

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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SAM BASS WARNER, JR.'S *THE URBAN WILDERNESS:  
A HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN CITY*<sup>1</sup>

According to Charles Tilly, a 1994 poll of urban historians identified Sam Warner as the country's most influential urban historian. Over the past forty years, he has published numerous books on the American urban experience: *Streetcar Suburbs* (1962), *The Private City* (1968), *The Way We Really Lived* (1977), *Province of Reason* (1984), and *To Dwell is To Garden* (1987). By way of comparison, Warner's *The Urban Wilderness* represents his most general work on urban history.

The book follows a nice three-part logical progression: first, initial conditions of early urbanization (seventeenth-century settlement, land laws and early planning); second, stages in the process of urbanization (stage one—the engine of private enterprise, New York, 1820-1870; stage two—the segregated city, Chicago, 1870-1920; stage three—the new freedom, Los Angeles, 1920-1970); and third, how previous urban development presents challenges today (diverse cultures, definition and settlement of urban problems, the failure of public housing and public health care, and projections for the future). While the book centers on the evolution of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles in three successive and sweeping historical eras, *The Urban Wilderness* addresses a main concern for all of America in the ongoing dynamic toward urbanization—that for most Americans the city is an urban wilderness, and as such Americans have no urban history.

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<sup>1</sup>Classics in Urban History, edited by Michael H. Ebner (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1972; reprint, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 303 pages, with forward by Charles Tilly, new preface by author, 116 historic photos, bibliographic guide, index.

What Warner means is that even though Americans live in one of the world's most urbanized nations, they "are not conscious that they have a past and that by their actions they participate in making their future. As they tackle today's problems, either with good will or anger, they have no sense of where cities came from, how they grew, or even what direction the large forces of history are taking them. . . . Without a sense of history, they hammer against today's crises without any means to choose their targets to fit the trends which they must confront, work with, or avoid" (4). As he builds on the excellent but much earlier work of Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (1938), Werner intends to illuminate his readers about the colossal and confusing world of urban realities, and by doing this, he hopes to equip contemporary Americans with practical wisdom toward the intelligent construction of a humane and prosperous urban environment. This review, however, will be confined to the author's discussion of pre-industrial urban development or his stage one that spans 1820-1870.

Apart from the legacy of the Puritan form of private landholding in modern real-property law, today's situation bears little resemblance to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In one respect, though, the history of the New England township carries a weighty lesson, namely "to plan without regard for the processes of change is inevitably to fail" (14). Werner chides the "many disorders" that resulted from regarding private property strictly in terms of civil liberty rather than as a social resource. The acquisition of large tracts of cheap land, encouraged by Congressional legislation in the nineteenth century, gave rise to speculation and tenancy, and this favored those who already held substantial capital. Speculators and money lenders as a result

found ways to influence the location and construction of heavy capital expenditures like transportation systems and public utilities. Further, the politics of private and public land use followed the dictates of conservative class interests from rural and urban contractors, insurance dealers, real-estate owners, and retail merchants. Waste and poor planning resulted. But during the Jacksonian era the courts narrowed the definition of “public purpose” to forestall the need for government action in the face of rapid growth. After the panic of 1837, the economy busted, and entire cities and even states in the 1840s and 1850s fell into bankruptcy due to the loss of public funds in canal and railroad failures. As evidence of widespread corruption in the fiscal management of municipalities came to light, the public backlash forced courts to curtail the powers of “eminent domain” for the next half century. This curtailment of government control of land use, especially as a capitalistic endeavor, proved problematic. Werner notes, “At the very moment when municipal projects needed to be enlarged to accommodate themselves to the ever-growing American city, the courts began to restrict municipal powers over land” (22).

In another section, Werner emphasizes the accelerated rate of growth in industrialization and urbanization from 1820-1870. For Americans,

their way of living on the land underwent a complete metamorphosis in which a national system of cities mobilized scattered villages and farms into a network of regional commercial and manufacturing centers. This sudden reorganization of American life, the forcing of a rural society into an urban mold, exacted a terrible toll in everyday life. . . . Never were conditions more exploitative and dangerous to human life. . . . Yet cities of every size boomed with the possibilities that flowed from new resources, new methods of transportation, new ways of doing business, and new ways of making things” (64-65).

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Werner is very good about showing the different aspects of this rapid transformation in its urban settings, for example, technological innovations, the appearance of new industries, the transportation networks provided by canals and railroads, and the rise of specialization in manufacturing. Werner observes that these changes caused “myriad interactions” whereby a “string of small commercial Atlantic coast cities” evolved into a “continental complex of trading centers to which were added a scattering of wholly new specialized manufacturing cities” (69-70). Merchant capitalists and contractors reorganized the labor force around this new market economy, and rural migrants—particularly young men—flocked to the cities in search of work.

The labor vacuum created by urban growth also attracted foreign immigrants (mostly English, Irish, and German before 1870) who competed with natives for jobs. Tensions flared, particularly between Catholic immigrants and Protestant natives. Economic depression, the growing gap between social classes, and health epidemics like cholera and yellow fever further strained society, so much so that between 1834 and 1871 every major city and many smaller towns “suffered epidemics of violence; there were labor riots, race riots, native-foreign riots, Catholic-Protestant riots, rich-poor riots” (79).

Nevertheless, Americans continued their venture toward national urbanity and increased material prosperity. While the South lagged behind (“its agricultural economy in 1870 resembled an underdeveloped eighteenth-century colony and had little in common with the boom conditions of the Northeast and Midwest,” 72), the North continued to expand its industrial metropolises.

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By 1870, with the integration of commercial and financial operations, the United States possessed a national economy centered around its major urban markets.

Although intended as only a part of the overall evolution of American cities, Werner's material on antebellum urbanization gives the reader a precise and compelling analysis of the turbulent change in Jacksonian America that still remains a vital part of the American urban landscape.