

Turn of the Century America by Pen and Camera: Social Histories in the American Viewbooks Collection

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Abstract

The American Viewbooks Collection in Avery Classics, the rare books division of Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University, consists of works originally produced as promotional and commemorative items depicting American cities and towns during the late 19th and early 20th century. Avery Classics recently completed a rare books cataloging project, funded by a CLIR Hidden Collections Grant, to catalog the Viewbooks Collection, which had long been exclusively described in the library's physical card catalog. The author of this article was in sustained contact with the collection over the course of two years, initially as an intern cataloger, then as a supervisor to student catalogers. Within these wide-ranging books that cover all corners of the United States, the author noted several patterns of content and theme that elucidate broader stories of the American cultural landscape at the turn of the 20th century.

Keywords: cataloging, hidden collections, American cultural landscapes, vernacular architecture, viewbooks, social history

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The American Viewbooks Collection in Avery Classics, the rare books division of Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library at Columbia University, consists of works originally produced as promotional or commemorative items that depict American cities and towns during the late 19th and early 20th century. The books are primarily pictorial, sometimes with little to no textual material accompanying the photographs and etchings. In 2013, Avery received a Hidden Collections Grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources to support the cataloging and exposure of this unique collection. Over a two year period, graduate student interns, including this article's author, worked with experienced rare books catalogers to catalog and house these rare materials.

Within any special collection of library or archival materials, hidden stories of history and provenance reside. This article highlights some of the hidden stories held within Avery's Viewbooks Collection, stories of both the built environment and its human inhabitants. A few examples of the vehicles for these stories include the extensive annotations in a souvenir book of Boston comprising the ad hoc travelogue of a traveler at the turn of the century; annotations in a town souvenir book that correct and enhance content through the addition of local knowledge; booster booklets for towns vying to be the next Great American City, towns whose names are now all but forgotten to history; and a pictorial album of the Ohio Penitentiary, a book

that exemplifies the ideals of a proselytizing progressive prison warden of the late 19th century. An underlying theme in the following explication is the extent to which thoughtful rare books cataloging can serve to assist the work of researchers and activate conceptual connections that would otherwise lay dormant.

Collection History

The American Viewbooks Collection was initially constituted by a former curator of Avery Classics, Herbert Mitchell, during his thirty-year tenure (1960-1991) in Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library. Long interested in architectural ephemera, Mitchell scoured yard sales and flea markets, as well as more typical sources for used books such as dealers and bookshops, to find the varied items that ultimately comprised the Viewbooks Collection. The collection has continued to grow in subsequent years through additional purchases and donations.

The collection includes roughly 4,800 illustrated works depicting cities, towns, and regional attractions across the United States. The items represent a variety of formats, including fold-out souvenir postcard booklets and accordion-folded embossed-cover board books, ranging in size from smaller than a deck of playing cards to full folios. The books were largely produced as souvenir keepsakes or promotional booklets by city booster organizations, real estate boards, or chambers of commerce; many bear the stamps of local stationers, book shops, or general stores. Primarily representing the span of time between 1880 and 1930 (but from 1850 to 1980 in full), the viewbooks depict enormous shifts in the American cultural landscape at the turn of the 20th century.

The viewbooks provide a unique glimpse of the ordinary environment of turn-of-the-century America, with content as much the domain of cultural geographers as that of architectural historians. While some of the viewbooks highlight individual buildings, including some landmarks, the works generally showcase the built environment. A typical viewbook heavily features the streetscapes of main streets and residential neighborhoods as well as municipal and civic infrastructure: churches, public schools, town halls, plazas, post offices, city parks and monuments, hospitals, colleges, social services, and transportation features such as railroad stations, bridges, and waterways. In short, the viewbooks present a thorough overview of the everyday landscape of American cities and towns at the height of industrialization and rapid urban growth. The items that comprise the American Viewbooks Collection stand as documents of civic pride and evidence of the optimistic belief in civic progress.

Collection Access and Discoverability

While the American Viewbooks Collection has been held by Avery Library for many years, patron and researcher access has been limited by the lack of presence in Columbia University's online catalog. Many of the viewbooks were represented by physical card catalog entries, very few of which were transferred to the online system. When Columbia University adopted an online catalog, the card catalog records for some of the viewbooks were included in the OPAC, but merely as stub records without significant detail. The object of the CLIR Hidden Collections grant was to expose the wealth of information in the Viewbooks Collection by creating detailed catalog records for all of the viewbooks, thereby broadening discoverability and increasing researcher access in the Columbia Libraries OPAC. Due to both a high level of competence among the student interns and the efficacy of the cataloging template, the project reached completion in 2016, with all goals on target.

The cataloging of the collection was executed by student interns with a variety of experience in information science, ranging from non-existent to a moderate level of experience. All of the project interns were graduate students of art history, architectural history, historic preservation, or library science. While the library science interns were already conversant in MARC cataloging, other interns were new to the concept of authority control altogether. (In the first days of cataloging training, a Viewbooks Collection intern memorably informed library staff that he now understood the purpose and role of subject headings: "They're like hashtags, but old fashioned"). Given the anticipated range of experience and the need for expediency on the project, a cataloging template was developed for the project by supervising project staff in collaboration with an experienced staff cataloger. The detailed MARC template allowed cataloging interns to supply details through a fill-in-the-blanks approach, enabling novice catalogers to capture salient bibliographic information without undertaking significant training in rare books cataloging. Descriptive terminology relating to binding, format, annotations, insertions, and printing methods was supplied in the template for the cataloging interns, who then could pick and choose the completed fields as appropriate. The template also called for the exercise of cataloger's judgment in the provision of subject headings, which, as any cataloger knows, is where things get interesting.

While many of the viewbooks were made by a similar design formula, the precise subjects depicted or emphasized by a single viewbook can range greatly. The intern catalogers quickly learned to read through the images and captions to perform subject analysis to appropriately capture

the content. By far the most frequent subject heading in the Viewbooks Collection is “Streetscapes (Urban design)”; nearly every book features at least one detailed image of a main street or city square. Other elements depicted include schools, churches, and homes of notable town residents; colleges or hospitals will also appear, if the town was fortunate to have one, as well as charitable institutions such as orphanages, homes for the aged, or mental institutions. In the cataloging process, the interns have attempted to capture these features as completely as possible, either through subject headings or detailed, keyword-searchable notes fields.

Viewbooks

The typical viewbook consists primarily of illustrations, with captions ranging from brief and generic to several sentences of detailed information. The format and binding method, if not simply stapled, generally is one of two distinct types: accordion-folded pages pasted to board covers, or stabbed and tied bindings of stacked pages with card stock or board covers. The illustration types included in the viewbooks present a history of printing and photographic reproduction methods, including photogravure, photolithography, chromolithography, and photography. Many of the viewbooks in Avery’s collection were printed in Albertype, a photomechanical process that creates a printed image with appearance similar to that of lithography.

While photographic processes had existed since the mid-19th century, it was the development of less costly photomechanical reproduction techniques in the late 19th century that facilitated the widespread production of viewbooks. As Jay White explains in his study of late 19th century tourism in Nova Scotia, “Tourist literature underwent a metamorphosis of sorts in the 1890s. Book publishing in general experienced a technological revolution when improved techniques for printing photographs were developed, such as the gravure process and the half-tone block” (White, p. 149). With the development of quicker and less expensive photomechanical reproduction techniques, small books with detailed illustrations could be produced and sold for an accessible price to tourists and travelers.

Small publishers and jobbers at the turn of the century specialized in viewbooks, contracting with towns, cities, and institutions to create customized mementos. Among the well-represented small publishers in Avery’s collection is Adolf Wittemann, whose firm The Albertype Company¹ was based in New York City but published books on all corners of the country, from Oregon and Ohio to New Hampshire

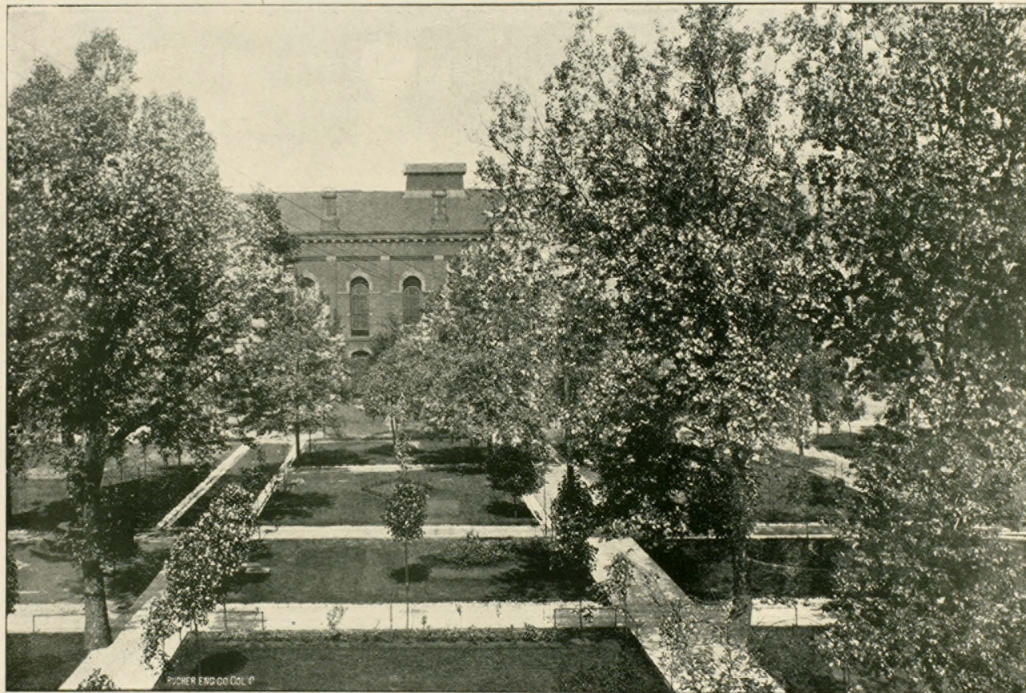
1. The Albertype Company was a solo operation formed by Adolf Wittemann in 1887, after an earlier printing company with his brothers Rudolf and Jacob, Wittemann Brothers. Further background information on Wittemann and his brothers is available through the online finding aid for the Wittemann collection, Pennsylvania Historical Society, and on the websites of the Staten Island Advance and Soda and Beer Bottles of North America.

and Florida. The Chisholm Brothers, based in Portland, Maine, ran a printing operation with a similarly wide geographic spread. Many viewbooks, particularly those coming out of a specific printing house, follow a formulaic layout: a birds-eye view of town often opens the book, images are set within decorative printed borders, municipal buildings are proudly displayed, and the homes of the town's most noted residents depict domestic beauty. Jay White notes that while viewbooks enjoyed brief and significant popularity, "the novelty of the genre quickly wore off due to their formulaic content" (p. 149). However, for purposes of research in the early 21st century, this formulaic content takes on a desirable quality, as it facilitates interpretation. With evidence of consistent patterns between books, one can sort the books and images into revealing typologies.

City or town overviews are the most prevalent form of the viewbooks, but several other veins of content appear in the collection as well. Among the more focused single-subject viewbooks are groupings of industrial, residential, and disaster books. Industrial viewbooks include presentations of mills, mining operations, and industrial zones of developing cities, frequently with an emphasis on commercial development possibilities and economic output. Residential viewbooks include profiles of apartment buildings, hotels, and housing developments. The disaster subgroup presents images of municipal devastation caused by earthquakes, fires, floods, and hurricanes. At first glance the disaster books seem a dreary counterpoint to the images of civic progress manifest in most other viewbooks, but the general undertone in disaster viewbooks is the resilience of the town and the effectiveness of the recovery effort. Other subgroups of single-subject viewbooks include profiles of prisons, military forts, and colleges. Each type of viewbook reveals another aspect of the fin de siècle American social and civic imagination.

Progressivism in Viewbooks

Among the single-subject viewbooks, a prison viewbook from the Ohio Penitentiary, published by the penitentiary warden Elijah G. Coffin in 1899, stands out as a striking example of the American progressive agenda at the turn of the century. Progressivism was governed by the notion that the human condition could be continually improved and that societal ills could be steadily ameliorated through legislative, social, and moral reforms. The progressive movement coalesced in many arenas, including secular and faith-based groups engaging in social voluntarism

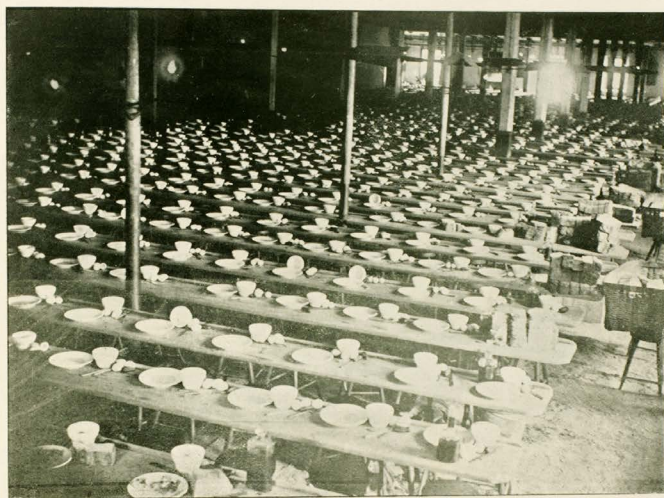


PRISON CAMPUS, WALKS AND FOLIAGE—SECTIONAL VIEW OF NEW HALL BLOCK IN BACK GROUND.

or political activity, addressing topics that ranged from immigrant assimilation and racial inequities to child labor and prison conditions.

As head of the Ohio Penitentiary, Warden Coffin lectured frequently on the topic of prison reform, and aimed to make his prison an example of the ideals he espoused. *Souvenir of the Ohio Penitentiary* was printed, illustrated, laid out, photographed, and typeset by inmates in the penitentiary. The book is bound in flexible binding with textured beige paper covers, with an illustrated cover title printed in metallic gold ink. The illustration, produced by one of the prison inmates, features a ball and chain enclosing the title text, drawn with an almost playful hand. The content of the book is largely photographic, opening with images of the warden's residence but focusing strongly on the prison buildings and grounds, or the "prison campus," (see Figure 1) as it is referred to in captions, with its orderly paving, greenhouse, flower beds, and well-planted foliage. Solid brick buildings in the background are identified as the new bathhouse and prison hospital. A trio of images depicts prisoners lunching with their families and friends on the prison grounds on the July

Figure 1. Ohio Penitentiary campus.
From *Souvenir of the Ohio Penitentiary*.
Image courtesy of Avery Architectural &
Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

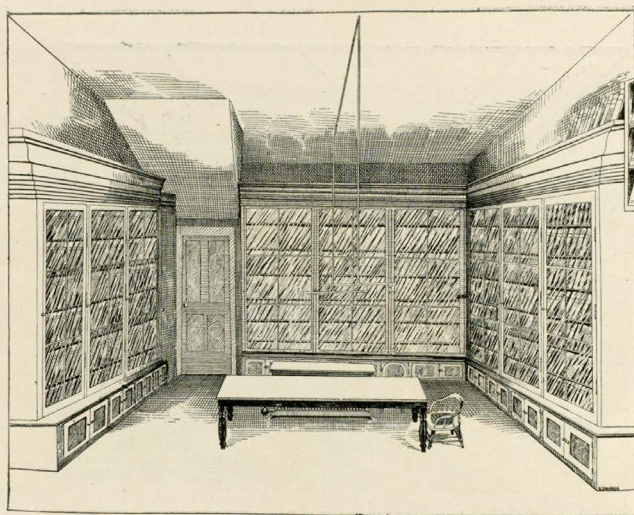


INTERIOR VIEW OF DINING ROOM-DISHES SET FOR CONVICT'S DINNER

Figure 2. Ohio Penitentiary dining hall.
From *Souvenir of the Ohio Penitentiary*.
Image courtesy of Avery Architectural &
Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

Fourth holiday. In the massive expanse of the prison dining room, rows of narrow tables are single-loaded to face the front of the room, with plate, bowl, and drinking cups in uniform arrangement: “Dishes set for the convict’s dinner” (see Figure 2).

Several hand-drawn illustrations by inmate artists appear in the book, including drawings of the expansive prison kitchen, bakery, and school room, as well as the prison library, with a caption that boasts of its 5,000 volumes (see Figure 3).



SECTIONAL INTERIOR VIEW OF PRISON LIBRARY, CONTAINING FIVE THOUSAND VOLUMES.

Figure 3. Ohio Penitentiary library.
From *Souvenir of the Ohio Penitentiary*.
Image courtesy of Avery Architectural &
Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

Despite the wide variety of images in the book, the strongest visual emphasis is on the aspects of the prison associated with inmate labor. Here in the foundry, glove workshop, broom factory, and furniture workshop - to name only a few of the prison industries depicted - is where inmates of the Ohio Penitentiary lived out Warden Coffin's notions of productive penitence. Coffin, a prison reformer and former sheriff who served as warden during the last years of the 19th century, viewed industry as an essential element of humane and reformatory incarceration, along with education and proper nutrition. Coffin's theories on the humane prison appear in his tract "Progressive Penology," published in 1899 as part of his collected *Speeches and Essays*. Coffin writes, "Occupation is the mission of man, and if he is shut up where he cannot work, those responsible commit a crime against nature" (p. 20). Prior to the late 19th century, Ohio prisons relied heavily upon corporal punishment and the warehousing of prisoners throughout their sentences, which Coffin describes as exacerbating all manner of moral and physical ills. Coffin describes the rise in morale among the prisoners of Ohio Penitentiary after the move away from the "idle house" to the implementation of prison labor. No doubt the prison also benefitted from the revenues generated by prison industries; while financial benefits from prison labor contracts are not described in any detail, we might read these profits in the depicted construction of new prison buildings. On the topic of nutrition Coffin writes, "Imperfect alimentation is an unmitigated evil, fraught with the gravest consequences to the physical man, and also exercising a distinctly immoral influence" (p. 16). Coffin compares a hungry man to a tiger and suggests that better nourishment would turn men away from crime, drink, and animal instincts. The images of the prison bakery and the neatly set dining tables appear to illustrate Warden Coffin's ideals.

The fruits of the Progressive Era are visible in other ways across numerous viewbooks from coast to coast. Alongside images of courthouses and public schools, many viewbooks feature images of local charitable and social service organizations like orphanages and homes for the aged and the handicapped. Images of mental institutions are also featured prominently at this time, which was a surprise to many of the project cataloging interns. However, as John Sutton describes in his study of mental institutions in the Progressive Era, the number of mental institutions expanded hugely in the late 19th century, and it follows that images would be featured in viewbooks of the time. While many reformers and civic groups of the era may have acted from intentions to do good unto a mishandled population, Sutton notes that the effects of this expansion of mental institutions served mainly to confine the poor, intemperate, and physically disabled, without addressing root causes of these conditions (p. 665). All the same, the images of mental institutions, referred to by various terms such as "Home for the Incurable

Insane,” are featured regularly in the viewbooks, along with “Homes for the Friendless,” the intemperate, the orphaned, and the aged, presumably as evidence of a municipality’s commitment to its less fortunate citizens. A 1903 viewbook of Hastings, Nebraska, boasts of its State Asylum of the Incurable Insane, with a capacity of 1,080 patients and a cost of \$1.25 million.

Another aspect of early 20th century progressivism illustrated by the Viewbooks Collection is the notion of civic good through technological progress, particularly in American westward expansion. As cities in the East grappled with the challenges of retrofitting city cores and aging buildings with modern conveniences, newly developing towns in the American West were capable of implementing current technologies in pace with or in advance of human habitation. A viewbook from Abilene, Kansas, produced in 1915, demonstrates the capability of new cities of the West to implement municipal infrastructures of technologies and services to facilitate residential comfort and business success. The opening page of *Abilene, Kansas: A clean, healthy town, a prosperous business center, a rich, growing community* boasts of the city’s twelve and a half miles of asphalt paving and “beautiful white way with five-light cement posts and lights on every street crossing throughout entire city” (see Figure 4).

Much of the content of the viewbook follows the standard repertoire of images, but these five-light lampposts are featured repeatedly throughout the book, with a credit noted of their manufacture in Abilene by one J. E. Valentine. The booster text boasts of the city’s Carnegie library, new post office, and uninterrupted access to “99.998 percent pure, finest water in Kansas,” administered through the city-owned plant and spring. In a new town of the west, electricity and gas could hardly go without mention, nor could the proximity of railroads. At the time of the book’s publishing, the Santa Fe, Union Pacific, and Rock Island lines all came to the city, with “another north and

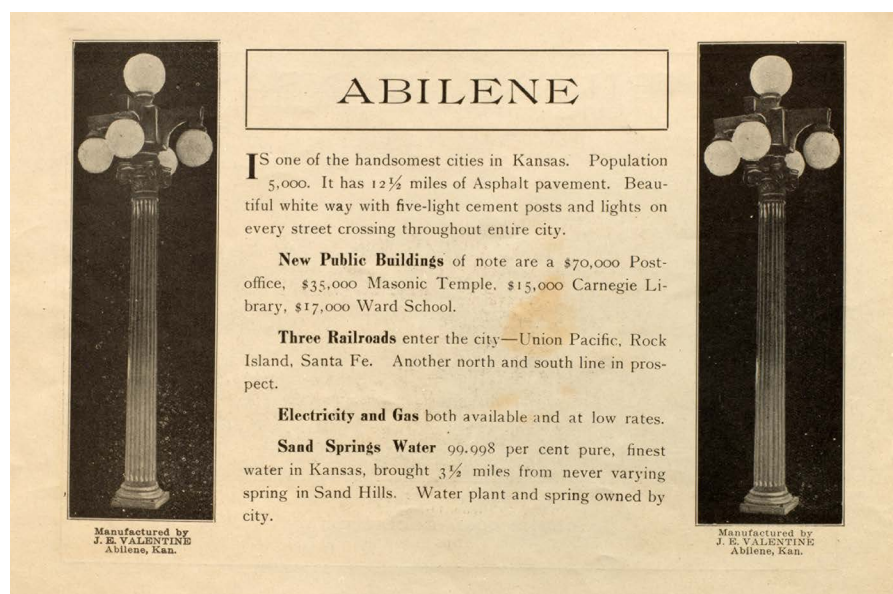


Figure 4. *Abilene, Kansas: A clean, healthy town, a prosperous business center, a rich, growing community* viewbook. Image courtesy of Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

south line in prospect.” The city boosters of the Abilene Commercial Club might have been disappointed to know that the population of the city never expanded much beyond its 1915 numbers, despite Abilene’s promising municipal framework. Today the city of approximately 6,500 residents is known mainly as the location of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum.²

Annotations

Given their origin as souvenir items, many of the books within the American Viewbooks Collection include annotations and inscriptions. In large part, these are brief dedications or notes of ownership, occasionally including a date. In a few cases, annotations included in the books are considerably more detailed, comprising narratives unto themselves. In the case of a viewbook of Beaver, Pennsylvania, book annotations provide details from a town resident that serve to correct and augment the printed textual and pictorial information. Extensive annotations in a souvenir viewbook of Boston emerge from the viewpoint of a stranger to the city, who notes with thorough detail her impressions of the sites depicted.

The 1905 edition of *Souvenir of Boston and Vicinity* in itself is not a striking object. The softcover book has a stapled binding and a faded black cover, measures roughly 6x10 inches, and contains about 60 pages of black and white photographs of the city of Boston. As viewbooks of the first decade of the 20th century are concerned, it is rather standard issue in format and content. The book has also not earned singularity through survival, as WorldCat notes more than fifteen other copies. However, the uniqueness of Avery Library’s copy of this book lies in the penned annotations that accompany nearly every image. While the book was published in 1905, the annotations are dated from the months of July and August 1909, when the annotation author seems to have stayed in Boston for several weeks. The annotator appears to have utilized the souvenir book as a travel guide for the city, noting dates under images to record visits to each site. Occasionally the annotator expands the dated note impassively, simply stating “Seen this” or “Been here,” or notes a site’s adjacencies to other monuments and sites depicted. Some notes include more emotive impressions: on an image of Old South Church, the annotator writes, “Visited this July 29, 1909. A very interesting collection is kept here. Still used as a church.” Next to the image of the Public Garden: “Walked past. The garden is beautiful.” Occasionally an annotation is both factual and appraising, such as the note included under an image of the statue of General Washington astride his horse, located in the Public Garden: “Splendid but the horse has no tongue.” The annotator

2. General information on Abilene, Kansas, is available through the city website at Abilene city hall

Historical population data is summarized on the Abilene Wikipedia page:



Figure 5. Annotated page in *Souvenir of Boston and Vicinity viewbook*. Image courtesy of Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

includes notes relating only to the sites depicted, without expansion of his or her visits beyond those places pictured in the book's photographs (see Figure 5).

While we could reconstruct the travel itinerary of the *Souvenir of Boston* annotator with ease and some accuracy, the annotations give only small indications of his or her identity. The adjective “we” appears several times, implying that the annotator did not travel alone. The annotations provide no indication of the author's gender or relationship to his or her traveling companion. As to the home city of the annotator, our only clue, which may be misleading, is located alongside an image of the Sullivan Square Elevated Station in Charlestown: “Change here in going to Malden,” a town located four miles north on the city subway system. A note next to a photograph captioned “Longfellow's Home” may give a further clue as to the annotator's identity, which refers to being given a tour of the home “by Mr. Longfellow's grandson Mr. [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow] Dana” (see Figure 6). At this time the historic house trust had not yet been established for the Longfellow home, and without further research to confirm that Mr. Dana often served as a tour guide to his family's private home, we might presume that the author of this book's annotations had some connection to the Longfellow or Dana family.

Another instance of unique annotations within the American Viewbooks Collection appears in a 1900 viewbook on Beaver, Pennsylvania. This viewbook is unsigned by an owner (as was often the case), but the annotations clearly communicate that the annotator was a resident of the town. Through handwritten corrections and additions, the



Figure 6. Annotated page in *Souvenir of Boston and Vicinity* viewbook. Image courtesy of Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

annotator evinces the self-assurance and sense of ownership over content that only a resident can possess. On nearly every page the annotator expands upon or corrects the information presented through the text and images. It would appear, from what we can glean of the annotator's perspective, that the book's authors have made their first oversight in the matter of page numbers, which have not been printed in this viewbook: our annotator corrects this omission with handwritten number on the corner of each page (see Figure 7).

On an opening panorama, the annotator, perhaps unimpressed with the originality of perspective, notes, "I have a Kodak & took of this same view." A later page features a view captioned "View of Ohio River looking east from Front Street," to which the annotator has written in response, "I am sure this is a view looking west, not east," drawing an arrow to the caption for further clarity. A rather ordinary image of the county courthouse is enlivened by the annotator's addition of "Court House, burned down, by fire beginning up in tower,-"; the annotation ends curiously with a comma and a dash, implying that the annotator may have intended to elaborate. Beaver, Pennsylvania, was once home to a college, and a dormitory is featured in an image captioned, "Elk Street and College Dormitory." Our annotator expands thus: "'Elk Street' was later called College Ave. The College - for women only - was burned down in 1895 or 96; was rebuilt, then the building was bought by the School District, and used as a high school. Elmer graduated from Hi-school in that building in 1927." Through these annotations, we are endowed with local knowledge of the town, presented by an insider who thoroughly knows the town and its history. We also gain a sense of the local endurance of a



Figure 7. Annotated page in *Beaver, Pennsylvania : The ideal home town, 1800-1900* viewbook. Image courtesy of Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

book such as this one; though published in 1900, our resident annotator was interacting with and commenting on the contents of the viewbook twenty-seven years later.

Along with Avery Library's collection of trade catalogs and the Robert Biggert Collection of Architectural Vignettes on Commercial Stationery, the American Viewbooks Collection enables the Library to present a vivid picture of the everyday built environment at the turn of the 20th century. Not only does the collection highlight commonplace local architecture, occasionally side by side with high-style works, but the books also illuminate often-unseen aspects of social history and lived experience through annotations and inscriptions. Throughout the Viewbooks cataloging project, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library aimed for the effective capture of hidden stories and social

historical threads within these unique books, in addition to cataloging the architectural and urban details of the cities and towns. In some cases, such as the *Souvenir of the Ohio Penitentiary*, the viewbook at hand is the only copy in WorldCat, thus careful cataloging serves a particularly important role in identifying a unique item. In other cases, such as the *Souvenir of Boston and Vicinity*, annotations and inscriptions constitute the uniqueness of the object, in which case the cataloger needed to thoughtfully approach the notes fields of the item's bibliographic record. Due to a well-ordered approach to the project, the dedication of intern catalogers, and the funding of the Council on Library and Information Resources, the bibliographic records of the American Viewbooks Collection are now available in their entirety in the Columbia University OPAC. In 2016 Avery Classics presented an exhibition of the Viewbooks Collection to help further open a window on this unique group of publications. Many more hidden stories in the Viewbooks Collection are still waiting to be found.

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