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The American Memory Website. Library of Congress.

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In an essay published recently in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), Gertrude Himmelfarb argued that the Internet exemplifies post-modernist technology. "Like postmodernism, the Internet does not distinguish between the true and the false, the important and the trivial, the enduring and the ephemeral."^[1] One need not subscribe to Himmelfarb's politics of culture to appreciate her questions about modern technology. Anyone who has been web-surfing can attest to the enormous amount of unadulterated junk that will accumulate in a search of websites as well as to the Internet's inordinate capacity to devour one's usually limited time.

A visit to the Library of Congress's [American Memory Website](#) will require time, but the trip will yield a multitude of documents, photographs, and films of interest to a historian of urban America. After briefly describing some of the sites most useful to urbanists, I would like to return to issues about the use of the Internet that are raised in Himmelfarb's essay.

At the American Memory homepage, the browse option provides an overview of seventeen on-line collections. These include documents, such as the African American pamphlets from the Daniel A. P. Murray Collection and books and tracts from the National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection, as well as daguerreotypes and the collections of several photography studios, and early films from the Edison and the American Mutascope and Biograph companies. I found the photographic collections best illustrate the potential use of this website. The photographs themselves are visually interesting, while the hypertext links take you to brief but informative essays based on recent scholarship. For example, a special presentation entitled "Architecture in America: From State Houses to Skyscrapers" introduces viewers to the Detroit Publishing Company collection, which includes 25,000 photographs of urban, rural, and small town life from the 1890s through

the 1920s. The presentation features thirty-three images of main streets, city halls, stately residences, and tenements, with links to essays on architects and architectural styles. Browsing through the other photographs will not yield the same level and coherence of information, but the exhibit exemplifies the possibilities for creating photo essays out of the Detroit Publishing Company materials and other photographic collections.

Urbanists, particularly those interested in architecture, will also want to visit the Theodor Horydczak Photographs and the Gottscho-Schleisner Collection. The Horydczak photographs consist of over 14,000 on-line images, dating from the mid-1920s to the 1950s, that document the architecture, suburban development, and social life of Washington, D. C. There is a presentation on "Discovering Theodor Horydczak's Washington" that functions as a brief preview of the collection. The Gottscho-Schleisner materials are more wide-ranging, with 29,000 images covering architecture and interior design, principally in New York City, Washington, D. C. (over 5,000 images each), Detroit (over 1,000), Chicago (nearly 900), and San Francisco (nearly 100). Smaller groups of photographs of non-U. S. cities, including London, Montreal, Mexico City, Paris and Tokyo, are included in the collection.

The "Early Motion Pictures Homepage" and the "American Variety Stage Collection" include short films on vaudeville, turn-of-the-century New York City, the 1901 Pan-American Exposition and William McKinley's funeral, the Westinghouse Works, and San Francisco before and after the 1906 earthquake. All of the films can be searched by a subject index and each film has a brief note and description. (Unfortunately, I could not download the films with my Mac IICI, but the stills reproduced with the descriptions convey a flavor of the films.)

The documentary collections, although the least interesting visually, allow viewers to read (and print off) primary texts. Interviews from the Folklore Project of the

WPA Federal Writers Project, for example, cover topics on tenement life in New York City, organized crime, and racial and ethnic relations. The Folklore Project represents less than one percent of the Federal Writers' 300,000 items and it is the only portion of the collection that is digitized currently. Since [The American Memory Website](#) provides only a small sampling of the Library of Congress collections, this raises questions about the intended use and audience for this website: Is the website intended for research purposes? Is it entertainment of the public television variety? Is it, like so much found on the web, simply an advertisement? The website has limited use for scholarly research. Certainly it is not as valuable as the opportunity to search manuscript and book holdings on line. However, images can be down-loaded from the website, which also includes information on obtaining permission to reproduce photographs, and hard copies may be purchased from the Library of Congress. Moreover, the site will be useful for the research projects of undergraduates and high school students, who will have access to a wide range of primary textual and visual materials not available in local college or public libraries. Even if every urbanist on this list built research in [The American Memory Website](#) into their syllabi, it is likely that the largest audience will still be the general public. A site built and

maintained by public money ought to engage the public, and the materials on popular culture, the built environment, Civil War photographs, and documents from the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention will do that. In addition, the Library of Congress has been attentive to issues of race, class, and gender in assembling a site that is broadly representative of the American people. Most importantly, the site demonstrates the potential of the Internet to contribute to a democratic public culture. Will use of the Internet, as Himmelfarb fears, exacerbate impatience with textual analysis and the careful labor required for research? Will our students go beyond the information readily available at their fingertips? I suspect that the Internet is no more subversive of research and scholarship than any other technological innovation. If we are training our students to evaluate evidence and to make coherent arguments, they will perforce treat the items their web searches yield with the requisite skepticism. And if the American Memory website does serve as an advertisement for the Library of Congress and lures them from the virtual site to the real one, so much the better. Notes: [1]. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "A Neo-Luddite Reflects on the Internet," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* vol. XLIII n. 10 (November 1 1996), p. A56.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

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