The Gospel of Cleanliness

The greatest justification for the public bath is its educational influence. It may make people now poorly housed more insistent upon that part of housing reform which will give them, eventually, bath equipment in the home.

—Donald B. Armstrong

By 1914, when these words were written, the public bath movement had peaked and it had become obvious to the bath reformers that patronage of the baths did not meet their expectations. Yet some of them had come to realize that, although many of the great unwashed had not been converted into users of public baths, they were becoming converted to the gospel of personal cleanliness.

In spite of this changing focus, the actual process of public bath reform on the local level provides interesting historical insights. Its international character, its diverse leadership, the variety of responses in the cities considered, the combination of public and private provision of public baths, and the motivations of its reformers all reveal the complexities of urban social reform and the difficulties inherent in generalizing about a reform which had its origins in the mid-nineteenth century and achieved success during the Progressive Era.

The public bath movement had its genesis in both the rising American concern for cleanliness in the mid-nineteenth century and the example of the public baths of European cities. Like the settlement house leaders, public bath proponents were influenced by English models, but they were also very impressed by Continental practices. Both Simon Baruch of New York and Thomas M. Beadenkopf of Baltimore visited German public baths and urged that American cities base their bath systems on
German models. The movement itself was international and, as we have seen, American bath proponents were also active in the organization of the International Association for Public Baths and Cleanliness and continued to participate during the 1920s.

The leadership of the public bath movement illustrates the diverse character of urban progressive reformers, who were in this case united by this single issue. One charitable organization, the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, was a consistent advocate of public baths and built the very influential prototype of the People's Baths. In Philadelphia the Public Baths Association, a private charitable organization, was responsible for the only year-round baths located in that city. Individual philanthropists also presented public baths to their cities, as bath advocates urged them to do. Henry Walters of Baltimore was the leading donor, but Pittsburgh, Richmond (Virginia), New York City, and San Francisco also were presented with public baths by wealthy citizens.¹

Some politicians were leaders in the bath movement or lent it strong support. Although the bath movement in New York City seems at first to be a simple case of reformers versus the bosses of Tammany Hall and although reform mayors Strong and Low were its firmest supporters, later Tammany leaders endorsed the movement. In Boston the strongest supporters of public baths were some of its mayors: the patrician reformer Josiah Quincy and the Irish machine politicians John Fitzgerald and James Michael Curley.

Physicians, because of their interest in public health, also were in the vanguard of the movement and its foremost leader was Dr. Simon Baruch of New York City. In Chicago, a group of women physicians, leaders of the Free Bath and Sanitary League supported by a network of women reformers, convinced the municipal government to build that city's first public baths. Women also served as members of the bath commissions of Boston and Baltimore, and a woman was instrumental in the organization of the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia. Asserting their role as "municipal housekeepers," these women found themselves moving naturally from the private sphere into the public sphere.

Settlement house leaders male and female, such as Robert Woods in Boston and Jane Addams and Mary McDowell in Chicago, were strong supporters of public baths which would improve the lives of their poor neighbors. Settlement houses themselves often maintained a few shower
baths, and they cooperated fully with the bath reformers of their cities by organizing their neighbors to campaign for baths and putting pressure on city governments. With the exception of Woods, however, public baths were not in the forefront of reforms that settlement house leaders advocated.

Businessmen as a group were often interested in political and economic reform in their cities but were seldom found in the ranks of urban social reformers. Nevertheless, they were very active in the public bath movement as leaders and philanthropists. Eugene Levering, a Baltimore banker, headed its Public Bath Commission for over thirty years, and the members of the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia were some of that city's leading businessmen. Robert Wiebe maintained that "the only important contribution which businessmen made to the social welfare movement came as a by-product of their zeal for civic improvement. As they scrubbed and polished their cities, some did assist in improving local housing and health codes." However, the businessmen who were bath reformers were primarily interested in providing an essential city service that would help the poorer citizens of their cities and safeguard the public health. Beautifying or improving the appearance of their cities was of secondary importance to them in this case. Additionally, almost all the businessmen involved in the public bath movement were also active in a variety of other charitable activities.

The leaders of the public bath movement were for the most part middle and upper class, native-born Protestant Americans educated at prestigious colleges. Mostly from affluent families, many were wealthy in their own right. They were professionals and businessmen; one, Thomas K. Beadenkopf, was a Congregational minister. Yet the movement did have an interethnic character. Simon Baruch was both an immigrant and a Jew; and the chairman of Boston's Bath Commission, its Irish bosses, and Baltimore's Henry Walters were Catholics. Although labor leaders were represented on the mayors' committees on public baths in New York and Boston, they were only peripherally interested in the cause and were not important advocates. Among the great unwashed there was little interest or enthusiasm. With the exception of a few public meetings in New York City and support rallied by settlement house workers in Boston and Chicago, there was no mass advocacy in slum neighborhoods for public baths. This was truly a reform offered from above.

By the turn of the century there was general agreement that it was the
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responsibility of city governments to provide public baths for the poor. However, because this was local reform, it was achieved in a variety of ways in the cities under consideration. Basically the decision of whether, when, and how to build public baths was political, and bath reformers had to deal with the political conditions in each of their cities to achieve their objective. New York City, after a decade of delay, built the most elaborate and expensive bath system in the country. Boston combined most of its baths with recreational facilities and thereby attracted the most satisfactory patronage. Chicago came closest to the bath reformers' ideal by building many modest and utilitarian baths in slum neighborhoods. In Philadelphia and Baltimore, where the municipal governments were slow to comply, private charity assumed responsibility. In Baltimore, once the baths were built and presented to the city, it assumed administration of them and paid the operating expenses. In all these cities, however, once the bath system was an operating reality, the movement, like much of the social reform of the Progressive Era, of necessity became professionalized and bureaucratized.

The motivation of the public bath reformers is complex. Certainly they were interested in social control, that is, they were attempting to impose middle- or upper-class standards of behavior on the lower classes and to increase the order and stability of their rapidly changing cities. But, in advocating the cleanliness of the poor, they were not coercive. They sought conformity by persuasion and were confident that, once provided with bathing facilities, the poor would change their ways. They maintained that not only would the poor be clean, but also their moral character would be enhanced, and slum conditions would be improved. For the bath reformers, as for other Americans, personal cleanliness had assumed a symbolic meaning; it stood for respectability, admission to the middle class, and citizenship in the urban community.

Cleanliness also had assumed symbolic importance in the process of Americanization and assimilation of immigrants, who comprised more than one-third of the population of three of the cities under discussion. Immigrants also constituted the majority of slum dwellers. Conforming to American standards of cleanliness was a crucial step on the road to acculturation and, as we have seen, most public baths were located in immigrant neighborhoods. Even though public bath advocates claimed that these institutions were to serve the poor, the people they served were mostly poor immigrants.
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Public baths would also, bath proponents believed, provide a measure of social justice or redress some of the inequities of urban life. As Josiah Quincy maintained, municipal governments must “secure in some measure the enjoyment by all, not, indeed, of an impossible equality of social opportunity, but of a certain minimum of elementary social advantages.” The bath reformers did not seek to supply the poor with the private bathrooms in their homes which they enjoyed, but instead would build public baths. This is in contrast to European public baths, which served both the poor and the middle class (in separate sections, to be sure).

American bath reformers stressed the utilitarian function of public baths. The short time allotted for bathing and the control of the water temperature communicated the primacy of the cleanliness function. Although many public baths included recreational facilities such as swimming pools and gymnasiums, reformers saw them as means of improving the health and physical fitness of the poor and of attracting them to the baths. The strict separation of the sexes was meant to ensure that these public baths would have none of the unsavory connotations of those of the past (or the future). Bath advocates almost never mentioned the pleasurable and sensual aspects of bathing, such as rejuvenation, invigoration, or relaxation. They wanted the poor to be clean but seemingly did not want them to enjoy it too much.

The public bath movement may represent a case of class and ethnic conflict between middle- and upper-class reformers and the objects of their reform. While there is almost no record of the reactions of the poor to the public baths, they did use them, although not in the numbers expected by the reformers. The statistics show that the baths were utilized to their capacity only on the hottest summer days and attendance was very low in the winter, except where the baths were connected to recreational facilities, as they were in Boston. An incident in New York City in which bath patrons bribed bath attendants so they could bathe for as long as they liked, indicates resistance to the no-nonsense approach to bathing. Also in New York City, a “small scale riot” occurred during a heat wave in the summer of 1906, when 5,000 persons waiting to bathe at the Rivington Street Bath were told that it was closing. The police had to intervene to restore order. It seems obvious that the bath patrons used the public baths for their own purposes, not just to be clean but also for relaxation and relief from summer heat.
Paradoxically, although the appearance of some public baths, such as the inexpensive, modest baths of Chicago, conveyed their utilitarian cleanliness function, others were architecturally distinguished and even luxurious. New York's neo-Roman East 23rd Street Bath (now the Asser Levy Bath) with its marble bath cubicles and marble swimming pool decorated with a brass lion's head fountain, Boston's Dover Street Bath with its terrazzo mosaic floors and marble walls and staircases, and its North Bennet Street Bath and Gymnasium with its architecture adapted from the Villa Medici in Rome provided very pleasant surroundings for bathing. Although the bath reformers can be criticized for not demanding for the poor the same private baths in their homes which they enjoyed and for not making allowances for the pleasurable aspects of bathing, some of the public baths were, as Josiah Quincy maintained, "architectural monument[s] of the city" and did "raise the whole idea of public bathing to a high and dignified plane."

Certainly the fact that cities and philanthropists provided public baths for the poor and the fact that some of these baths were expensive and imposing, communicated the idea that personal cleanliness was an important aspect of full membership in the communities in which they lived. These bathhouses were tangible witness to the exhortations of the bath reformers on the significance of cleanliness. And in fact cleanliness was critical for those who were seeking better employment, and for social acceptance in public places and in schools, in other words, for social and economic mobility. The bath reformers seemed to have considered that the main patrons of public baths would be workingmen and transients in that they invariably provided more showers for men and boys than for women and girls or, as in Chicago, opened the public baths to women and girls two days per week and to men and boys the rest of the time. The percentage of women bathers ranged from a low of about 10 percent in Philadelphia to a high of about 30 percent in Boston. Bath reformers attributed the lack of female patrons to various causes ranging from modesty, timidity, and the pressures of home duties to the difficulty in drying their hair.

Bath reformers made a strenuous attempt to convert schoolchildren to the gospel of cleanliness, most especially by providing showers in the public schools but also by publicizing nearby baths in local schools. Public schools also did their part by scheduling weekly shower baths for each student during the school day in schools that had showers, and by stress-
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ing the importance of personal cleanliness in health and hygiene curricula at the turn of the century and well into the twentieth century.¹⁰

The educational effect of the public bath movement was its most lasting legacy. The poor did not reject the gospel of cleanliness, although they did not use the public baths to the extent that the bath reformers expected. What they wanted and what they eventually got was what the middle-class reformers already had—baths in their own homes.¹¹

David Glassberg has seen the provision of public baths as a stopgap measure to ensure the cleanliness of the poor until they had bathing facilities in their own homes. The bath reformers and the municipal governments and philanthropists who built public baths, however, considered them to be permanent institutions. But by the time that the bath movement reached its peak (1900–10), standards in housing for the poor had begun to change, especially in the matter of the provision of bathrooms. As has been noted, tenement house laws passed around 1900 generally required that apartments include a separate toilet and many builders included a bathtub as well. New tenements after this time almost always included private bathrooms, which became more inexpensive with the invention (in 1916) and mass production of the one-piece galvanized, enameled bathtub. More and more the poor had bathtubs in their homes. A 1917–18 study of Philadelphia workingmen’s standard of living reported that 86.2 percent had bathtubs in their homes and considered a “fair standard of housing to include a bathroom with toilet, washstand and tub.” The United States Bureau of Labor studied the housing conditions of the poor in twenty cities in 1918–19 and reported that over one-half the families had baths. Their report also asserted that “it is felt that a housing standard to provide health and decency must include a complete bathroom with toilet.”¹²

During the 1920s the number of the urban poor who had private bathrooms continued to increase. Even among the poorest the majority had bathrooms. A 1928–32 study of 113 Chicago households on relief found that only 18 were without bathrooms. In 1934 during the Great Depression, a survey of New York City dwelling units uncovered only 11.4 percent without bathtubs or showers. As the federal government began to build low income housing during the New Deal, the Public Works Administration housing standards required a private bathroom in each apartment. Cities continued to operate their public bath systems during this time to serve this small minority without bathing facilities in their homes.¹³
Another factor that the bath reformers did not consider was the changing nature of urban neighborhoods. As has been pointed out, in New York two public baths were constructed in what were then poor immigrant neighborhoods on the now exclusive Upper East Side. By the 1920s, the East 54th Street Bath was neighbor to the luxurious apartment buildings on Sutton Place; twenty years later the East 76th Street Bath met a similar fate. In other cities similar transformations occurred, although some neighborhoods where baths were located remain slums.

In the two decades after World War II almost all urban dwellers acquired private bathrooms in their homes, and cities gradually closed down their bath systems as they became an expensive and virtually obsolete service. The gospel of cleanliness has become a basic tenet of American life, but it is the private bathroom, growing ever more elaborate and luxurious, and not the public bath that is the bath reformers’ monument.