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Progressive Ambivalence: Upholding and Upending Tradition in Philadelphia's First Public  
Bathhouse

Abstract: Philadelphia's first, charity-run public bathhouse was established in 1898 by the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia. By the turn of the century, bathing had become inexorably linked to a series of social beliefs, particularly regarding hygiene, morality, and domesticity. In this paper I examine the development of these beliefs and discuss the ways in which the PBA's first bathhouse became a site in which they were simultaneously upheld and challenged. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the relatively ambivalent nature of bath reformers' feelings toward the city's poor.

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On a particularly hot day in the spring of 1894, Sarah Dickson Lowrie, a wealthy philanthropist and Philadelphia native, was teaching a sewing class for girls in an old mission building in one of Philadelphia's most densely-populated slums. Attempting to strike up a conversation with her students, she asked them why they preferred summer to winter. One child answered, "Oh, teacher, summer is way nicer than winter. You can get a bath in summer." Somewhat taken aback at the specificity of this response, Lowrie asked the rest of the children if they liked to take baths. "Oh yes, teacher," they replied. "It's just lovely. It makes you feel good." "Then why haven't you bathed all winter?" Lowrie responded. Referring to the wooden tanks present in some of the city's mission buildings, the children answered, "because they don't ever let

you into the tank, the janitor don't, until it's good and hot weather." Still struggling to grasp how her students could be so dirty when they clearly enjoyed bathing, Lowrie asked them why their mothers did not bathe them at home: "If I were you I'd ask them to. A bath with soap." Amused at her teacher's apparent ignorance, the first child replied with a slight smile, "there ain't no way."<sup>1</sup>

This seemingly insignificant conversation raises a number of questions. First, why did Lowrie immediately place responsibility on the children? Having spent a great deal of time with these students (this was not her first class) it would be reasonable to assume that Lowrie was at least somewhat aware of the barriers that stood between them and a bath. Not only were they prohibited from using the public tubs in the winter, but the majority of them did not have private bathing facilities at home, a luxury which Lowrie herself presumably enjoyed. Yet she still asks them why they themselves did not bathe, implying that it was largely a matter of personal agency and choice. Second, why did Lowrie shift responsibility to the children's mothers once she realized they could not bathe themselves? Moreover, why did she still imply that their homes were the spaces in which they should bathe, despite no suggestion from any of the children that this was possible? Lowrie clearly believed that cleanliness was a process that began in the home and was initiated by the mother. All of these questions, and their answers, have historical roots that reveal a great deal about American attitudes toward bathing at the turn of the century.

The moralizing sentiment implicit in Lowrie's "If I were you," for example, was indicative of the broader tendency among middle- and upper-class Americans to frame cleanliness in terms of morality and individual responsibility. This association developed primarily during the nineteenth century, when elite's standards of cleanliness began diverging from the poor's. Wealthy Americans,

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<sup>1</sup> Undated typewritten history of the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia, 1.

health reformers, and hydropaths all contributed to a narrow idea of what personal hygiene should look like. Habitual bathing became a precondition for moral righteousness, and since the poor did not have access to the technologies that made this possible, their dirt became a sin. The structural factors that impeded cleanliness among poor communities garnered far less attention from the wealthy. Barriers to year-round bathing, such as the janitors that prevented Lowrie's students from using the wooden tubs in the winter, were often ignored in favor of a belief in the moral inferiority of the urban poor. Additionally, when Lowrie suggested to her students that they should ask their mothers for a bath with soap, she was effectively demonstrating how intimately bathing was connected to ideas about gender, domesticity, and motherhood. She placed responsibility for the girls' cleanliness on their mothers, and at the same time designated the home as the site where this should occur. By the 1890s, this had become a common belief among virtually every class of Americans. Women, particularly mothers, were seen as morally obligated to maintain proper cleanliness within their homes. Among other duties, this included the habitual washing of their own bodies and the bodies of their children. That Lowrie's students were dirty thus did not just reflect poorly on the children themselves, it also turned their mothers into subjects for judgement. Philadelphia's first, charity-operated public bathhouse, established as a direct result of Lowrie's conversation with her pupils, quickly became a site wherein these traditional ideas about health, class, morality, and gender were simultaneously solidified and challenged. PBA leaders began to shift blame away from the poor and onto the infrastructure that dirtied them, while those who patronized the baths actively took part in a reconfiguration of domestic space itself.

Concerned by what she had learned from her students, Lowrie began asking "among men and women who had worked in the poor districts of the city" why there were so few adequate

bathing facilities in Philadelphia's tenement communities, when cities like Liverpool and Manchester had for a long time provided public bathhouses. Those she spoke to, despite being "more or less ignorant" about her questions, nevertheless agreed that the lack of year-round bathing facilities for the city's poor was problematic.<sup>2</sup> At a dinner party in early 1895, Lowry spoke to Barclay H. Warburton, editor and publisher of the *Daily Evening Telegraph*, about the possibility of establishing public baths in the city. Warburton sent one of his reporters to investigate the bathing environment in Philadelphia's slums, and soon after his newspaper ran a feature-length article on the lack of adequate bathing facilities for the city's poor. Alongside the report, Warburton proposed raising \$50,000 for the construction and operation of public baths and washhouses. As a consequence of these developments, the Philadelphia Public Baths Association (PBA) was born and incorporated on March 18, 1895.

Construction was completed on its first bathhouse, located at 410-412 Gaskill Street in the city's Fourth Ward, in April 1898. At the time, the neighborhood surrounding the baths consisted primarily of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants, but it also rested on the border of the Seventh Ward's largely African American community.<sup>3</sup> Ward Four was the most densely populated area in Philadelphia, and between 1884 and 1890 it had the highest death rate as well.<sup>4</sup> High mortality rates in the city's poor neighborhoods were primarily due to overcrowding and a lack of adequate sanitary facilities. Most alley homes in southeast Philadelphia had neither running water nor toilets. Instead,

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<sup>2</sup> A Philadelphia Bureau of Labor investigation found that by 1893, only 16.9 percent of families and 18.05 percent of individuals lived in houses or tenements with bathrooms. See Marilyn T. Williams, *Washing "The Great Unwashed": Public Baths in Urban America, 1840-1920*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Leigh Todd, "Public Health and Personal Hygiene in Progressive-Era Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ward Four had a death rate of 33.87 per 1,000 of population. See Michael B. Kahan, "The Risk of Cholera and The Reform of Urban Space: Philadelphia, 1893," *Geographical Review* 103, no. 4 (October 2013): 522.

they relied on outdoor hydrants and “privy vaults,” which they often shared with other residents.<sup>5</sup> The prevalence of infectious diseases in neighborhoods like those which surrounded the Gaskill Street baths led many city officials and public figures to decry them for their filth. In 1890, when fears of cholera had reached their apogee, Philadelphia’s chief inspector of nuisances conducted a house-to-house inspection in the South Street neighborhood where many poor immigrants had settled. In his report, he maligned “the habits and character of a large number of the residents,” that made keeping the area clean “next to an impossibility.” He continued by saying that “a reckless disregard for cleanliness appears to be the rule, particularly... among the Italians and the Russians.” Two years later, a Protestant Minister named MacGregor toured the same community and wrote that it represented a “dark, feculent sea” of “contagious corruption.”<sup>6</sup> Both the inspector and MacGregor framed their hatred of the poor in hygienic and moral terms. Their sin was dirt, not poverty, and the only way they could be saved was through the good graces of city elites.<sup>7</sup> This association between personal hygiene and moral purity was not a new development, however. It had been gaining traction over the course of the preceding century and was intimately linked to developments in American bathing practices. As a site in which Progressive Era attitudes toward the poor met with more traditional ideas about bathing and personal cleanliness, the Gaskill Street bathhouse was an important part of this history.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

<sup>7</sup> Also see Sam Alewitz, *“Filthy Dirty”: A Social History of Unsanitary Philadelphia in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Garland Press, 1989).

Americans have not always believed in bathing as a habitual practice. In fact, in the early days of the republic, immersing oneself in water in order to achieve personal cleanliness was seen as morally suspect and even dangerous. Kathleen Brown has observed that hostility toward bathing increased significantly after the American and French Revolutions “as part of the larger reaction against European corruption and the embrace of rural wholesomeness as quintessentially American.”<sup>8</sup> Bathing nude was associated with ideas about European licentiousness that were fundamentally at odds with the American way of life. This is not to suggest that Americans never bathed, however. Health advocates championed the stimulation of cold water, and by the 1770s bathing in mineral springs, rivers, and oceans became a popular activity among all classes.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, however, bathing was becoming more private. Washbasins began appearing in middle- and upper-class homes in the 1760s, and by the 1790s many families had installed tubs in their houses and shower boxes in their backyards. Soap was not included in these particular private bathing practices, and family members would rarely change the water in their tubs between uses.<sup>10</sup>

Commercially-operated public bathhouses also began to emerge during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a development that Marilyn Williams attributes to Americans’ desire to bathe closer to home.<sup>11</sup> Philadelphia’s first bathhouse was established in 1791 and provided two shower baths, a plunge bath, and a bowling green.<sup>12</sup> New York followed closely behind and in 1792, Nicholas Denise announced that he had built a bathhouse at his home on the East River, in which patrons could take a fresh, salt, or warm water bath for 4 cents.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that the first

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<sup>8</sup> Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies : Cleanliness in Early America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 203.

<sup>9</sup> See Claudia and Richard Bushman, “The Early History of Cleanliness in America,” *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 4 (1988): 1215 and Williams, *Washing “The Great Unwashed,”* 11.

<sup>10</sup> Bushman & Bushman, “The Early History of Cleanliness in America,” 1214

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *Washing “The Great Unwashed,”* 11.

<sup>12</sup> Bushman & Bushman, “The Early History of Cleanliness in America,” 1215.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *Washing “The Great Unwashed,”* 11.

bathhouses built in the United States catered almost exclusively to a middle- and upper-class clientele. Although they stressed cleanliness more than the stimulation of cold water, the bathhouses that emerged during this period were also very much recreational spaces where elite patrons could experience a variety of baths, such as vapor, steam, and mud.

Middle- and upper-class ideas about cleanliness were changing rapidly, as evidenced by the proliferation of both private and public bathing facilities. The introduction of hydrotherapy to American hygienic practices, however, helped to both solidify an almost dogmatic commitment to bathing and to establish a perceived moral divide between the rich and the poor based on differences in cleanliness. Hydrotherapy, or the “water cure,” was developed by Vincent Priessnitz in Silesia in the early 1800s. Based upon the belief that the internal and external application of water could heal almost any ailment, hydrotherapy became extremely popular in the United States during the nineteenth century, with over two hundred water cure centers being established between the 1840s and 1880s.<sup>14</sup> Mary Gove Nichols, a health reformer and one of the most prominent American hydropaths, expressed her conviction that the water cure was superior to any drug prescribed by a doctor: “If people only knew the remarkable and almost marvellous way in which all violent and febrile diseases yield to a judicious application of this cure, drugs would be at a discount, and blisters and the lancet among the thousand horrors of the past.”<sup>15</sup> Other “domestic practitioners” of hydrotherapy used it to allegedly cure everything from liver failure to symptoms of nicotine withdrawal.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Mary S. Gove Nichols, “Mrs. Gove’s Experience in Water-Cure (1850),” in *Major Problems in the History of American Public Health: Documents and Essays* eds. John H. Warner and Janet A. Tighe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 129.

<sup>16</sup> “Home Voices. Extracts of Letters (1854),” in *Major Problems in the History of American Public Health* eds. John H. Warner and Janet A. Tighe, 107.



Hydropaths' biggest contribution to the American hygienic landscape in the mid nineteenth century, however, was their tendency to equate cleanliness with morality. For them, the water cure functioned not simply as an alternative to certain medicines, but as a way to cleanse the soul and spirit. The editors of the widely-read *Water Cure Journal*, whose motto was "Wash and be Healed," argued that the establishment of public baths that could be accessed by even the poorest citizen would contribute greatly to the moral uplift of society in general. They wrote that baths would improve "habits of personal cleanliness and comfort, so indispensable to self-respect, and so essential to the preservation of virtuous habits generally. A free use of water in this way would tend in no small degree to prevent the moral as well as physical atmosphere from becoming tainted."<sup>17</sup> While the editors were calling upon municipal governments to build public bathing facilities, they were also placing the responsibility to bathe on the individual. At the same time that water and bathing had become almost symbolic in the eyes of middle- and upper-class Americans, they were also coming to believe that proper hygiene (as they defined it) could only be achieved through the exercise of personal agency. Thus the urban poor, who had been left on the periphery of this process and who did not have access to the devices and technologies that elite households deemed necessary for personal cleanliness, came to be perceived as lazy, dirty, and immoral. Hydropathy was not the sole reason that upper-class Americans began to make judgments about the poor through claims about cleanliness. The popularity of the water cure was certainly an important aspect of this development, but other factors, such as the widespread acceptance of germ theory in the late nineteenth century, were equally significant. Germ theory reaffirmed the importance of frequent

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<sup>17</sup> Editors of the *Water Cure Journal* quoted. in Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 219.

bathing and led to new understandings of risk, which in urban environments were manifested in spatial terms that led many elites to blame the poor for their situation.

This was the environment that Sarah Dickson Lowrie and other bath advocates in Philadelphia found themselves in at the turn of the century. Through their efforts to construct public bathing facilities for the city's poor, they simultaneously preserved and challenged prevailing ideas about the relationship between hygiene and morality. The PBA's charter demonstrates this tension quite clearly. In the document, the Association stated that its mission was "for the purpose of establishing and maintaining public baths and affording to the poor facilities for bathing and the promotion of health and cleanliness in order to meet the existing needs of the older part of the city."

<sup>18</sup> For much of the preceding century, the groups and individuals at the forefront of health reform movements had almost universally associated poor hygiene and poverty with laziness, thriftlessness, and moral degradation. These advocates felt that they were obligated to establish institutions such as public baths in order to contribute to the moral uplift of the urban poor, thereby halting the spread of bad habits into wealthier parts of cities. The charter's official documentation of a plan to promote "health and cleanliness" within certain parts of the city demonstrates that PBA leaders still maintained these beliefs, at least to an extent. For example, the first news clipping in a scrapbook collected by the PBA is a summary of Boston Mayor Josiah Quincy's speech to a charities conference in Baltimore in December of 1895. In his speech, Quincy tells the conference about the success of the Boston Public Baths in uplifting the moral status of the city's poor through the physical washing away of dirt: "The advance of mankind is marked by the victory of the old enemy,

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<sup>18</sup> *People's Bath for Philadelphia, A Short Account of the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia, Its Organization and Objects, Charter and By-Laws* (Philadelphia: Times Printing House, 1895) 18.

dirt. Cleanliness of the body leads to self-respect, and when the physical dirt is banished a step is taken toward getting rid of the moral filth.”<sup>19</sup>

Quincy’s later remarks also echoed what David Glassberg has termed the “progressive civic ethos,” which demanded that the public take responsibility for the solution to certain social problems.<sup>20</sup> Quincy argued that it was naïve to assume that the “great mass of the unwashed” would take it upon themselves to establish much-needed public bathing facilities. He stated that if “some of the washed classes go to work with a will...the unwashed, you will find, will follow along quick enough and bring their children with them.”<sup>21</sup> His belief that proper cleanliness had endowed the “washed classes” with the physical and moral authority to insert themselves into the lives of the “unwashed” classes is indicative of what Brown has called “a dynamic process that was at once an act of distinction, humanitarian intervention, cultural imperialism, and intimate intrusion into the lives of others.” “By making cleanliness their mission,” she continues, bath advocates and other health reformers “announced their own bodily refinement and claimed the authority to set standards.”<sup>22</sup>

The PBA also embodied this moralizing project through the language used by both its leaders and those who observed their efforts. In an 1899 interview for *The Evening Telegraph*, W.L. Ross, the superintendent of the PBA, stated that “where formerly the great majority who came only bathed when the spirit moved them--and spirit only seemed to appear in warm weather--now there is a large and increasing number who bathe regularly, showing that it is largely a question of

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<sup>19</sup> “Public Baths: Mayor Quincy Tells Charities Conference What Boston Has Done,” Dec.1, 1898, Scrapbooks, PBA.

<sup>20</sup> David Glassberg, “The Design of Reform: The Public Bath Movement in America,” *American Studies* 20, no. 2 (1979): 7.

<sup>21</sup> “Public Baths: Mayor Quincy Tells Charities Conference What Boston Has Done”

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 327.

education and habit.”<sup>23</sup> Ross’ argument is reflective of Quincy’s, who believed that the poor needed upper-class individuals to show them how to achieve proper standards of cleanliness. This class-based model of hygienic education was echoed in other news articles. One journalist who entered the bathhouse during its first year of operation wrote that “women especially” were fond of the hot water, and that “they are so glad to indulge in this hot comfort that they fairly have to be watched, lest they scald themselves.” The same journalist bemoaned what he saw as the poor’s continued disregard for the gravity of personal cleanliness, writing that “it has been hard to get any idea of discipline into the heads of many of the bathers. They persisted in regarding it as a playhouse, seemingly not grasping the idea that ‘getting clean’ and keeping clean is a serious matter.”

<sup>24</sup> An article published in May of 1899, more than a year after the Gaskill Street Baths first opened its doors, suggested that the poor did not use it as much as they should because they “understand a circus better than a bath and wash house...The house is a school as well as a workshop. It teaches, not only the want, but the how to be clean and the cost of the practice.”<sup>25</sup>

While the tendency to frame questions of health and hygiene in terms of moral responsibility is still clear in the PBA’s charter, the text also reveals the fact that reformers were beginning to change their attitudes, particularly with regard to blaming the poor for their poverty or lack of hygiene. When the PBA stressed the need to “meet the existing needs of the older part of the city,” it was implicitly acknowledging that there were structural factors that contributed to poor hygiene in the city’s slums. Overcrowding in tenements, due to poor planning and negligence from city officials and landlords, led to increased disease and mortality rates. Certain groups, like the Conference of

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<sup>23</sup> “Great Success of the Baths and Wash House. Over Twenty-two Thousand of the Poor Avail Themselves of its Privileges,” March 24, 1899, Scrapbooks, PBA.

<sup>24</sup> “Public Baths and Wash Houses: Where the Poor Can Bathe and Wash Their Raiment,” August 1, 1898, Scrapbooks, PBA.

<sup>25</sup> May 31, 1899, Untitled News Clipping File, Scrapbooks, PBA.

Moral Workers, chose to emphasize this professional negligence. Established in 1893 by Walter Vrooman, a Christian socialist, labor activist, and journalist, the Conference accused tenement developers and greedy landlords of constructing living spaces that bred disease and prevented cleanliness, thus shifting the blame from the poor to the powerful.<sup>26</sup> Although the PBA's twelve-person board of trustees was made up of primarily upper- and middle-class Philadelphians, their efforts and stated purpose at the same time reflected these newer progressive attitudes toward the poor. Their decision to construct Philadelphia's first public bath in one of the poorest, most crowded neighborhoods in the city also suggests this fact.

The PBA's attitudes regarding the spread of certain diseases were perhaps the clearest examples of their changing feelings toward the poor. In several interviews between 1898 and 1902, W. L. Ross criticized Philadelphia's municipal bathing facilities, namely the pool baths, for spreading conjunctivitis. Now known colloquially as pink eye, conjunctivitis is the result of a bacterial infection that can cause inflammation, itchiness, and discharge. At the turn of the century, it was a large problem among Philadelphia's poor communities, and was found to be at least partially the result of bathing in dirty water. In 1901, Ross sent a letter to "many men interested in the public welfare," urging that "shower baths be substituted for the pools used in the bath houses conducted by this city."<sup>27</sup> Invoking developments in sanitary science, Ross stated that "it is the overwhelming testimony of medical experts, that the rain, or shower bath, is superior to all others and meets all the sanitary requirements. The public baths and wash house at 410 and 412 Gaskill Street is run upon this plan...and is considered perfect from a sanitary standpoint."<sup>28</sup> Ross positioned his institution firmly against the city's, using technical and medical language to implicitly accuse officials of

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<sup>26</sup> Kahan, "The Risk of Cholera and The Reform of Urban Space," 522.

<sup>27</sup> August 20, 1901, Untitled News Clipping File, Scrapbooks, PBA.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

negligence. Smallpox also garnered a great deal of attention from the PBA. As a result of the bacterial revolution that had begun in the 1850s, as well as the widespread acceptance of germ theory, by 1900 smallpox was understood to thrive in unsanitary environments. “It is a matter of common knowledge,” wrote one journalist, “that small-pox obtains a footing readily among the very poor, and this because it is such a difficult matter for them to indulge in the luxury of a bath.”<sup>29</sup> The PBA thus saw itself as uniquely positioned to combat the disease by providing baths to the poor. In a statement regarding the bathhouse’s efforts, Ross said that “the value of the baths, particularly to the squalid district, in which they are situated, has been demonstrated by the absence of small-pox in the homes in close proximity to them.”<sup>30</sup> While it is difficult to gauge what effects the Gaskill Street bathhouse actually had on conjunctivitis and smallpox levels in the surrounding area, the important thing to note is that PBA leaders were placing a new emphasis on the technical deficiencies of municipal facilities, acknowledging that they were contributing to high levels of disease among the city’s poor population.

The ambivalence with which Philadelphia’s bath reformers viewed the relationship between dirt, poverty, and morality was indicative of what Michael Kahan has called the set of “culturally and temporally specific set of fears” that defined many members of the urban middle-class during the Progressive Era.<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, these figures displayed a strong belief in the power of science and technology. PBA leaders stressed the negative effects of the city’s tenement infrastructure and municipal bathing facilities, and positioned their bathhouse as a model alternative. In doing so, they used developments in science and medicine to argue that shower baths were more hygienic than the city-run pool baths, and would thus stop the spread of communicable diseases like smallpox and

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<sup>29</sup> November, 1901, Untitled News Clipping File, Scrapbooks, PBA.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Kahan, “The Risk of Cholera and The Reform of Urban Space,” 533.

conjunctivitis. At the same time, they remained deeply concerned with producing a certain kind of model American citizen, one whose personal morality required frequent bathing. Kahan shows that “Native-born, white, middle-class Philadelphians feared that immigrants and African American migrants would fail to absorb ‘American’ values of cleanliness, sexual morality, privacy, piety, frugality, and temperance. And these fears were invested in a very specific urban space: the slums.”<sup>32</sup>

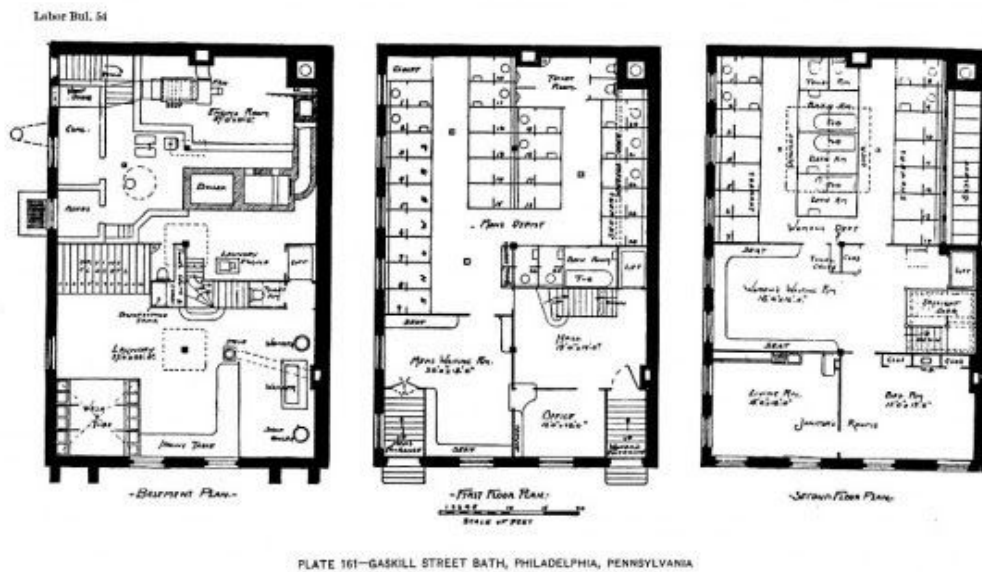
The PBA believed that collective morality in the slums could be improved through hygienic education, which they attempted to achieve through the construction and operation of a bathing facility that concretized their values. While it acted as a site in which some traditional beliefs were upheld, the Gaskill Street bathhouse also inadvertently contributed to a rethinking of other, equally entrenched ideas. One of the most significant of these was the particularly American conception of domesticity, and the gendered ideals upon which it was built.

Modelled after the People’s Baths in New York, the Gaskill Street bathhouse stood two and a half stories high, with levels separated by gender (see Fig. 1). Men entered on the first level and had access to 26 shower baths and one tub bath. The second level was designated for women and contained 14 shower baths and 3 tub baths. The gendered separation that informed the construction of the PBA’s first bathhouse reflected older ideas about the deeply sexualized nature of bathing, wherein women’s bodies were seen as particularly vulnerable to the unrestrained impulses of degenerate men, and thus became objects to be protected and ruled over. At the same time, over the course of the nineteenth century women rapidly became the primary agents in a new domestic health crusade. Their efforts in promoting and maintaining proper cleanliness in the household came to be inexorably linked to new ideas about American citizenship and statehood, ideas that would

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 533.

ultimately place blame on poor mothers for their failure to produce a certain kind of child. Unemployed, unmarried men were also defined in opposition to this domestic sphere. Often termed “vagrants” or “tramps,” these men’s poverty and dirt made them dangerous to the moral and physical health of American homes. The Gaskill Street bathhouse both upheld and upended these beliefs. While PBA leaders continued to maintain certain ideas about the private, familial aspects of hygiene, they also recognized the structural problems from which Philadelphia’s poor population could not escape. The men and women that patronized the Gaskill Street bath also challenged their statuses by helping to redefine “the domestic.”



**Fig. 1:** Floor plan of the Gaskill Street Baths<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *The Philadelphia Medical Journal*, April 23, 1898, vol. 1, no. 17, 717-718, Scrapbooks, PBA.



The evolution of private and public bathing in the United States was, from the beginning, intimately linked to ideas about gender. Brown has observed that in early depictions of bathing, when the practice was viewed as morally questionable and dangerous, authors and artists often portrayed it as a threat to female virtue.<sup>34</sup> Baths were places where women were constantly--either unknowingly or unwillingly--subjected to the male gaze, and where their innocence was consequently compromised. As Americans became increasingly concerned with upholding certain standards of cleanliness and gentility, however, married women and female servants took on new roles in the household, becoming the primary agents in the cleansing of the nation. Even before the obsession with personal hygiene radically reshaped American bathing practices, women in eighteenth century homes were conducting what Brown calls "body work."<sup>35</sup> During this period, people around the Atlantic world believed in the cleansing powers of linen clothing, convinced that the constant rubbing of fabric upon the body would naturally purge the skin of any foreign agents. In this understanding, changing one's clothes was thought of as the equivalent to a modern-day bath or shower.<sup>36</sup> In the home, women were the ones who washed and folded family members' linens, aired featherbeds, and provided clean bed dressings.<sup>37</sup> Maintaining some perennial idea about the hygienic body was not their concern, yet they still were still the ones who upheld societal standards of the respectable, proper household.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, as gentility grew to become almost doctrinally important in many white, middle-class Americans' lives, and as private and public bathing evolved in

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<sup>34</sup> Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 203.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>36</sup> Katherine Ashenburg, *The Dirt on Clean : an Unsanitized History*, 1st American ed. (New York: North Point Press, 2007) 12.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 140.

response to a number of factors, women were tasked with actualizing these new ideas in the home.<sup>38</sup> It is important, however, not to look at women's roles in domestic hygiene as proof of older, oversimplified understandings of "separate spheres" in which women were seen as confined to the private sphere while men were free to roam throughout the public sphere. In her article, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," Linda Kerber shows how, despite many changes in the field of gender history, continued use of the term "separate spheres" relies upon an implicit assertion of past divisions that may never have actually existed. She quotes the late anthropologist Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, who argued that approaches which attempt to locate "women's 'problem' in a domain apart...fail to help us understand how men and women both participate in and help to reproduce the institutional forms that may oppress, liberate, join or divide them."<sup>39</sup> One of the institutional forms that a separate spheres approach would ignore is maternalist politics, the process of collective engagement whereby American women used both their femininity and their status as mothers to enact public policies that benefited them. In their analysis of the linkages between maternalist politics and the birth of the modern welfare state, Sonya Michel and Seth Koven argue that "women's varied social movements fundamentally changed their relationships not only to 'civilization' but to each other, to men, to the state, and to society."<sup>40</sup> Maternalism was as much a social project as it was a political movement aimed at improving maternal and child welfare.

Women's engagement in domestic cleanliness practices should thus not be understood solely as the result of strict binarisms or as proof of separate spheres. As Michel notes, women reformers

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<sup>38</sup> See also: Suellen M. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> Rosaldo quoted in Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 38

<sup>40</sup> Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, "Introduction: Mother Worlds," in *Mothers of New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, edited by Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993) 2.

in the Progressive Era played a significant role in producing a “discourse of domesticity which presented breadwinning as a role appropriate only for men.”<sup>41</sup> This was due to the particular form of American maternalism that emerged in the nineteenth century, in which “the maternal role was exalted to the exclusion of all other occupations for women.”<sup>42</sup> Michel focuses her analysis on women reformers’ role in, and attitudes toward, the development of institutionalized childcare. Childcare that took place outside of the home presented a problem for those engaged in maternalist politics, since caring for children in domestic settings was perhaps the most important value that defined nineteenth century American motherhood. While reformers did help to establish a number of daycares, “their values prevented them from allowing the day nursery to develop beyond a charity that provided short-term, stopgap solutions in family emergencies; they had no intention of using their institutions to encourage long-term maternal employment, even for poor and working-class women.”<sup>43</sup> Nineteenth century maternalism thus took the form of an increased emphasis on motherhood as it pertained to childcare. Cleanliness was a vital part of this care, extending into a kind of reproductive futurism.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, children were painted as the necessary recipients of the new domestic hygiene paradigm. Medical advice authors, according to Brown, began depicting bathing as “part of a program of child care necessary to produce useful, healthy citizens.” Moreover, “Mothers were represented in this literature as uniquely positioned to enforce habits of cleanliness that would not only protect the child’s health and strengthen its constitution but contribute to the health of the state and *its* constitution.”<sup>44</sup> Cleanliness and motherhood were thus

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<sup>41</sup> Sonya Michel, “The Limits of Maternalism: Policies toward American Wage-Earning Mothers during the Progressive Era,” in *Mothers of New World*, 278.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 239.

deeply bound to ideas about statehood and citizenship. As the future of the nation, children came to be seen as the sites upon which battles against disease, uncleanness, and immorality would be won or lost, with mothers as the primary actors. The new domestic cleanliness paradigm targeted girls far more than boys, further reinforcing the gendered component of bathing. Brown writes that “continued mixed feelings about the compatibility of masculinity and refinement made boys less useful than girls as the subjects of lessons about personal hygiene.”<sup>45</sup> This was partially the result of a long process that viewed bathing as a means to tame the female body by ridding it of undesirable odors. Over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, a consensus grew among both male and female sanitarians that body odor was “a normative condition, offensive to genteel aesthetics, that women especially needed to guard against.”<sup>46</sup> Thus while children’s health and cleanliness was seen as integral to the proper functioning of the future state, girls in particular had to be taken care of and educated so that they might embody gentility and pass this knowledge down to their daughters.

At the same time that women were increasingly held up as the harbingers of a new collective, national hygienic order, men were being absolved of any agentive power in the same process. Instead of adhering to genteel aesthetics, boys and men were supposed to remain somewhat ritually unclean, thereby embodying older American ideas that equated grit and filth with patriotism and nation-building.<sup>47</sup> This extended into parenthood: “the person denouncing girls for their filth and disciplining them into cleanliness was no longer the father, offering advice to his daughter...but the mother, who had succeeded in taming her own physicality.”<sup>48</sup> Domestic hygiene separated men and

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>47</sup> See Anthony E. Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, (New York: BasicBooks, 1993): 31-56

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

women based on individual responsibility. Women, particularly mothers, were tasked with producing a new, clean nation by introducing proper hygienic practices to their children. They also had to maintain a particular kind of household that minimized the possibility for contagious disease. Men were more passive subjects. While their personal cleanliness was still important, as evidenced by their inclusion in discourses that associated poor hygiene with immorality, they were not seen as responsible for cultivating domestic spaces or producing future generations.

Philadelphia's first public bathhouse, like other similar institutions across the country, challenged notions about the association between cleanliness and femininity by disputing the idea that the household was the only site in which women could participate in cleanliness. Women living in Philadelphia's tenement communities did not have access to the private bathing facilities found in many of the city's middle- and upper-class homes. As a result, they were unable to conform to popular conceptions of domesticity, and were often blamed for the high infant mortality rates and disproportionately high presence of infectious diseases in their neighborhoods.<sup>49</sup> The public bathhouse became a site in which women could engage in some of the behaviors that had previously been located solely within the home, namely the cleaning of one's body and the washing of the family laundry. A newspaper article published in June 1900 acknowledged both the structural impediments to domestic hygiene in Philadelphia's slums, and the extent to which the bathhouse mitigated them: "The washroom was intended at first for women only. Here they gather every day in the week and 'do' the family laundry in almost half the time they can accomplish it in their homes where the small yards and flats are a hindrance to drying."<sup>50</sup> The laundry that was located in the

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<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of infant mortality in Philadelphia, see Gretchen Condran and Jennifer Murphy, "Defining and Managing Infant Mortality: A Case Study of Philadelphia, 1870–1920," *Social Science History* 32, no. 4 (2008): 473–513.

<sup>50</sup> "Model Public Wash House Where Men and Women May 'Do Their Washing' At Small Expense," June 8, 1900, News Clipping File, Scrapbooks, PBA.

basement of the Gaskill Street baths, where women from the neighborhood could come and do their family's washing for the same price as an individual bath, was far more efficient and hygienic than the shared pumps where many women washed their clothes in the slums. By constructing a space which served as an implicit acknowledgment of Philadelphia's infrastructural problems, the PBA had also begun to challenge the hegemony of the home in cleanliness practices. It became acceptable to wash oneself and one's clothes in a semi-public place, and thus for the first time, poor women could begin to participate in a broadening of the domestic space.

Nonetheless, as in virtually every bathhouse in the United States, the Gaskill Street establishment was patronized by more men than women. During its second year of operation, it was used by 15,695 men and boys and 4,981 women and girls. In an attempt to explain this disparity in patronage, the PBA relied on a highly gendered understanding of individual behavior:

The experience has been the same here as in other cities with regard to the large proportion of men as compared with the number of women who attend. Among the causes for this are the pressure of home duties and timidity on account of not being accustomed to the visiting of public places, but the principal cause is that the habits of domestic life naturally confine the patronage of women to the immediate neighborhood, while that of men is drawn from all parts of the city on account of their life being more largely in the outside world, rather than in the home in the case of women.<sup>51</sup>

This passage of the PBA's Third Annual Report demonstrates that its leaders were deeply influenced by the ideas of domesticity that had developed over the course of the preceding century. Despite the fact that the construction of the laundry was an implicit acknowledgment of the structural problems

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<sup>51</sup> Third Annual Report of the PBA, Scrapbooks, PBA.

that prevented women from efficiently and adequately cleaning themselves and their clothes, PBA officials still believed that their behavior could be explained by their relationship to the home. Evidence suggests, however, that the real reason for this numerical imbalance was the fact that women were concerned by the large presence of “vagrant men” in the bathhouse.<sup>52</sup> The PBA quietly acknowledged this by erecting new baths across the street in 1903 that were to be used solely by women. The original bathhouse was thereafter reserved exclusively for men.

This change was important for several reasons. First, it concretized ideologies of sex segregation in bathing that had dictated American hygienic practices since the earliest days of the republic. Despite the progressive philosophies that moved PBA leaders to establish a facility in which both men and women could become equal in terms of personal cleanliness, they still adhered to older beliefs that viewed women’s bodies as particularly vulnerable and in need of protection from the sexual degeneracy of men. Second, it further designated the public bathhouse as a place to which working-class women could lay claim, and by extension allowed them to more actively engage in a system that had long treated them as passive agents in a larger moral project. By voicing their displeasure and motivating the establishment of a separate institution, poor women who had been targeted for their inability to uphold proper standards of domestic cleanliness were able to retaliate against their own marginalization by taking part in a redefinition of the domestic. The public bathhouse challenged the belief that the home was the only space in which people could become clean, and when poor women dictated the terms of this challenge, they reasserted their role in the cleanliness of the nation. Finally, the restructuring of the PBA based on fears of vagrancy placed the bathhouse within an ongoing debate surrounding single, unemployed men in urban centers.

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<sup>52</sup> Williams, *Washing “The Great Unwashed,”* 106.

Vagrancy had been a problem in the United States since the early days of the republic, but the combination of increased immigration, improved transportation systems, and frequent economic crises in the late nineteenth century made it more salient than ever. Between 1870 and 1890, many American cities, including Philadelphia, experienced influxes of unemployed white men that came to be known as “tramps.” As Tim Cresswell has pointed out, the term “tramp” was both socially and legally constructed. “Tramp laws,” passed by 19 different states between 1876 and 1886, defined tramps as mobile, unemployed, and male.<sup>53</sup> The gendered aspect of these laws was important, as it painted tramps as dangerous to both women and domestic life. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported in 1893, for example, that “A repulsive and dangerous looking individual” was seen to “approach a respectable old lady and demand \$2, threatening to shoot her if the money was not forthcoming at once.”<sup>54</sup> The moral separation between the two central figures in this story is framed in terms of physical difference. While the elderly woman is “respectable,” the tramp’s presumed homelessness makes him “repulsive” and therefore dangerous. Moreover, Cresswell notes that these men were perceived as most threatening when they knocked on doors and asked for food or money, since “the woman at home, without a husband, was seen as particularly vulnerable.”<sup>55</sup> Tramps and vagrants thus occupied a distinct sphere that was diametrically opposed, and actively dangerous to, the feminine domestic space.

The particular architecture and functioning of the Gaskill Street bathhouse allowed these unmarried, unemployed men to renegotiate their status by combatting the two most visible signs of their poverty: dirtiness and a lack of money. The PBA charged five cents for a shower bath and ten

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<sup>53</sup> Tim Cresswell, “Embodiment, Power and the Politics of Mobility: The Case of Female Tramps and Hobos,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 2 (1999): 183.

<sup>54</sup> “Overpowered a Tramp. The Vagrant Had Terrorized Citizens of Chestnut Hill.” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), September 1, 1893: 5.

<sup>55</sup> Cresswell, “Embodiment, Power and the Politics of Mobility,” 182.



cents for a tub bath, both of which came with a towel and soap. The laundry also cost five cents per hour. The charging of a fee, in addition to helping maintain the baths, had important social implications. In 1899 a journalist from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* visited the Gaskill Street Baths and wrote that “the small charge saves the humiliation that arises in the self respecting poor of receiving alms. Many people come, some of whom are well to do, who would not come if the baths were free of charge.”<sup>56</sup> PBA leaders realized that the poor were less likely to use the bathhouse if they saw it purely as a charity organization. By paying a small fee, bathers were, at least momentarily, on the same socioeconomic level as everyone else inside of the establishment.<sup>57</sup>

The basement washroom, while it had been built specifically for the women of the neighborhood, unexpectedly became a popular destination for men as well:

While it was gratifying to have the wash-house prove successful, an entirely unexpected development took place. A colored boy of the neighborhood came in and washed his own clothing. He was the forerunner of dozens of men, most of whom had only the one suit, who came now every week to wash their clothing. A room was given them in the men’s bathing department where they remove[d] their underclothing, slip on their overclothing and proceeded to the wash-house. A small charge of 5 cents an hour with soap free of charge was much appreciated and many got their clothes washed and dried in one hour.<sup>58</sup>

This was a surprising development to those who paid attention to the bathhouse, even in other cities. An article published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, for example, highlighted the laundry’s “wide range of patronage,” which included “not only the poorer class of women who come there to do their family wash, but men who come on Sundays to wash their one suit of underwear, and the small shop keepers who send their servants to do the family washing.”<sup>59</sup> Despite the fact that men were

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<sup>56</sup> *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Scrapbooks, PBA.

<sup>57</sup> Typewritten history of the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia, 5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> July 9, 1899, Untitled News Clipping File, Scrapbooks, PBA.

only allowed in the washroom on weekends, their presence was still a particular point of contention in gendered debates about the bathhouse's use, so much so that for a short period of time before the new bathhouse was opened, PBA leaders felt compelled to ban men from the laundry entirely. An article in the "Women's Section" of the *New York Evening Telegraph* emphasized how the character of these men threatened the proper functioning of the washroom:

The admission of men to the washroom brought together a lot of unfortunates whose struggles to keep up appearances would be ludicrous if their poverty was not so pitiful. Men with only one shirt, one pair of stockings, one suit of underwear and one or two handkerchiefs would come to the public washroom, give the garments a rapid rub down in the hot water tub, souse them in cold water and then sit around in their coats and trousers while the things were drying. By this method their entire week's washing did not cost them more than ten cents. Men out of employment used to come to do the family wash, while their wives went out to earn money. But the plan, for many reasons, proved impracticable. It was obvious that if men were admitted to the washroom the very class of women for whom it was intended would stay away. So, at a sacrifice of cash receipts, and in spite of protests from unmarried men, the washroom was given over exclusively to women.<sup>60</sup>

Despite making up the majority of the bathhouse's patronage, and despite their novel efforts to improve their appearances by using the laundry, "vagrant" men were still disciplined within the baths. Just as they were seen as threats to domestic life when they walked the streets, so too were they deemed dangerous to the new domestic space (the washroom) that had been created within the bathhouse. Nearly all of the ire directed towards these men, however, came from female patrons. There is little evidence to suggest that PBA employees feared their presence or believed they would cause anyone harm. Thus the construction of the second, all-female bathhouse can be seen almost entirely as the product of these women's agency and work. Additionally, the allocation of the first bathhouse and its accompanying washroom to an all-male clientele can be understood as a new development in unemployed, unmarried men's relationship to their own cleanliness. The bathhouse

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<sup>60</sup> January 8, 1902, "Reformers' Public Wash House in Philadelphia Successfully Run in Slums," Scrapbooks, PBA.

became a place where they could be free from spatial forms of discipline, and where they were no longer framed as existential threats to American domestic ideals.

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By the early 1920s, most American cities had ceased building public bathhouses. The PBA, however, opened three more public baths between 1903 and 1928. Patronage reached a peak in 1928 of 530,964, with surplus revenues amounting to \$15,339.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, by 1929 Philadelphia's bathhouses began experiencing rapidly declining use, and in 1932 the surplus had become a deficit of \$10,667.<sup>62</sup> The Gaskill Street baths were closed in 1942 as a result, with the rest of the PBA buildings being sold back to the city by 1948. On January 11, 1950, the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia ceased operations. From its inception, the PBA had hoped that it would act as an exemplar in the American public bath movement. PBA leaders wrote in their Third Annual Annual Report that "The bath house movement throughout the country is growing rapidly, and it is to be hoped that Philadelphia will not only keep abreast, but lead in this very important branch of moral and material progress."<sup>63</sup> David Glassberg has shown that this dream was thwarted, not only in Philadelphia but in all other major American cities, by the growth in popularity of private bathing practices.<sup>64</sup> Tenement house laws passed at the turn of the century generally required that all apartments contained a separate toilet, and builders began including bathtubs as well. Additionally, bathtubs in individual tenement homes became less expensive after the invention and mass

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<sup>61</sup> Williams, *Washing "The Great Unwashed,"* 107.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 109. A deeper examination of the effect of the Great Depression on public bathing would also be useful.

<sup>63</sup> Third Annual Report of the PBA.

<sup>64</sup> Glassberg, "The Design of Reform," 5-21.

production of the one-piece galvanized, enameled bathtub. As a result, a 1917-1918 study of Philadelphia workingmen's standard of living reported that 86.2 percent had bathtubs in their homes, compared with less than 20 percent just two decades earlier.<sup>65</sup>

While the PBA may have never been at the forefront of a public bath renaissance, and while that concept may have never actually existed in the first place, its efforts nevertheless constituted a vital step in the evolution of American hygienic practices. More than this, however, the baths themselves acted as sites wherein traditional ideas about hygiene, morality, and gender were both upheld and challenged, both by the PBA leaders themselves and by those who patronized the establishments. In the first five years of the Gaskill Street bathhouse's operation, news articles, pamphlets, and reports moved from stressing the didactic capacities of the baths to focusing on the structural problems that impeded individual cleanliness in the surrounding neighborhood. For example, whereas in the 1890s Superintendent Ross had spoken extensively of the role of elites in educating the poor on proper bathing habits, by the early 1900s he had begun to blame both municipal bathing facilities and the architecture of tenement homes themselves for failing to provide the poor with what he saw as a fundamental human right: "The city has a number of pool baths, but these are open only four months in the twelve and are more for recreation. It is the poorer classes, especially those who have no bathing facilities at home, that the association wishes to reach..."<sup>66</sup> Thus while PBA members and reformers continued to believe that cleanliness represented an individual, moral responsibility, their research into the city's infrastructure led them to shift blame away from the poor and onto the city officials and landlords who had made it impossible for the poor to bathe properly.

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<sup>65</sup> Williams, *Washing "The Great Unwashed,"* 107.

<sup>66</sup> W. L. Ross, "A Modern Bath House," *Public Improvements*, September, 1900, Scrapbooks, PBA.

Philadelphia's public bathhouses also challenged older, gendered understandings of bathing by altering the spatial dimensions of domesticity. For much of the 19th century, the household was the only place in which women and mothers could clean themselves and their families. Since most of the country's urban poor lacked the facilities to achieve this, they were often blamed for the supposed moral degradation of themselves and those they cared for, and could thus be excluded from the markings of middle-class respectability. The architecture of the Gaskill Street baths provided a path out of this narrow idea. By including a public laundry, the PBA, at least for a period, turned a traditionally domestic practice into a collective enterprise. The laundry also unexpectedly opened up a historically feminized act to a host of male agents. Men used the washroom so frequently, and in such great numbers, that the PBA found it necessary to construct an entirely new facility dedicated exclusively for women, who had been the original intended patrons of the laundry. A large portion (often the majority) of men who frequented the baths were unemployed, unmarried white men known as "vagrants" or "tramps," who used the bathhouse to improve their social status by cleaning their bodies and clothes. Acknowledging their agency in this story is vital. By using the laundry, which was not intended for them, they lay claim to an aspect of personal cleanliness that had for a long time been not been available to them. In doing so, they helped renegotiate the domestic by engaging in one of the practices that defined it, as well as challenging their own image as a threat to domestic spaces.

In a 1900 op-ed in *Public Improvements*, Superintendent Ross wrote that "On April 21st, 1898, Congress declared war against Spain, and The Public Baths Association of Philadelphia declared war against uncleanness by opening the doors of the Gaskill street baths."<sup>67</sup> Whether or not this war

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<sup>67</sup> Ross, "A Modern Bath House."

was won is still up for debate, but cleanliness has only ever been one piece of a much larger picture, a picture that includes contested understandings of the relationships between hygiene, morality, gender, and numerous other social phenomena that could not have been discussed adequately given the scope of this paper.<sup>68</sup> Marilyn Williams has argued that the private bathroom is the lasting legacy of America's public bath reformers.<sup>69</sup> I would add to this that the public bath movement, exemplified in a rather unsuspecting structure on Philadelphia's Gaskill Street, altered the very social nature of bathing. It lives on in this way, embodied every time someone is moved to get clean.

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<sup>68</sup> The place of race in the history of the PBA will hopefully receive greater attention in the future. Additionally, I hope that the intersections between maternalist politics and the nineteenth century domestic hygiene paradigm will be explored further.

<sup>69</sup> Williams, *Washing "The Great Unwashed,"* 138.

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