H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Benedetto, Jane Donovan, Kathleen DuVall. *Historical Dictionary of Washington, D.C.* Lanham and Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003. xxxi + 339 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8108-4094-2.

Reviewed by Alan H. Lessoff (Department of History, Illinois State University)
Published on H-DC (June, 2003)

A Handbook for Washington Historians

A Handbook for Washington Historians

The opening of the City Museum in the old Carnegie Library on Mount Vernon Square offers a major example of the progress of historical activity in Washington and of the infrastructure to support it. The H-DC list, with its varied contributors and discussions, attractive homepage, and abundant links, also points to the current vigor of the study of the city. In its own way, the volume under review underscores the impressive development of scholarship on Washington and on its neighborhoods and institutions in recent years. Even two decades ago, compiling a reference guide such as this would have entailed enormous original research. A considerable portion of the fifty pages of works listed in the bibliography were published since 1980 and reveal the breadth of recent research on which the authors could rely.

None of the three authors of this volume qualifies as an urban historian in either an academic or public history incarnation, but all have considerable experience with bibliography, archives, and editing. A bibliographer and archivist on religious topics now at the Princeton Theological Seminary, Robert Benedetto previously produced an historical dictionary on reformed churches for Scarecrow Press. A freelance writer, Jane Donovan has written on historical topics in the Washington-area press and has published a history of Methodism in Georgetown funded by the D.C. Community Humanities Council. Kathleen Duvall is a professional editor as well as writer.

In this, the second volume in Scarecrow's series on world cities to deal with a U.S. city (after a 1998 work on Honolulu and Hawai'i), the publisher assigned this trio of authors a daunting task of selection and compression. This publisher's dictionaries are not meant to be exhaustive in the manner of Kenneth Jackson's *Encyclopedia of New York City*, nearly 1,400 pages of small print, or the *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, nearly 1,200 pages, plus a second volume of historical narrative.[1] With some qualifications, the authors of the Washington volume have done an admirable job of distilling the enormous and increasing volume of information on Washington's people, places, and events into a practical handbook for scholars and writers, museum and site administrators, archivists, librarians, and other historical practitioners.

The bulk of the volume consists of hundreds of entries of 100 to 500-600 words on topics ranging alphabetically from "Adams, Henry Brooks" to "Wormley Hotel" and chronologically from "Native American Settlements" through the as-yet incomplete "Black Patriots Memorial." The longest, most informative entries generally concern neighborhoods from Adams Morgan through Tenleytown or districts such as Chinatown or Seventh Street. As historical interest focuses more on Washington's neighborhoods and Washingtonians' daily lives, these entries, which sketch both an area's origins and its social evolution, will serve as valuable summations.

The authors endeavored to include major personalities, events, and institutions in the civic and economic development. The dictionary makes a solid effort to cover Washington's racial and civil rights experiences, with entries ranging from "Slavery" to "Strayer Report," "*Hobson v. Hansen*," "Riots of 1968," and "Industrial Bank of Washington," as well as entries on numerous African-American figures from civic and cultural life, including leading Howard University professors such as Kelly Miller and musicians such as Bill Harris and Duke Ellington. Memorable events such as the September 11 attacks, the Hanafi Muslim siege of 1977, the Truman assassination attempt of 1950, and the Woman Suffrage Parade of 1913 receive explanation.

The volume reveals considerable familiarity with the history and present condition of the performing arts and popular culture. Present-day theater, dance, and music are well covered, as are cultural landmarks from past eras, all the way back to the United States Theatre, which existed from 1800 to 1836. Coverage of the visual arts, public sculpture, and architecture is less comprehensive

but serviceable. Entries sketch most private and public art galleries, arts organizers such as J. Carter Brown, extant and demolished landmark buildings, and key architects from James Hoban through the present. For some reason, the authors prepared an entry on the Octagon House but not on the American Institute of Architects, though the AIA's effect on Washington equals or exceeds that of its familiar building. This reviewer was most impressed by the coverage of churches and religious figures and institutions, frequently a neglected element in urban studies but one in which all three authors have research experience. Finally, the authors provide capsule explanations of such basic elements of Washington as the street naming system, the law code and the courts, and the home rule issue.

Supplementing the entries are a seven-page chronology and fourteen pages of historical photographs. The most valuable of the appendices provide contact information for local history collections, and addresses and architects of significant buildings. The bibliography offers a solid starting point for historians, though one finds shortcomings. The coverage of local governmental and business history exhibits discernible gaps. The authors omit almost all sources on the local role of the Army Corps of Engineers. Examples of missing modern scholarship include: James Whyte's *The Uncivil War* (1958), still the only complete narrative of Washington's stormy Reconstruction years; Carl Osthaus's *Freedmen, Philanthropy, and Fraud* (1976), the definitive study of the Freedman's Bank debacle; Donald Ritchie's *The Press Gallery* (1991), which examines the post-Civil War development of the press corps; and Carl Abbott's *Political Terrain*, the innovative study of Washington's regional identity.[2] Proofreading mistakes are evident in the bibliography, such as placing Glenn Brown's 1900-03 *History of the United States Capitol* under "General History." (In the entry on Brown, this book is erroneously called "*History of the United States Capital*" [p. 43].) Constance McLaughlin Green's individual volumes are listed correctly, but at the bottom of the same page, the combined version is attributed to James Sterling Young (p. 264).

The entries, as well, contain errors and inconsistencies that will not sidetrack an experienced historian but that pose hazards for novices and students, who may hereby elicit undeserved professorial grumbling in the margins of term papers. For example, Cleveland Park is listed as containing "America's first shopping center," dating from 1931 (p. 60). Depending upon definition, this title is generally awarded either to Baltimore's Roland Park Shopping Center, dated 1896, or Kansas City's Country Club Plaza, begun in 1923. Restrictive convenants were not "banned" in 1948 (p. 193)–they were ruled legally unenforceable. Charles Guiteau, who would be better described as deranged than "disgruntled," shot James Garfield not at the Baltimore and Ohio Station (p. 97), but at the Baltimore and Potomac Station, which was the station on the Mall (a fact that deserves a separate entry). The B&O Station was north of the Capitol at New Jersey Avenue and C Street, NW. Rightly or wrongly, Saint Elizabeths Hospital generally omits the apostrophe (p. 201). The entry "McMillan Report" (p. 143) refers readers to an entry on "Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.," when pages 167-168 discuss the father and not the son, who does merit a separate entry. The first governor under the Territorial system was Henry D. Cooke, not David H. Cook (p. 310).

One example of a string of errors and inconsistencies relates to Alexander Shepherd and the Territorial government, Washington's most dramatic local political controversy before the Marion Barry years. The entry on the 1871 District Territorial Act is correct if sketchy (pp. 78-79). Yet the wording regarding the same measure in the chronology (p. xxi) and in the introduction (p. 10) is misleading, especially concerning which segments of the government were appointed and which elected. Likewise, the entry on Alexander Shepherd (pp. 191-192) is also more or less correct, though most scholars would question the insistence on labelling Shepherd "boss" at every opportunity. Moreover, the entry implies that Shepherd's bankruptcy and departure for Mexico followed in quick succession after his government's abolition in 1874. In fact, he did not declare bankruptcy until 1876 and did not move to Mexico until 1880. The introduction, meanwhile, has Shepherd appointed governor in 1874 instead of 1873 and has him accused, inaccurately, of giving contracts to his own companies (p. 11). Only the most hostile critics charged Shepherd with malfeasance for direct personal gain; his agreed-upon misdeeds were reckless finance, high-handed administration, and the funneling of contracts to political and personal allies. The introduction also depicts Shepherd as having "fled town, laying low in Mexico" after his ouster in June 1874. Convinced he would soon be vindicated and rehabilitated, Shepherd had no reason to flee. When he did go to Mexico six years later, it was as head of a well-publicized, multi-million dollar mining venture encouraged by Mexico's D=az regime. The area of the Sierra Madres was remote, but he was not "laying low" by any means. After its 1979 removal from Pennsylvania Avenue, the Shepherd statue did not go into storage permanently (p. 192). By the mid-1980s, it had reappeared near a Department of Public Works building on Shepherd Av-

enue in Anacostia.

On a substantive level, the dictionary exhibits conceptual gaps that undercut its considerable strengths. Selection in such a work is inevitable, but the pattern of selection and omission here seems to slight institutions and episodes that were indispensible at different periods in the city's development, even though they may escape attention now. The Army Corps of Engineers plays as little a role in the entries as in the bibliography. Other than Montgomery C. Meigs, none of the army engineers who dominated Washington's physical development and public works have entries, not even Orville Babcock and U.S. Grant III. The Corps's influence on Washington's parks and on such distinctive features of the city's civil engineering history as water supply, asphalt paving, and underground wires receives insufficient attention.

Radical Reconstruction was a pivotal moment in Washington's political and racial history, but it, too, receives scant attention. Even the entry on radical mayor Sayles J. Bowen leaves ambiguous his place at the center of the divisive politics of the late 1860s.

Washingtonians might wish to consign the century of commission rule after 1874 to oblivion, but that would be no more accurate than Parisians omitting the reign of Louis XIV from their histories out of pique at the Sun King's preference for Versailles. Among the commissioners, only Louis Brownlow merits an entry. The appendix on political leaders details the commissioners who managed the creation of the city in the 1790s but not its governance from 1874 to 1967. The entries on Home Rule and on the Organic Act of 1878 leave out the financial issues that drove this famous legislation. There is no mention of the half-and-half budget plan implemented in 1878, nor of how this eroded into the much-deplored Federal Payment during the early twentieth century. Likewise, Congress has always been there, however much Washingtonians would like to forget this. Few of the congressional figures who shaped Washington for good (James McMillan) or for ill (John McMillan) receive profiles. The dictionary does not explain how the congressional committee structure evolved with regard to Washington, even though congressional committees have effectually governed Washington intermittently, especially in the aftermath of its recurring budget crises. The various incarnations of the police have no entries, nor do such once-formidable institutions as Capital Traction.

A reference work on Washington history should do more with the press. For nearly three-quarters of a century after the Civil War, the *Washington Evening Star* was the most influential newspaper on the local scene, yet it has no entry. Only a scant few of the one-time celebrities of the press appear, not even Emily Briggs or Ben. Perley Poore. Other than the University of the District of Columbia, higher education receives good attention. The indispensible role, however, in modern Washington's life played by research institutes such as Brookings as well as by professional, trade, and public-interest associations receives almost no attention. Though the authors made a solid effort to cover African American politics and business, key personalities are missing or questionably summarized. To cite a major example, Marion Barry's 1990 drug arrest certainly counts as the most spectacular incident of his mayoralty, but a sentence or two on what he did while mayor–his approach during his first three terms to redevelopment, municipal finance, and the D.C. civil service–would explain why Barry's rule was already the focus of a storm of controversy before the FBI's sting. While the suburbs are beyond the volume's scope, Washington's development into a metropolitan region, and the governmental and social difficulties created by the suburban/urban divide, merit at least some notice.

In sum, this generally admirable work would be more valuable if the authors adopted a more definite set of principles for determining which periods of and elements in Washington's history require emphasis and in what proportions. In preparing a second edition, the authors should also comb the volume for inconsistencies and errors. These comments do not negate the considerable promise of this handbook, which in its current form offers a useful reference tool for professional historians and, over time, should evolve into an appreciated resource for Washington's residents and students as well.

Notes

[1]. Kenneth Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); David D. Van Tassel and John J. Grabowski, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); and Carol Poh Miller, *Cleveland: A Concise History*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[2]. James H. Whyte, *The Uncivil War: Washington during the Reconstruction* (New York: Twayne, 1958); Carl R. Osthaus, *Freedmen, Philanthropy, and Fraud: A History of the Freedman's Savings Bank* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Donald A. Ritchie, *The Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Carl Abbott, *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C., from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Alan H. Lessoff. Review of Benedetto, Robert; Donovan, Jane; DuVall, Kathleen, *Historical Dictionary of Washington, D.C.*. H-DC, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7722

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.