



The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City

Cathy Stanton

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In the early nineteenth century, Lowell, Massachusetts, was widely studied and emulated as a model for capitalist industrial development. One of the first cities in the United States to experience the ravages of deindustrialization, it was also among the first places in the world to turn to its own industrial and ethnic history as a tool for reinventing itself in the emerging postindustrial economy. The Lowell Experiment explores how history and culture have been used to remake Lowell and how historians have played a crucial yet ambiguous role in that process.

The book focuses on Lowell National Historical Park, the flagship project of Lowell's new cultural economy. When it was created in 1978, the park broke new ground with its sweeping reinterpretations of labor, immigrant, and women's history. It served as a test site for the ideas of practitioners in the new field of public history—a field that links the work of professionally trained historians with many different kinds of projects in the public realm.

The Lowell Experiment takes an anthropological approach to public history in Lowell, showing it as a complex cultural performance shaped by local memory, the imperatives of economic redevelopment, and tourist rituals—all serving to locate the park's audiences and workers more securely within a changing and uncertain new economy characterized by growing inequalities and new exclusions.

The paradoxical dual role of Lowell's public historians as both interpreters of and contributors to that new economy raises important questions about the challenges and limitations facing academically trained scholars in contemporary American culture. As a long-standing and well-known example of "culture-led redevelopment," Lowell offers an outstanding site for exploring questions of concern to those in the fields of public and urban history, urban planning, and tourism studies.

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