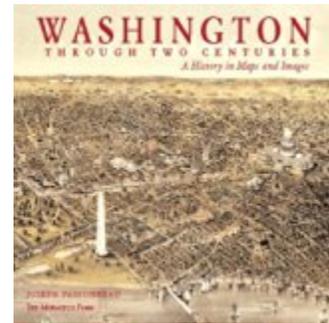


H-Net Reviews

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Joseph Passonneau. *Washington through Two Centuries: A History in Maps and Images*. New York: Monacelli Press, 2004. 288 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58093-091-8.

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Maps without Context

Over a span of almost 30 years, architect and civil engineer Joseph Passonneau guided a bevy of students, draftsmen, and architects in the creation of a series of maps tracing the history of land use in central Washington, D.C. The maps were drawn in pairs, two maps for each of the years of 1860, 1900, 1940, 1970, and 2000, covering the city from 30th Street NW to 2nd Street NE/SE and from P Street NW/NE to Independence Avenue. One map for each year is an axonometric view that allows users to compare the relative heights of the buildings in each block. The second map uses colors to code the structures according to function, providing readers with a sense of how the city's residential, commercial, government, and institutional areas grew and transformed over time. The first maps in the series, depicting conditions in 1900 and 1970, were drawn in 1973, the work of students hired under grants received when Passonneau was a visiting professor in architecture at the University of Maryland. The complementary maps for 1860, 1940, and 2000 came in the following decades and were drawn by draftsmen in Passonneau's architectural practice, which specializes in transportation engineering.

These maps are the backbone and singular achievement of Passonneau's otherwise unoriginal general history, *Washington through Two Centuries: A History in Maps and Images*. Although the book's introduction implies that it will focus on urban planning in the city, the six chronological chapters that follow broadly cover the landscape, architectural, governmental, and demographic influences that shaped the growth of the national

capital. Transportation developments, revisions to the Mall, and histories of a select group of neighborhoods receive particular attention throughout the book. The city's best-known agents of change—the growth of the federal government; war-time exigencies; the introduction of streetcars, park planning, transit and highway construction—appear in due course throughout the book.

Passonneau's maps are certainly an accomplishment, synthesizing information for thousands of buildings from a variety of historic and contemporary sources: Sanborn Insurance maps, Baist's Real Estate Atlases, photogrammetry and oblique aerial photography, and first-hand observation. Although limited in coverage to the modern central business district and a part of the adjacent monumental core, the maps paint a grand and easily grasped picture of change in the city over time. Decreases in density, increases in building scale, and the loss of houses from the central city practically leap off the page when the chronological maps are compared.

Unfortunately, the disappointingly imitative text of *Washington through Two Centuries* does not do the maps justice. Rather than interpret the maps directly—and thereby help readers understand the patterns of growth they reveal—the book spends its time rehashing the long-familiar stories and usual personalities of Washington history. Virtually everything in the text is borrowed from existing literature about the city. (All of the important supporting illustrations appear elsewhere, too.) For example, all the chapters save the first contain a signifi-

cant section examining Washington's neighborhoods as windows on the city's growth. However, each neighborhood Passonneau treats—Georgetown, Shaw, Dupont Circle, and Le Droit Park, among others—already appears in *Washington at Home: An Illustrated History of Neighborhoods in the Nation's Capital*, the out-of-print standard work on the subject.[1] Considering how much ongoing research there is on the city's neighborhoods, and how much research remains to be done, it is disappointing to find only repetition of familiar themes in Passonneau's discussion of the city.

Nowhere is Passonneau's lack of primary research more evident than in his treatment of demolition in the city. Two chapters contain extensive illustrated discussions of buildings that have been razed to make way for new development. These discussions are based wholesale on James Goode's thorough and broad-ranging 1979 book *Capital Losses: A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed Buildings* (reprinted in 2003). Passonneau discusses only lost buildings that appear in Goode, and there are many textural similarities between the two. His

treatment is so derivative, in fact, that Passonneau uses the same photographs Goode used—without exception. Readers are advised to pick up Goode's superb original rather than consult Passonneau's imitation.

It should also be noted that a handful of Passonneau's maps were published in 2001 in "Visions for the Millennium," a 24-page booklet brought out by the Committee of 100 on the Federal City. Passonneau was the chief author of this simple booklet, which contains a straightforward planning history of central Washington and a concise evaluation of today's sometimes competing schemes for future development in the city. If only this booklet contained Passonneau's complete series of maps, there would be no need for *Washington through Two Centuries*.

Note

[1]. Kathryn Schneider Smith, ed., *Washington at Home: An Illustrated History of Neighborhoods in the Nation's Capital* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1988).

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