

*Who Built America? From the Centennial Celebration of 1876 to the Great War of 1914.* Voyager Company,

**Reviewed by** John D. Saillant

**Published on** H-Amstdy (June, 1994)

This version of *Who Built America?* derives from the second volume of the American Social History Project's textbook of the same name in American History (Pantheon, 1992). In its CD-ROM version, *Who Built America?* contains a narrative text to be read traditionally (the arrow keys turn pages), but it also contains features ("excursions") ranging from those well known in printed textbooks (maps, charts, timelines, and short excerpts from primary sources) to those that usually are not in printed textbooks (long excerpts from primary sources, sometimes even entire documents) to those that cannot be printed in books (films, music, recordings of jokes and speeches). The technological capabilities of the years covered by *Who Built America?* help define the excursions. Booker T. Washington and William Jennings Bryan appear in sound recordings. Vaudeville numbers appear with their stereotypes and burlesque accents. Newsreel clips cover presidential elections and prize fights. The written word appears in the first crossword puzzle ever presented in a newspaper as well as one of the Adams brothers' *Chapters of Erie* essays from the *North American Review*. Moreover, *Who Built America?*'s self-conscious status as a social history work means that readers gain a perspective on American history that is left out of much teaching and writing. A good example is *Who Built America?*'s treatment of Augustus Saint-Gaudens's memorial to the 54th Massachusetts

regiment, which is displayed in Boston. I (John Saillant) studied Saint-Gaudens and that memorial in particular in several courses at Brown University, and I have viewed it a number of times. Brown has a reputation as a progressive university, but here the memorial was taught as part of a monumental European tradition that Saint-Gaudens carried to America and as part of a genteel New England tradition, refracted in Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead." Never mentioned, however, was the essential fact, which appears in *Who Built America?*, that the memorial was funded by the collection of small donations from countless African American families and organizations. In the spirit of *Who Built America?*, we might well ask who built the monument. Part of the usefulness of a CD-ROM like *Who Built America?* flows from the way in which Hypertext is presented to the reader. The reference material and the primary sources are "behind" the on-screen text. The reader can always invoke a series of maps or a timeline, while images in the text can be invoked in photographic-quality reproduction and an icon of a railroad track hovering near a word or phrase alerts the reader that an "excursion" into primary materials or into a closer analysis than the narrative text allows is available at a click of the mouse. Thus a book offered in Hypertext can carry its own reference library around with it. The usefulness of a CD-ROM like *Who Built America?* also flows from the way in which it ex-

tends some of the means of reading and learning. It holds much more material than is likely to appear in an ordinary textbook as well as some that could not appear there. It allows highlighting in the text, notetaking in the page "margins," and searching by words. This last feature seems to have attracted the most notice from those learning about Hypertext--or *\*in\** Hypertext. Students who know about Hypertext seem to warm to the idea that they need not read a book as it is presented to them, but rather may reorganize it according to their own principles. I have read claims that this idea is the beginning of a new era in reading and that it is the end of reading. While the effect of Hypertext on reading is not yet clear, it seems safe to infer that many people enjoy playing the roles once played by Duchamp and Picasso, Joyce and Woolf, in turning away from what might be the illusion of straightforward representation. Not only might history itself be like some novels by Faulkner, but so might history books!

<p> <cite>WBA?</cite> poses several interesting challenges to historians. <p> First, how can historians match <cite>WBA?</cite> when they deal with time, place, or matter in which the "multimedia" record is not only different from that of America, 1876-1914, but, in many cases, poorer? <cite>WBA?</cite> works so well partly because the variety of human expression in America, 1876-1914, is so well preserved in writings, images, speeches, songs, jokes, and artistic productions. For example, early American history has no lack of significant material that can be well represented visually--artifacts, broadsides, buildings, maps, newspapers--but any speeches or films would have to be modern reenactments. How could a CD-ROM book about early America be produced? This an interesting challenge because while human experience has always been in "multimedia," the reconstruction and analysis of that experience seem at once closer (because of new technology) and further away (because we are moving into new territory). Professionally-trained historians should meet this challenge, not

only because it involves learning about the past and the present, but also because technological advances create a vacuum, into which abuses of the past can be expected to rush. <p> Second, since a CD-ROM book is likely not only to offer statistics, timelines, and maps, but also to offer a phenomenology or psychology of the past, we may find ourselves countenancing very different views of the feeling or the internal dimension of the past. I have seen CD-ROM books praised for "making the past come alive." What we should be prepared for are different views of the past's inside life. <cite>WBA?</cite> commits itself to a feeling of its period as at once vaudevillian, oppressive (Jim Crow figures prominently), experimental (six paintings from the 1913 Armory Show are there in full color), and diverse (we learn about presidents, immigrants, workers, and gay cowboys). Likely the different forms of writing about history will be reflected in different forms of producing CD-ROMs about history. The historians' profession seems to be entering a new period of experimentation, and the production of CD-ROMs is likely part of this period. We have no way of knowing which experiments will succeed, but we can guess that some historians will use multimedia resources to present intelligent analysis of the past, to bring the computer's means of learning to the screen, and to recreate, in one way or another, the feeling of the past. <p> Third, how can scholars best use the multimedia capacities of CD-ROMs not for illustration of points made in the text (as is the case with <cite>WBA?</cite>), but for original analysis of the sources we study? The traditional monograph, the mainstay of scholarly work, is likely to change if it can include within itself not just brief quotations from the material under examination, but rather, for instance, a critical edition of <cite>Moby-Dick</cite>, or Tom Paine's political writings, or John Singleton Copley's *\*oeuvre\**. How will computer technology change scholarly analysis? This is an open question--and an interesting one.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amstdy>

**Citation:** John D. Saillant. Review of *Who Built America? From the Centennial Celebration of 1876 to the Great War of 1914*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. June, 1994.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14997>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.