²²

The fact that major new ideas about southern race relations have issued from studies focusing on regional cities is, in itself, interesting and significant for the fate of southern urban studies. Yet another example concerns the institution of slavery and whether or not it could survive in the urban milieu. The debate was initiated in Richard Wade's *Slavery in the Cities*, in which he claimed that the evidence pointed to a consistent decline of the number of slaves in regional urban areas.

By 1860 slavery was disintegrating in Southern cities. Forty years earlier, the institution had seemed as stable and vigorous in town as in country. Slaves comprised at least 20 per cent of the population of the major cities. In most places the proportion was much higher, and in Charleston blacks outnumbered whites. Slaves handled the bulk of domestic drudgery; worked in shops and factories; built the streets, bridges, and municipal installations; some even acquired mechanical skills. Within four decades, however, the picture had changed dramatically. In the border cities the institution had nearly disappeared altogether; farther south it had diminished in extent and vitality. Everywhere proportionately, and in many places

²¹William Ivy Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900* (Baton Rouge, 1976), and Robert V. Haynes, *A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* (Baton Rouge, 1976).

²²Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York, 1978). Rabinowitz has also published a number of articles dealing with southern urban themes in this period, including "From Reconstruction to Redemption in the Urban South," *Journal of Urban History*, 2 (February, 1976), pp. 169-194. See also his essay, "Continuity and Change: Southern Urban Development, 1860-1900" in Brownell and Goldfield (eds.), *The City in Southern History*, pp. 92-122.

absolutely, the number of town slaves declined. In the countryside slavery still appeared stable and successful, but wherever it touched urban conditions it was in deep trouble.²³

Wade's interpretation rested essentially on the notion of urban distinctiveness: "The city had created its own kind of world, with a pace, sophistication, and environment that separated it from rural modes."²⁴ Thus, slaves lived together in scattered clusters, relatively free from white surveillance, and increasingly hired themselves out in almost "free market" patterns; and the efforts to maintain the discipline and structure essential to the preservation of the institution were only half-hearted, and in some instances almost non-existent, in cities intent on expansion, profit, and different means of exploiting the labor force.

Wade's interpretation has been challenged, most notably in a recent monograph by Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South 1820-1860: A Quantitative History*. "Cities and slavery were not incompatible," Goldin wrote. "The cities were just subject to more dramatic shifts in slave populations due to the availability of substitute labor and to other factors which made the urban demand for slaves more elastic than that for rural areas."²⁵ The apparent hostility of the urban environment to slavery was, in Goldin's view, attributable primarily to the propaganda issued by white artisans fearful of slave competition, whereas urban slaveowners defended the institution and its economic and social benefits.

David R. Goldfield, in his study of Virginia, concluded that the "city and slavery proved congenial to each other. Increasing use of slave labor in urban pursuits sounded not the death knell for the institution but rather portended a renaissance. Urban slavery demonstrated the flexibility of the institution and the ability of the slave to learn and adapt to new techniques. In competition against northern cities, slave labor was an important commodity." Slaves were so important in the urban South, in fact, that the end of the institution was viewed "as the end to dreams of prosperity and urban growth, and hence of achieving sectional equilibrium."²⁶ Slavery was, ironically, perceived by many southern urban leaders as a crucial device for progress in the competition for markets and regional advantage.

²³Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York, 1964), p. 3.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁵Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South*, p. xiii-xiv.

²⁶Goldfield, *Urban Growth in the Age of Sectionalism*, p. xxvii.

These works are not so contradictory in their views as this brief account may suggest. The urban environment was, by all accounts, different from that of the countryside, and slaves and slaveowners did have to adapt to these different circumstances. Urban slavery was much more easily buffeted by shifting economic currents and changes in the labor market. The number of slaves proportionally declined in some southern cities, and manufacturers and other businessmen were not especially interested in supporting an inflexible labor pool on the rural model, or the stringent, restricting, and expensive regulations and structures required to maintain the plantation slave system. Factories which hired slaves were notoriously uninterested in enforcing the slave codes through checking ownership papers and the precise identity of their workers, in much the same way that many industries today are more interested in a cheap and flexible labor supply than in stemming the tide of illegal aliens from across the Mexican border.

But Wade's study clearly argues that, even with adaptations, slavery was on the way to extinction in the cities, and suggests that the degree of adaptation required to make slavery and the urban environment compatible would have, in effect, destroyed the institution of slavery in the process. Goldin and Goldfield have argued persuasively, however, that the adaptations were significant, and sufficient to make slavery and the cities compatible, and even mutually dependent, at least in the eyes of a number of boosters and urban business groups. Entrepreneurial capitalism was not, in other words, inherently destructive of slavery, as long as the slave labor market could be rendered sufficiently flexible and regionally competitive with the free labor market elsewhere in the country, even though, as Wade pointed out, slavery was becoming less and less effective as a means of social control of blacks.²⁷

Perhaps even more important than the conclusions of this debate, for our purposes here, is the fact that investigations of urban slavery have centered not just on the characteristics of the institution of slavery, drawing from the wealth of information on plantation society and economy, but on the distinctive features of the *urban* environment. In this sense they are among the very best examples of urban history, and have illuminated larger questions of interest to urban scholars generally. For southern urbanists, the more pertinent general issues are the relationships between the urban environment and the rural,

²⁷Marianne Buroff Sheldon, "Black-White Relations in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1820," *Journal of Southern History*, 45 (February, 1979), pp. 27-44, observed that the difficulties of maintaining slavery in Richmond were due to a "curious mixture of fear and leniency on the part of the white community." Whites were fearful of black revolt, but they were also cognizant of the importance of skilled black labor to the city's economy. Essentially, Sheldon argued that the Wade thesis was correct, but that the difficulties of urban slavery actually appeared even earlier in the city's history than Wade believed.

agrarian sources of "traditional" southern culture; the role of southern cities in the processes of regional change; and the degree to which southern cities resembled urban patterns elsewhere in the United States. Ultimately, fascination with the subject probably derives from the intersection of two major determinants of American history: human slavery and urbanization.

It is perhaps in the nature of the field that before one set of questions is fully addressed, we move on to new sets. The answers to earlier queries may not seem so important after a time, or we have reached the point of diminishing returns in efforts to arrive at *the* definitive answer. If the past is any guide (a proposition to which historians can hardly take exception), we shall return to earlier questions before long, and they may have gained in importance in the interim. Usually, all this shifting about is in part a response to solid scholarship — even if the process does not appear entirely logical. Ten years ago, the main point was to show that there was an urban tradition and experience in the South that warranted investigation and could not be ignored. Today, there is no such self-consciousness, largely because the point has been won.

Southern urban history will always appear schizophrenic as it moves forward, dominated by concerns for the history of cities and the history of a region. The main concerns and interests of southern urban history today, however, are pretty much those of urban history generally. The issue of quantification has been reduced to its proper place — as research tool rather than purpose — and attention is directed more toward the distinctive characteristics of cities and the urbanization process, the relationships between social activity and the physical environment, the relationships among cultural traditions and economic changes and new technologies, and the need for genuinely multidisciplinary approaches if we are to make any headway at all in pursuit of such interests. Some of these topics — like the interaction between economic change and cultural tradition — may focus more attention on the urban South than other subjects — like ethnicity; but southern cities will continue to be studied for reasons of convenience, manageable size, and particular characteristics as well.

One can think of a research agenda for southern urban history that is quite appropriate to these new interests and demands. One effort should be simply to enhance our capacity for large-scale urban research in the region, building upon existing efforts but following the models of the most ambitious and productive programs, like the Philadelphia Social History Project in the Center for Philadelphia Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Given the present-day economic situation and cut-backs in state legislative appropriations and some categories of Federal research funds, this will not be an easy task.

We need more investigation, employing new techniques, of basic assumptions about southern urban society — like the relatively greater importance of the family and the church in regional cities. Even if such assumptions turn out to be sound, we do not know how deep they go, how dependent they are on economic conditions, and to what degree they are manifestations of a distinctive regional culture or of race, age group, political realities, and community size. Already we can guess that when we talk of the importance of the “church” we increasingly mean religion, perceived as a broad social impulse rather than a specific institution.

The degree to which physical space reflects economic activities and social patterns, and can sometimes reveal indirectly truths that we cannot discern directly, suggests another area deserving particular attention.²⁸ A more precise picture of the role of the family, for example, will be developed not only through detailed studies of family size and composition but through analysis of the residential patterns of southern urban families, the movement of families from place to place, proximity of families in certain categories to major urban institutions, and the changes in families that precipitate movement and determine location.²⁹ This may help us to understand if the southern urban family is substantially different from urban families elsewhere in the country and, if so, how.

A frequently mentioned mainstay of southern culture is a relatively more pronounced attachment to *place*, but this assumption has hardly ever been seriously investigated. It is quite possible that, to the extent that this is an important southern tendency, it is common to most rural societies marked by the pull of continuity, pre-industrial land-ownership patterns, and the lack of available opportunities outside the farm or small town. It may be only symbolic in importance, reflected in literature and preference but rarely manifested in behavior. Whatever the answers, this is a superb subject for investigation in southern cities, entailing not only a review of published opinion about “roots” and “home” but actual attempts to measure attachment to place through surveys of individual and family location and movement in the city, preferably over the course of at least several decades. We should learn, in the process, something about southern culture, the changes of southern rural patterns (brought by recent migrants) in a

²⁸Some studies along these lines, of course, have already been done. See, for example, William F. Ainsley, Jr., “Changing Land Use in Downtown Norfolk, Virginia: 1680-1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1977).

²⁹One example of this promising research area is Ruth Klopper, “The Family’s Use of Urban Space. Elements of Family Structure and Function Among Economic Elites: Atlanta, Georgia 1880-1920” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1977).

new urban milieu, and ways of examining highly subjective cultural tendencies through their overt manifestations in behavior and space.

Another area of investigation with direct public-policy implications is the urban impact of government programs, especially Federal programs. How southern cities have been affected since the 1930s not only by boosters and economic changes but also by the interstate highway system, federal housing programs, urban renewal, public works spending, welfare, revenue sharing, community development block grant funding, and civil rights legislation (especially in the areas of fair housing, education, annexation, redistricting, and affirmative action) are critical questions that must be addressed if we are even to begin to understand the recent history of southern cities, or the region and nation for that matter.³⁰ Here, again, we may illuminate both urban and southern history by focusing on factors which probably had a greater impact on southern cities — given their sizes, economic bases, and stages of development — than on others.

We still do not know for sure what “the South” is and to what degree the cities of the region are “southern” except in geographic location. One observer, Michael O’Brien, has speculated that “the South” is primarily an intellectual perception that gives meaning to social reality: it has “taken on a psychological reality, not entirely distinct from social reality, but capable of fastening on to successive regimes. It has secured such a hold on the American mind that it is a postulate, to which the facts of American society must be bent, and no longer a deduction.”³¹ This interpretation finds support in the sociological studies which locate no clear demarcation between North and South, and for that matter in the urban histories of the region which conclude that southern cities, in their essential characteristics, are basically similar to cities elsewhere in the country. We have known all along, of course, that the region is diverse, including broad farm lands, sweeping ranches, and piney woods, crackers, cajuns, blacks, and mountain folks. The contrasts seem even greater along the edges — from the Tidewater towns to Houston and Dallas, for example. And the new emphasis on “Sunbelt studies,” tracing common themes across the lower half of the country and lumping together Los Angeles

³⁰Two excellent recent studies point up the possibilities here: Mark I. Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965* (New York, 1975) and Philip J. Funigiello, *The Challenge to Urban Liberalism: Federal-City Relations During World War II* (Knoxville, 1978). Also see the perceptive “comparative” study of public welfare politics and policies in one southern city by Edward S. LaMonte, “Politics and Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama 1900-1975” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1976).

³¹Michael O’Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore, 1979), p. xiv.

and Atlanta, Tampa and Flagstaff, Birmingham and Oklahoma City, promises to confuse the issue of "southern" identity considerably.

There *are* elements which suggest a social and economic integrity in the region, from the slow emergence of the southern urban system in comparison with the systems in the North to the impact of freight rates and general transportation costs, not to mention major institutions like racial segregation, in setting the South apart. The work over the past ten years has provided a general framework for thinking of southern cities as southern, even if the definitions are not set in concrete. We can safely predict that research on southern cities will in the future focus more on elements of diversity and on the examination of particular cities and specific elements of the urbanization process, though one would always hope within a comparative framework or at least with comparative awareness.

Southern cities probably take their essential characteristics from the fact that they are *both* southern and urban, but the variations on these themes are quite large. Just as recent social history has pointed up the complexity and diversity of communities in America, future research on the urban South will probably confirm the fact that to comprehend one city is not to understand them all.

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WHILE YOU WERE AWAY (HOUSTON SEEN AND UNSEEN, 1923-1979)

*A Letter to Charles Provine Goyen, distinguished early Citizen
of that city*

BY WILLIAM GOYEN

Dear Father:

I have been asked to speak about the city you brought me to. Houston! I could not speak of Houston without speaking of you. For in the image of my boyhood and young manhood, Houston is you and you are Houston. Though you are, for me, one of the founding citizens of this new metropolis I see around me in 1978 when I come to deliver this communication, you did not "build" Houston; you had no realtor's "vision" of Houston's destiny. You did not even "grow" with Houston. For you were a "failed" man in a boomtown. Your earnings did not triple, or double, you gained no commercial power in a city of commerce. You did not own a bank or try to get one together (in a city of banks); you did not cut a new street through woods for a sub-division with your name on it, did not start an insurance agency, get the franchise for a car dealership, buy up some land by what might be an airport.

The Houston I saw, dear father, on my daily journeys through it by foot, from other people's automobiles by hitch-hiking, above all from the automobile you drove, was the Houston of the Nineteen-Twenties and Thirties. After that, from the Forties to the present, I left and came back, left and came back, year after year. You were always, until you died, waiting for me. My daily travels were spiritual journeys; that is, I was experiencing a place deeply, on my own secret terms, as I moved through it. Where I was going, why I was going there, and when, will compose this letter to you. I was not just a walker in a growing city. I was in a kind of flight from my place, a fugitive from the very scene I travelled; I saw later that I was, from the beginning, saying goodbye as I said hello, in the same breath — already giving up what was being given to me. And so the places I passed, on my way, the