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Network of City Beautiful Reformers: Humanizing Harrisburg’s Influencers

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How do we find out information about strangers in our society today? We ask their friends about them, observe their interactions with others, or possibly check their social media. When researching people in the early 20th century, we can uncover clues to people’s character by using archival research. We can study them in their space and place using geospatial and census data.

Mira Lloyd Dock, J. Horace McFarland, and Warren H. Manning were three key reformers who rose to prominence during the City Beautiful Movement in Harrisburg, defined broadly as the period of urban development from 1900-1930. They formed a tight-knit yet evolving interpersonal network as they pursued their controversial goal of improving the industrial town of Harrisburg into a sophisticated metropolis.

Introducing the Reformers

Mira Lloyd Dock lived with her sisters on North Front Street, Harrisburg. She pursued a professional career in forestry and conservation. Dock gave a speech at the Harrisburg Board of Trade on December 20, 1900, that sparked the beginning of the Harrisburg City Beautiful movement (Wilson 1980). After moving away from Harrisburg, she continued to influence the movement through her correspondence with McFarland and with Manning.

J. Horace McFarland was an influential man in Harrisburg even before the City Beautiful Movement. He ran a successful printing company and was the secretary of the Municipal League of Harrisburg for 45 years. He was also president of the American Civic Association for 20 years. McFarland played a key role in influencing popular opinion through leading the Municipal League and campaigning for improvements.

Warren H. Manning hailed from Boston. He was a student of Frederick Law Olmsted who was in charge of designing Central Park in New York City. Manning was also helpful with lantern slides. It seems Mira Dock was not afraid to ask Manning for assistance procuring some lantern slides, presumably for one of her talks. In this letter, he speaks of their mutual friend, McFarland. In 1900, Mira Dock was in correspondence with Manning’s teacher, Frederick Law Olmsted. He was helping her with lantern slides. It seems Mira Dock was not afraid to ask for help when she needed it. She had many friends involved in her area of interest, including friends in high places. She appears to have been a great “networker,” as we would say today.

The Network before Urban Reform

During the early years, the network was gaining form. Dock, McFarland, and Manning were becoming better acquainted by connecting over their common interests and goals.

In 1898-1900, before the campaign for improvements began, both J. Horace McFarland and Mira Dock were campaigning for change through their connections in the greater Harrisburg community. Manning was in correspondence with Dock and McFarland regarding Harrisburg and nationwide improvements.

In the winter of 1898, Manning wrote a letter to Dock in response to her request for assistance procuring some lantern slides, presumably for one of her talks. In this letter, he speaks of their mutual friend, McFarland. In 1900, Mira Dock was in correspondence with Manning’s teacher, Frederick Law Olmsted. He was also helping her with lantern slides. It seems Mira Dock was not afraid to ask for help when she needed it. She had many friends involved in her area of interest, including friends in high places. She appears to have been a great “networker,” as we would say today.

The Network during Urban Reform

After the seed of the improvement gospel was planted, the improvement plans started in full force and the movement gained strength.

The majority of Harrisburg’s urban reformers lived on North Front and Second streets, where there was a community of well-to-do white residents. The Front Street map below uses census data from 1901, linking ethnicity with residences. The yellow dots symbolize white residents and the green dots represent black residents. Mira Lloyd Dock’s house is circled in blue.

The Network after Urban Reform

After the City Beautiful movement in Harrisburg, the network of urban reformers stayed strong through extensive correspondence and continued relationships.

A letter from Warren H. Manning to Mira L. Dock in 1924 starts, “Dear Miss Myra Lloyd Dock: I always think of you in the full name and always with pleasure from my associations with you in the Harrisburg and other work in the public welfare and especially from the visit that I had with you and your sisters.” The informal tone of this letter signals a closer relationship between Manning and Dock.

In most of these later letters between the reformers, there is an inner-circle feeling. Issues regarding the movement that might not be discussed with the public are discussed in this correspondence.

From their correspondence, personal papers, and other items, these three reformers gain a more human image. They corrected each other, they encouraged each other, and they spurred each other on in what they believed was a worthy endeavor. Seeing their personal connections and interactions can aid us in understanding the beliefs behind the City Beautiful movement in Harrisburg, the actions taken during the movement, and the consequences of the movement that influence Harrisburg to this day.

The Project

This exhibit accompanies a full website exhibit. The purpose of creating this exhibit was to incorporate digital skills and tools with hands-on archival research. The procedure I adopted was reading secondary sources of the movement, researching letters and papers at two archives, and then analyzing data from censuses and historical maps. I incorporated my research into a cohesive project through the use of Microsoft Access, Microsoft Excel, WordPress, and ArcGIS. To access the website, either visit: https://networkofreformers379807436.wordpress.com/ or scan the QR code.

References