

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ann Durkin Keating. *Invisible Networks: Exploring the History of Local Utilities and Public Works (Exploring Community History) (Exploring Community History)*. Malabar, Fla.: Krieger Pub. Co., 1994. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89464-871-7; \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0455-9.

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This book is the first in a prospective series from Krieger “devoted to exploring community history” (ix). Series editors David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty set as their goal the training of local historians. Marty and Kyvig proceed on the assumption that “any literate person motivated to explore some question regarding the past of his or her immediate surroundings could master most historical methods, pursue most research possibilities,” (viii) critically evaluate sources and possible explanations, and write good history. The editors began their efforts to help local historians identify and ask historically significant questions about community history with *Nearby History* in 1982. The new series will continue and expand upon the legacy of *Nearby History*, exhorting historians from small- and medium-sized communities to delve more deeply into long-ignored topics, such as public works and utilities.

Local utilities and public works form the essential infrastructure of daily life. The provision of those services with which we are all familiar—telephones, water, electricity, sewage and garbage disposal, parks and recreational facilities—helps create and define communities. “[P]ublic works” are the sinews that make modern life possible,” Ann Durkin Keating argues; “without them, we are wilderness campers” (p. 3). While these services make urban life possible and country life much less difficult, public works are often provided by “invisible networks.” People take it for granted that the water will run if the faucet is turned on, that the lights will come on if a switch is flipped, etc. The actual technology which provides these services is often hidden from view. We generally know even less about the origins of public works. While water, sewage, and power systems in major cities

have been studied, much remains to be explored in the development of public services in smaller communities. The history of public works can reveal much about daily life, economic activity, and power relationships at the local level.

Keating offers a practical guide for researchers. Part I introduces readers to the basic methodology. Keating advises students of public works to take a visual survey of their communities, and to investigate published local histories. She also details the various sources one might use to investigate the history of local public works: minutes of city council meetings, newspapers, interviews, annual reports of utility companies, and others. In Part II, Keating differentiates between two types of infrastructure networks. Networks “that physically tie individuals to community public works” (such as sewer systems) represent one type. Highways and rail systems are examples of another group of networks—“those that tie a community to a region and beyond” (p. 51). She introduces local historians to the idea that industrialization was the key change that “led to the creation of service networks” (p. 52). Part III introduces students to another, and often delicate, aspect of local public works history. These infrastructure networks are “extremely expensive,” and the issue of “who pays for an improvement and who benefits” is often contentious. In this section, Keating leads students through an examination of the role of government and business in financing services. Keating also emphasizes value of researching the men and women who designed and built public facilities, such as New York City’s Robert Moses, who was directed the development of numerous public works projects major ridges, Shea Stadium, playgrounds, parks, and numerous other facili-

ties.

Keating appends a list of suggested readings at the end of each chapter. These extensive bibliographical essays form one of the most useful aspects of the book, especially for the local historian. Keating cites articles from a variety of scholarly journals such as *The Journal of Urban History*, *Urban Studies*, and the *Journal of Social History*. She also lists relevant book-length secondary sources of value for public works history. Keating's essay on sources for chapter 3 ("Basic Tools for Exploring Public Works History") could be of particular importance for historians just beginning the process of investigating a community's past. She cites several publications of the American Association for State and Local History on local government records and the uses of oral history, and offers suggestions for alternative sources such as the *Survey of Federal Writers' Project Manuscript Holdings In State Depositories*. Such citations can be of inestimable value to all historians, either academic or unaffiliated, but they will be of particular importance to the local historians to whom Keating primarily addresses this book.

Invisible Networks, like *Nearby History*, would serve as an excellent supplementary text for undergraduate courses in local history. Keating provides direction and advice on research materials, important questions to ask, and a solid summary of the state of public works history. This book can serve as a solid "how-to" guide for students and local historians just beginning to develop a broader view of local history. Concerned citizens who are engaged in writing city, county, or regional histories, either independently or under the auspices of a local historical society could also profit from reading *Invisible Networks*. Community studies and local history have been the source of some of the best recent history written, both academic and non-academic. Keating has succeeded in giving local historians a blueprint for asking and answering significant historical questions at the level of "micro history."

This review comes at a time when H-Local list members are in the midst of a discussion on the value of local histories produced by non-academics. Such histories vary widely in quality. All have value. Keating's book

certainly can help concerned citizens take a broader view of their own community's history. Professional historians, whether in academia or not, could also profit from Keating's work, especially the essays on sources.

Addendum based on my own research....

The call for more study contained in this book has a special resonance for me. The faculty here at Kennesaw State College is in the midst of a three-year project designed to research and write a history of the American carpet industry. Since World War II, the U.S. carpet industry has grown at a rate surpassed only by computers and the aerospace industry. The industry has also been heavily concentrated in one small community—Dalton, Georgia, in the northwest section of the state. The emergence of this industry has had a profound impact on this small town of less than 30,000. In virtually every oral history interview conducted for the carpet history project, executives and politicians from the area have cited the local municipal power and water company as one of perhaps three key factors in this rapid development. Carpet mills have a voracious appetite for water. The mills have also used great quantities of dyes and other chemicals which have to be removed from the water supply. The director of this public utility company has pioneered in using the latest techniques to keep ahead of the demand from the industry. In many ways, the local municipal utility and the mill owners have worked together to promote industrial growth. The history of this interaction will form an integral part of our history of the carpet industry and the community of Dalton. Indeed, it would be impossible to write a history of the development of this industry without serious consideration of public utilities. Study of the development of the local utility company can shed important light on local power relationships. Dalton, Georgia, is not unique in this regard. Keating's call for more research into public works, especially in smaller communities, is one that should be heeded by historians of all sorts.

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