Introduction

Deny to the poor those advantages which are possessed by the rich and you intensify discontent. When the poor are so very poor as they are in our cities and have neither the knowledge nor customs nor initiative to be other than as they are, it is a duty of the public, as its own government, to educate them out of their condition, to give baths to them that they may be fit to associate together and with others without offense and without danger. A man cannot truly respect himself who is dirty. Stimulate the habit of cleanliness and we increase the safety of our cities. And give over the idea that a free bath is any more of a "gratuity" than the right to walk in the public streets.

—BROOKLYN DAILY EAGLE, SEPT. 12, 1897

By 1897, when a New York City newspaper editor wrote these words, public baths were accepted as one of the important services which progressive American cities must provide for their poorer citizens. Personal cleanliness had become a necessity, not only for social acceptability and public health but also as a symbol of middle-class status, good character, self-respect, and membership in the civic community. If slum tenements failed to provide the poor with bathing facilities so that they could attain the proper standards of cleanliness, then cities must provide public baths to wash the great unwashed. Cleanliness had become a right of all citizens.

Bath reformers used the generic term "public bath" to refer to a bathhouse built, either by a municipality or a charitable organization or an individual, specifically to serve the poor (they were either free or charged a small fee). Municipal baths were those built by city governments, but these baths were usually called public baths and this practice has been followed in this book. Private bathhouses, which were found in most
nineteenth-century cities, were commercial enterprises that also were open to the public but generally were too expensive for the poorer classes.

This book is a study of the history of the public bath movement, an almost forgotten urban reform. Public baths were one of the many solutions proposed by nineteenth-century American reformers when they were faced with the numerous social problems presented by unprecedented urban growth and congested slums. The demands that cities furnish public baths for their poorer citizens began in the 1840s, continued through the ensuing decades, and culminated during the Progressive Era, when many American cities constructed public baths in slum neighborhoods. Although the public bath movement justifiably may be seen as part of the massive urban social reform of the Progressive Era, the arguments put forward by the bath reformers in that era echo those of earlier advocates and were based on previous experiences. In one case even their actions were the same. In 1851 the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor erected a public bath on New York City’s Lower East Side but closed it ten years later because it was not self-supporting; forty years later it built another public bath in the same area that was successful and became a prototype for future public baths.

From the beginning the demand for public baths was part of the wider demand for public health reform. Bath reformers maintained that baths would safeguard the health, not only of the poor but of all people in the city. But cleanliness would do more for the poor; bath advocates maintained that it would improve their moral character and make them better citizens. In fact as personal cleanliness became a hallmark of American middle-class status and respectability, it made the separation between the classes wider. Public baths would help bridge this gap, bath reformers maintained, and thus achieve one small measure of social justice.

The movement for public baths was also part of the effort to improve the urban environment and can be compared to movements for public parks, playgrounds, tenement house reform, and effective garbage collection. All these improvements would make the lives of city dwellers, especially the poor, healthier and more pleasant.

The history of the public bath movement illustrates the changing conceptions of the duties and functions of urban governments and the trend toward constantly expanding responsibilities. Antebellum cities did not seriously consider the demands for public baths; Gilded Age cities built
floating baths on their riverfronts and beach baths on their waterfronts but did not build the more expensive year-round baths. Progressive Era cities built public baths; some of them built very complete bath systems. New York City, for example, built twenty-five public baths and spent approximately four million early twentieth-century dollars in the effort.

The first demands for public baths came in the midst of the massive waves of Irish immigration, and the movement achieved its greatest success during the greater waves of eastern and southern European immigration at the turn of the century. Bath reformers asserted that public baths would assist in Americanizing the immigrants, and it appears that this group concerned them the most because the majority of public baths were located in immigrant neighborhoods.

The organization of this book proceeds from the general to the specific. Beginning with a brief history of public baths, chapter 1 surveys the development of the American obsession with personal cleanliness. In the mid-nineteenth century, many factors—including economic depression, the burgeoning urban slums of Irish immigrants, the water cure craze and other health reforms which connected cleanliness to health, the threat of epidemics, and the existing bath systems of large European cities—all contributed to the growing demand for public baths. The provision of water and sewage systems in large cities as well as technological developments, such as bathtubs with attached plumbing, gave the private bath first to the affluent and then to the middle class and made public baths for the poor feasible.

Chapter 2 traces the growing demand for public baths in the Progressive Era as new waves of southern and eastern European immigrants and increasing acceptance of the germ theory of disease in the 1880s added new impetus to the cause. Bath reformers grew more numerous, their arguments became more sophisticated and their demands more insistent. In this era of great urban reform the public bath movement reached its peak and achieved success.

Chapters 3–5 explore how and why this reform was achieved in five American cities: New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. These cities were chosen as case studies for several reasons. Excluding St. Louis, they were the largest cities in the country in 1900. Their bath reformers were the most active and successful, and these cities had the most extensive and well-publicized bath systems. Their municipal
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governments responded to demands for public baths in different ways and produced very different results or did not respond at all and left the building of baths to private philanthropy.

The study of the bath movement in these cities illuminates many of the issues surrounding progressive social reform and reveals the interplay between reformers and city governments. It identifies and explores the common interests of the issue-focused public bath reformers and their supporters and considers the question of the participation of the poor, for whom the baths were intended. The reactions of municipal governments and their leaders, both political bosses and reform mayors, were varied. Why did some cities build bath systems for their poorer citizens and others leave the task to private philanthropy? The discourse of the movement reveals the mixed motives and messages of those interested in urban reform in this period. Their goals and their rhetoric did not always conform to the actual results that they achieved. The comparative importance of social justice, social control, and public health in the motives of the bath reformers illustrates the complexity of urban reform in this era.

At the peak of its success the bath movement was organized both nationally and internationally. The activities of the American Association for Promoting Hygiene and Public Baths are discussed in chapter 6.

Finally, chapter 7 assesses the success, meaning, and lasting legacy of the public bath movement. In preaching the gospel of cleanliness, the public bath reformers wished to extend to the great unwashed in large American cities one of the amenities that their more affluent neighbors enjoyed and, in so doing, hoped to improve the lives of all the citizens of urban communities.