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Borchert: Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folk Life in the City 1850-1970

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Borchert: Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folk Life in the City 1850-1970

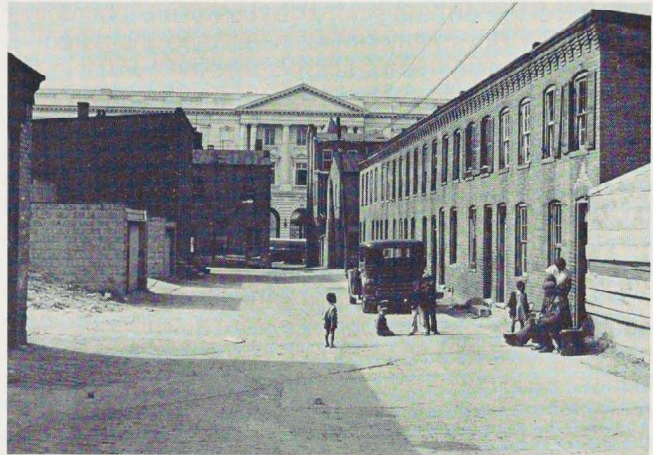
James Borchert. *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folk Life in the City, 1850–1970.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1980. 326 pp. \$18.50 (cloth).

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For well over 100 years, some residents of Washington, D.C., have lived in alleys. The houses in alleys do not face on main streets, but rather onto the inside of larger blocks, some running through to the street directly, others ("blind alleys," literally) ending in courts and cul-de-sacs. Until recently, when they became fashionable, alley houses were essentially small slums built into higher-class blocks. The pattern developed before public transportation made it feasible to segregate the population by class and race so that the well-to-do could live away from their work and servants could live away from the homes of their employers. Washington's alleys housed mainly rural migrants, at first European immigrants, as well as black slaves, and in the end almost entirely free blacks from the rural South.

From the beginning the alleys had a terrible reputation as places in which disorganized migrants lived dissolute lives of vice and crime, places even the police feared. They shared this reputation, of course, with the more totally segregated (both racially and economically) slums that replaced them as transportation systems grew. Both kinds of areas gave substance to and evidence for large-scale theories about the disorganizing effect of urban life. Though alleys and segregated slums were very similar, alleys were distinctive in one interesting way that had been pointed out by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*: because they were inside of larger blocks, they were not visible to middle- and upper-class people who lived nearby and walked by them daily; the upper classes could live close by and yet not know how the poor lived.

Social historians have been interested for some time in a question that is, because of the difficulty of finding adequate sources, hard to answer: what was the real character of social life in these hidden and segregated slums? Was it really disorganized and vicious? Did people lose all the ways that had served to organize collective life where they had come from when they migrated to the big city? Or did they bring with them customs, traditions, and patterns of collective action that made these segregated quarters more wholesome places to live than they appear to have been?



September, 1941. Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott. Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress: "Schools Court with Senate Office Building in the background. Four very small rooms rent for fifteen and eighteen dollars a month with water and privy in backyard. It used to rent for six and eight dollars. Frank Coles and his friend are sitting on the bench. He was a cement plasterer but has been on relief for the past year. He has frequent heart attacks and swollen feet and ankles." (Photograph 5)



National Capital Housing Authority Collection: "Down in the slums. . . . This was a combination bedroom-dining room-kitchen in one of the old houses demolished by the N.C.H.A. on the site of the Carrollsburg Dwellings. Note the oil lamps and the stove. The picture recalls the sentence from the devastating indictment of the Washington slums by the District's Territorial Board of Health in 1877: 'So domiciled are families with all the dignity of tenants having rent to pay.'" (Photograph 9)

Some of the terms in such a discussion are inherently ambiguous. How many families need to be one-parent before we can say that the alleys lacked the nuclear family? How much junk has to be strewn about the backyard before we can say that it is "disorderly" as opposed to a place in which people, for instance, store materials they have scavenged until they can get a good price? Is a sparsely furnished shack evidence of terrible living conditions or of the way people have made a tasteful accommodation to poverty?

Many such questions can be turned into factual questions about what people actually did, what their homes and yards actually looked like, who actually lived in those buildings. To answer such questions, however, requires data that are hard to come by. Slum residents do not produce neat archives of letters, diaries, portraits, and the like out of which the answers can be fashioned. James Borchert has done a heroic job of combining a multitude of fugitive sources to give at least some preliminary answers.

He has, for instance, turned up a number of surveys and observational studies of alley life, with which he fleshes out more general and sketchy findings gleaned from census records, city directories, case records of social agencies, and the like. Most importantly for readers of this journal, he discovered and copied over 700 photographs of alley life, made at a variety of times by an equally various group of photographers: journalists, reformers, and members of the famed F.S.A. group were the most prominent. He lists the places one might find such visual data—in the archives of government agencies and newspapers as well as in published reports—and gives an extensive review of the literature on "photoanalysis," both of which will be useful to others who want to use such materials.

How does Borchert use the photographic data he assembled? For one thing, he answers questions, on a factual basis, about matters that were taken as too obvious to need proof in earlier reformist accounts of alley life. Writers who described alleys as disorganized and dangerous places implied, without actually stating it, that there was no common space freely available to all inhabitants for purposes of sociability. But a number of photographs show people sitting on their alley stoops socializing, resting, playing games, and promenading. That such activities did go on shows that the earlier description is factually incorrect.

Similarly, reformist researchers described alley flats as filthy and untidy. The pictures Borchert reproduces reveal rooms that are poor and bare but that also show clear evidence of some attempt to make the best of circumstances: ingenious uses of space and equipment, efforts at decoration, the use of such middle-class home furnishings as tablecloths and curtains. (This analysis, in fact, reveals an ambivalence of Borchert's. On the one hand, he wants to show that alley dwellers might not have lived up to middle-class standards of propriety but

had their own standards, developed in response to the conditions of their lives—a relativistic view of the proprieties. On the other hand, he takes every opportunity to show that alley dwellers really did live up to those middle-class standards.)

In addition to demonstrating that earlier descriptions were wrong, Borchert provides a systematic reading of his 700 photographs under a large number of rubrics. He uses them to assess the character of the typical alley house, the makeup of family groups and neighborhood patterns of interaction (e.g., windows and doors on the street frequently appear open and with heads sticking out of them, supporting the interpretation that the house and the outdoors ran into one another in a characteristic way).

Overall, the photographic analysis is very convincing. Although individual interpretations sometimes appear farfetched, the mass of pictures makes you see as important things your eye had skipped over before. You notice, in a picture of some older black men (whose illness prevents them from working) sitting on a stoop in an alley, that they are in fact watching over some small children playing nearby; thus the demographic makeup of alleys made it untrue that children ran wild, unsupervised by responsible adults. Having seen that, you begin to notice the unremarked presence of similarly watchful adults in other photographs, as you notice the attempts at household decoration in interiors pointed out elsewhere.

Taken together with the other materials, Borchert uses the photographs to argue that black residents of the alleys, far from being disorganized migrants, had viable communities, relatively stable families, and a web of tradition and custom that helped them make lives for themselves: "Despite intolerable conditions, then, alley residents were able to shape and control their own lives within the economic, social, and political limits imposed by the dominant white society." He further uses comparative materials on other cities with similar housing patterns—alleys turn out to be quite common in the U.S. and elsewhere—to show that his findings can be generalized.

Borchert's argument is interesting and his assessment of the evidence judicious. In the end, his thesis, peppered with such expressions as "it is probable that" and "we may infer that," is not as compelling as he would like it to be. Yet the final result, bringing together so many kinds of evidence, somehow adds up to more. I came away from the book knowing more than I had about a topic I had been made to see was of considerable importance.