

Look Up, Look Out: Discrepant Stories from the Old Eighth Ward

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LOOK UP, LOOK OUT: DISCREPANT STORIES FROM THE OLD EIGHTH WARD

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ABSTRACT: During the 2018–19 academic year, the author oversaw the research, writing, and production of the *Look Up, Look Out* project. This collaborative endeavor aims to help visitors and state workers understand the social history of the communities of the Old Eighth Ward, the neighborhood displaced by the Capitol Park expansion beginning in 1911. Telling this story presented the research team with several challenges, including competing narratives and the tension between history and memory, but resulted in a richer history of this important multicultural neighborhood in the heart of the commonwealth's capital.

KEYWORDS: Old Eighth Ward, Digital Humanities, Digital Harrisburg Initiative, *Look Up, Look Out*, Commonwealth Monument Project

At its core, the *Look Up, Look Out* campaign is an effort to engage the thousands of state workers and visitors in Harrisburg's Capitol Complex to learn about and remember people and places obscured by the Capitol Park extension.¹ The majority of those who walk the halls of the Capitol Complex's many beautiful buildings do not know that, prior to 1911, the space between the capitol proper and the railroad that still cuts behind Seventh Street was a bustling, diverse neighborhood, known colloquially as the Old Eighth Ward.² It was home to countless businesses and industries, educational institutions, vibrant religious communities, and immigrants and freedom-seekers looking to escape persecution in the American South or Eastern Europe. Using poster installations featuring photos from the Records of the Land Office housed at the Pennsylvania State Archives and portraits of both well-known and lesser-known residents of the ward, interested passersby are directed via QR codes to a series of informative and well-researched webpages telling the stories of

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the Old Eighth framed by themes and subjects such as white and African American churches, synagogues, businesses and social life, service, and the character and consequences of urban reform (figs. 1–4).³

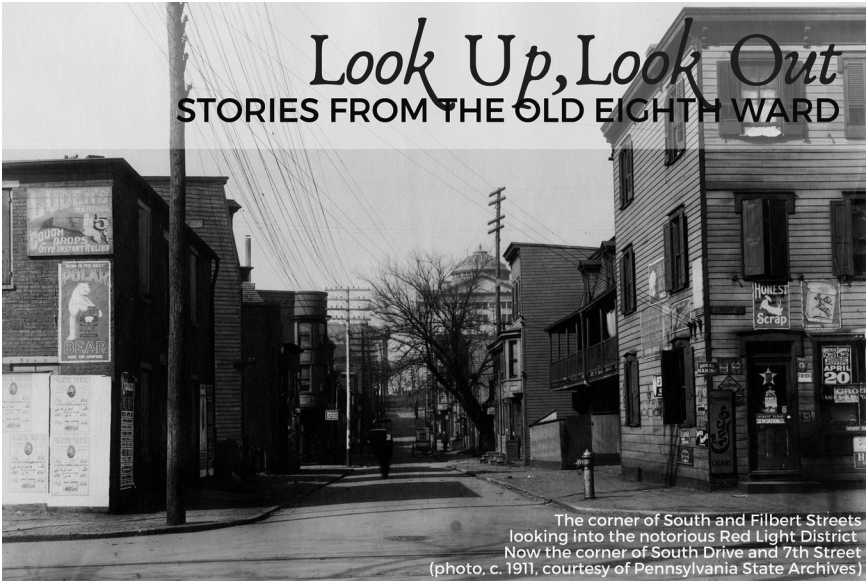
The *Look Up, Look Out* campaign sits at the intersection of history and memory, a contested and divisive space in this age of debate over monuments. As historian Gary B. Nash notes, there is a stark difference between history—academic research conducted within a broader historiographical conversation—and public memory created from the monuments and the motivations of those who erect them. While historians may debate the values or problems of a particular historical interpretation rooms far from the gaze of the broader public, public memory is molded through public institutions and popular media, a “process of memory-making” in which “particular people with vested power [reconstruct] the past through collecting, narrating, and interpreting” even as “individuals and groups outside the circle of cultural arbiters [try] to gain a claim on the past by resisting ‘official’ truth and telling different stories.” The many layers of this process of contestation are clear as we install posters within the Capitol Complex, an architectural wonder that seeks to tell a very different story.⁴

The Capitol Complex is a culmination of Harrisburg’s City Beautiful movement and a testament to the civic power of the commonwealth. Power and beauty were incompatible with what reformers saw as the vice and decay of the working-class ward adjacent to the new capitol. To them, this justified relocating many households, places of worship, factories, and businesses in the service of a greater good: the larger, statewide public. Even William S. Tunis, a Republican in the state House of Representatives and a resident of the Eighth Ward, made this clear when he spoke in favor of the expansion bill on the floor of the House: “I say to you gentlemen that this is for you; it is for your people; it is for the people of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and not for the people of Harrisburg alone.”⁵

In many ways, the *Look Up, Look Out* installation complicates a narrative of civic triumph and beautification in its reclamation of the many stories and memories of the ward. That work is challenging because, as both cognitive scientists and historians have shown, memory, whether individual or communal, is malleable and imprecise, leading to diverse and conflicting remembrances that different people and different communities all *know* to be true.⁶ Since the Old Eighth Ward was never a single community, we are seeking to restore memories with our interpretive installations that respect and empathize with its diversity. While civic reformers regarded the Eighth Ward

as an overcrowded residential district that was the home of unlicensed and rambunctious bars and saloons,⁷ many in the ward actively worked to make their neighborhood and city beautiful and promoted moral reform through campaigns such as the temperance movement (fig. 1). The ward's African Americans remembered Tanner's Alley, a critical station on the Underground Railroad just blocks away from the bounty office that sought to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (fig. 2). Many of these same African Americans were active in churches and fraternal organizations that fed and sheltered freedom-seekers escaping the South and marched in support of emancipation long before the question of slavery split the country. For Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, the Old Eighth Ward was their new home as they sought freedom from persecution at the hands of the Russian Empire (fig. 3). Small-business owners, whether African American, German, or Jewish, made fulfilling lives for themselves as bakers, confectioners, hotel owners, grocers, printers, tanners, shoemakers, and bar owners, often lobbying for themselves in local courts, as "reformers" from outside the neighborhood sought to shut them down for serving liquor on Sunday or using their businesses improperly in support of political causes.

This complication of narrative and memory is an important lesson for the many students who worked on the project as part of the Digital History Initiative and the Center for Public Humanities at Messiah College.⁸ These students conducted the research that forms the bedrock of this project, and their research required collaboration with local historians and community organizers, such as Lenwood Sloan and Calobe Jackson Jr., individuals who likewise continue to work tirelessly with the communities most impacted by the displacement wrought by the capitol expansion (See James B. LaGrand and David Pettegrew, "Harrisburg's Historic African American Community" in this issue). In most history classrooms, students are taught to find the source, cite it, and feel confident in the intellectual distance they place between themselves and their historical subjects. But the congregations central to the social and religious lives of the ward in the early twentieth century—such as Wesley Union AME Zion, Bethel AME, Second Baptist, St. Paul Missionary Baptist, Chisuk Emuna, and Keshet Israel—are still vibrant in the city today. Countless descendants of the residents of the ward have come forward, eager to make sure their inherited memories are included. These contributors make the story richer, but they do not always remember in the same way. They provide narratives that transcend a typical student history project by incorporating a resistance to the "official" story told by the commonwealth with the capitol expansion.



VICE AND VIRTUE IN THE OLD EIGHTH WARD

"To prevent any possible misapprehension, I wish to say again, most emphatically, that although disgraceful vice conditions were in evidence, year after year, in the 'Old Eighth,' yet has it always been the home of many devoted and noble men and women whose unsullied lives shine all the more brightly by the contrast."



—J. Howard Wert, writing in his
"Passing of the Old Eighth" column,
 Harrisburg Patriot,
 May 12, 1913

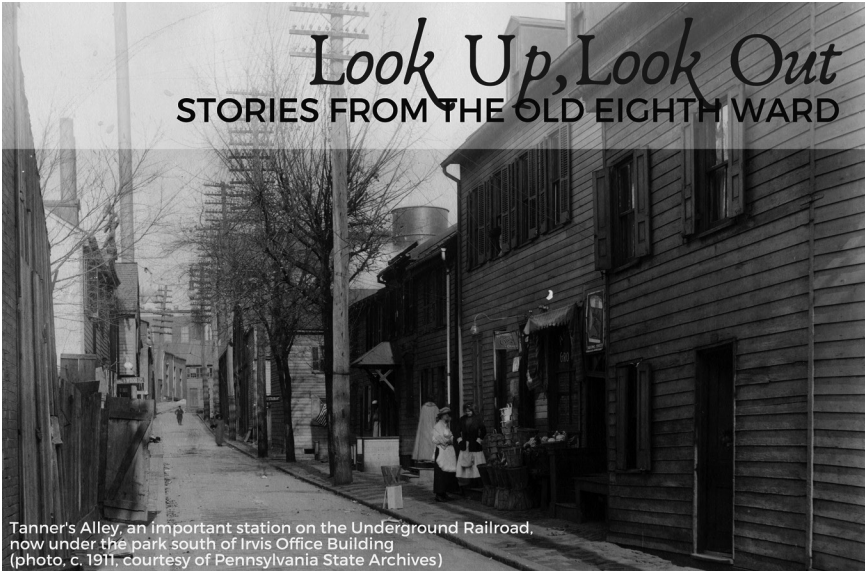


Joseph L. Thomas
 Undertaker and Census
 Enumerator in 1900 and 1910

digitalharrisburg.com/lookuplookout8

FIGURE 1. *Look Up, Look Out* poster on vice and virtue.

That is why we sought to tell the stories—plural—of the Old Eighth Ward. Not every story in our collection of interpretive posters and websites sits neatly with every other story. This was a neighborhood where the Daughters of Temperance organized against liquor consumption and also marched in favor of emancipation and women's suffrage, even while the ward was a destination for heavy drinking, prostitution, and other vices.



Tanner's Alley, an important station on the Underground Railroad, now under the park south of Irvis Office Building (photo, c. 1911, courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives)

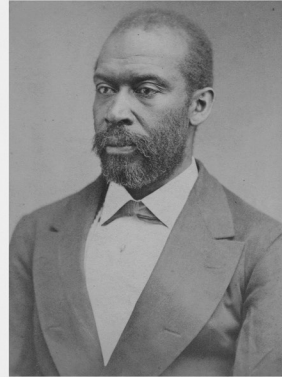
THE CIVIL WAR & EMANCIPATION

"From barber shops and hotels, from Tanner's Alley to South Streets, from 'Bull Run's' classic ground, from suburban settlements and subterranean 'dives' and rookeries, their beauty and their chivalry had flocked."

*—Patriot Newspaper,
June 10, 1863, commenting on
the rallying of Black soldiers
at a recruitment meeting led
by T. Morris Chester*



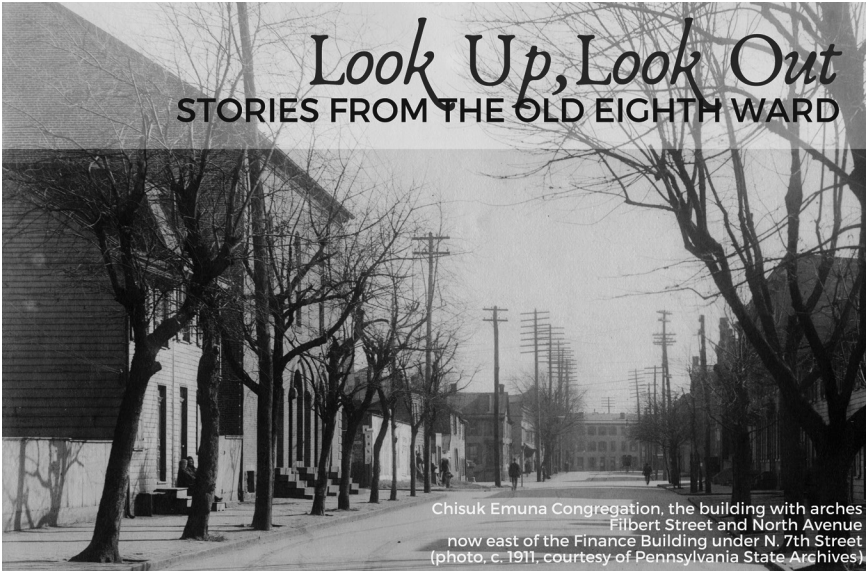
digitalharrisburg.com/lookuplookout1



T. Morris Chester
Civil War recruiter
& correspondent

FIGURE 2. *Look Up, Look Out* poster on the Civil War and emancipation.

This was a place where Jewish immigrants founded a conservative Lithuanian congregation only to split a few years later as certain members favored assimilation and abandonment of the exclusive use of Yiddish, all while actively resisting anti-Semitism not just from outside the ward but from inside it as well. This is a place where one of the most beloved Sisters of Mercy in the city, Sister Mary Clare Grace, founded a hospital that was instrumental in



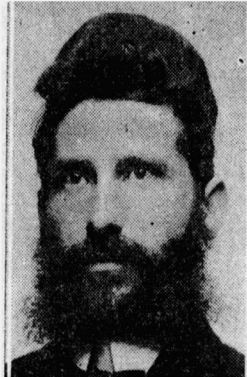
SEEKING SHALOM IN THE OLD EIGHTH WARD

"I love my master,' my father used to say. 'My master is God, my master is the Torah, my master is my people.' My father's self-appointed mission was to set a pattern for rabbinic leadership, to set a pattern as to what Jews should do and can do here."

—Rabbi David Silver, eulogizing his father Eliezer. The American Israelite, February 18, 1988. Both father and son served as rabbis for the Kesher Israel Congregation



digitalharrisburg.com/lookuplookout5



Eliezer Silver
Rabbi of Chisuk Emuna & Kesher Israel Congregations

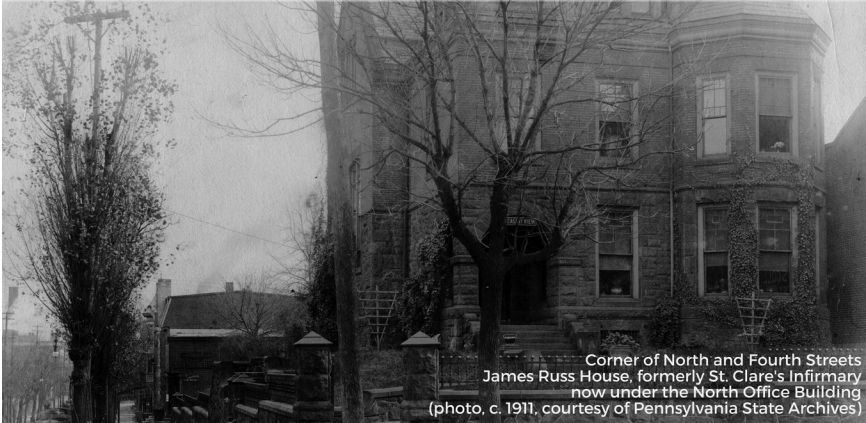
FIGURE 3. *Look Up, Look Out* poster on Jewish communities.

treating wounded soldiers from Camp Meade during the Spanish-American War, even while she was also ridiculed for wearing her habit during a period of rampant anti-Catholicism (fig. 4).

My personal hope is that this project can function as a little moment of “cultural acupuncture,” as Doris Sommer terms it, in the lives of state workers and tourists. Following in the tradition of Paulo Freire, Sommer

Look Up, Look Out

STORIES FROM THE OLD EIGHTH WARD



Corner of North and Fourth Streets
James Russ House, formerly St. Clare's Infirmary
now under the North Office Building
(photo, c. 1911, courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives)

SERVING THE PEOPLE OF THE OLD EIGHTH

"During the Spanish-American war... the work of this St. Clare Infirmary became especially conspicuous. Many a stricken soldier had reason to bless its shelter and thank God for the ministering care of those devoted Sisters of Mercy. Mother Clare now rests beneath the low green tent toward which we are all trending, but I would be recreant in my duty, if, in this connection, I did not place a wreath of recognition and laudation on her tomb."



—J. Howard Wert, writing in his
"Passing of the Old Eighth" column,
Harrisburg Patriot
May 12, 1913



Sister Mary Clare Grace
Founder and First Superior of
the Harrisburg Foundation of
Sisters of Mercy

digitalharrisburg.com/lookuplookout7

FIGURE 4. *Look Up, Look Out* poster on stories of service.

encourages public humanists and artists to move beyond dispassionate works of historical interpretation and instead disrupt the "official" narrative that encourages us to "keep moving, nothing to see here." Each poster is an attempt to tell people to stop, look up, and look out and see that there was once a neighborhood where they clock in every day, where politicians give campaign speeches and rally for their causes, where workers take their smoke

breaks or walk during their lunch break. There was once a neighborhood there that was alive with the joys, challenges, and conflicts that come with living together in community.

ANDREW DYRLI HERMELING was the project manager of the Digital Harrisburg Initiative at Messiah College during the 2018–19 academic year. He currently serves as a history and anthropology teacher at the Stone Independent School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He completed his M.A. in history at Lehigh University in 2014 and is currently finishing his Ph.D. at the same institution, writing his dissertation on intercultural diplomacy in eighteenth-century North America.

NOTES

1. The *Look Up, Look Out* campaign is part of the Commonwealth Monument Project organized by the IIPT Harrisburg Peace Promenade, a project of the Foundation for Enhancing Communities, fiscal sponsor. The campaign was initially the vision of Lenwood Sloan. As the project manager, I have worked with students and other project participants to make his initial vision a reality. For an overview of the project, see <https://digitalharrisburg.com/commonwealth/lookuplookout/>.
2. The Old Eighth Ward has had a long presence on the Web. Our work builds on the pioneering work of Dr. Michael Barton and Penn State Harrisburg students who popularized the subject of the Old Eighth Ward. Stephanie Patterson Gilbert designed an entire website about this neighborhood: Stephanie Patterson Gilbert, "Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward: Creating a Website for Student Research," *Pennsylvania History* 72, no. 4 (2005): 419–27.
3. Record Group 17, Records of the Land Office, Land Office Map Collection, Series #17.522, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, PA.
4. Gary B. Nash, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 11, 12.
5. William S. Tunis, speaking on HB 1280, *Legislative Journal for the Session of 1911* 3, 3327.
6. A good example of this is Carol Reardon's *Pickett's Charge in History and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
7. See the primary essays by J. Howard Wert, in *Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward*, ed. Michael Barton and Jessica Dorman (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2002).
8. This project would have been impossible without the support of Anna Strange, Rachel Williams, Molly Elspas, Mary Culler, and Bella McHenry, students

who worked to research and build the interpretive websites. Additionally, both David Pettegrew and Jean Corey, as the directors of the Digital Harrisburg Initiative and the Center of Public Humanities, respectively, worked tirelessly to support our work.

9. Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 49–79.