

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

The Spirit of Africville (selected and edited by the Africville Genealogy Society) Halifax: Formac Press, 1992. Pp. 124 (60 pages of colour and b&w photographs) Paperback \$19.95 Cloth \$34.95

Del Muike

Volume 21, Number 2, March 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016814ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016814ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Muise, D. (1993). Review of [*The Spirit of Africville* (selected and edited by the Africville Genealogy Society) Halifax: Formac Press, 1992. Pp. 124 (60 pages of colour and b&w photographs) Paperback \$19.95 Cloth \$34.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 21(2), 137–139.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1016814ar>

brutal completeness native cultures gave way and a replica European society grew in its place. The story is important beyond the particulars of this case, as is the discussion by editor Oke and his colleagues, M. North and O. Slaymaker, who discern a century of environmental change. The environment has been remade, just as has human society. "Verdant forest has been transformed into urban 'jungle,' ... and the haunts of the cougar and eagle are now the home of the cat and budgie" (p. 147). The changes are visible (dyking of flood lands and control of Fraser River tributaries) and invisible (the redirection of streams into sewers), large (the destruction of the forests) and small (the disturbance to the forest hush in Stanley Park by the intensity of road traffic through it). The authors are not decrying change; they note that it is continuous under any circumstances. Rather, they wish to alert city dwellers to the nature of the processes to which their actions contribute. The question of the quality of urban life is intimately related to the quality of the environment, where human agency is a vital element.

Vancouver is an emotive word: it connotes pleasures and opportunities, almost a vision of Eden, as an author sees it. This, as the authors note, is part of the explanation of its growth and future prospects. In light of this widely held assessment of the place it is surprising how little attention is given in the book to the realization or attempted implementation of the dreams that lead to Vancouver. The social texture of life receives remarkably little attention. What should we expect beyond a visual description of orderly suburbs, older inner city neighbourhoods and downtown high rise living? A diverse, contentious and lively society has taken root in Vancouver, yet its shadow can scarcely be discerned beyond the figure detailing the evolving floorplan of a gay bar or the illustration of a yuppified commercial strip. For a

geographical appreciation of this place, is it significant that we understand such matters rather than its role and function in international trade or in processing the raw materials of the land? The balance of treatment of these topics is not what the reader of the editors' commentary would expect.

Nevertheless, the editors and authors, all colleagues in the Department of Geography at the University of British Columbia, have given us a perspective which might well be emulated. Here is a broadly conceived and well rounded view of the science and art of geography harnessed to an interpretation of one of the most significant of human creations: the city. There is much in these pages to appeal to the scholar and the more casual reader.

PETER G. GOHEEN
Department Of Geography
Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario

The Spirit of Africville (selected and edited by the Africville Genealogy Society) Halifax: Formac Press, 1992. Pp. 124 (60 pages of colour and b&w photographs) Paperback \$19.95 Cloth \$34.95.

This book is the end-product of a remarkable collaborative effort spanning the past few years. In 1988 Mary Sparling of the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery joined with members of the Africville Genealogy Society and the Black Cultural Centre of Nova Scotia to exhibit photos and artifacts reflecting the history of a community that was bulldozed to the ground two decades earlier. A tiny enclave of black residents that had survived for almost two centuries on the shores of Halifax's Bedford Basin, Africville had been victimized by the combination of bureaucratic idealism, land greed and outright racism that was so characteristic of late 1960s Nova Scotia, when

there was so much hope for a better future and so much despair regarding the capacity of the state to reform.

Titled *Africville: A Spirit that Lives On*, the exhibit is still travelling throughout Canada and continues to be a remarkable success, as was the conference/symposium it spawned to discuss the process and implications of the removal of Africville's people from their homes. Material gathered from that symposium, along with a great deal of supplementary oral history, provided the stuff for a National Film Board production *Remember Africville*, released in 1991. Distributed on VHS format through NFB outlets, it also utilizes archival footage, official photographs, home movies, privately-held photographs, extracts from contemporary TV broadcasts that discussed demolition of the community. From the conference itself, former residents and politicians and planners reflected on the decision to destroy the community's homes and church.

This book is the latest stage in development of the project, which also includes a heavily attended and highly visible annual reunion of Africville residents and their children at tiny Seaview park now occupying the former site of the community. It is superbly presented in a large page format with excellent photo reproduction. It opens with a *Visit to Africville* as it was before 1966 conducted by former resident Charles R. Saunders, a Halifax-based journalist. It has been adapted here from its earlier incarnation in the catalogue accompanying the travelling exhibit. Saunders was helped along by members of the genealogy society, who appear to have had a remarkable input into every aspect of this project and deserve credit for its matter-of-fact directness, something quite unusual for museum exhibits. By focusing on everyday occurrences—the sites and sounds of the community in motion—

Saunders evokes a poetic and quite powerful memory of lives lived on the edge of "town", which is how residents of Africville referred to Halifax.

Donald Clairmont, the Dalhousie sociologist who has written more about Africville's experience than anyone, contributes two chapters. The first outlines the history of the community from its founding in the 19th century and features a detailed discussion of the families as well as the work experience of the residents of the community, many of whom served as railroad porters. His second chapter explores dimensions of the experience of relocation, where he offers a dispassionate account of the forces at work within Halifax City Hall at the time of the community's destruction. He highlights the means by which the city's politicians and bureaucrats isolated the people of Africville from participation in decisions regarding their fate; and then froze them out of any role in the vicious destruction of their community.

Stephen Kimber, a Halifax based journalist, edits remarks of residents and participants at the conference/symposium, in *The Africville Experience: Lessons for the Future*. There people directly affected by destruction of their community give voice to their experience, albeit twenty years after the fact. The emotive power of their recollections testifies to individual and community resistance to the broad trend towards homogenization of urban communities. The people of Africville speak with spirit, reflecting the power of historical imagination to hold a community together even after the physical reality of their lives has been altered so dramatically.

A few members of the civic political and bureaucratic establishments of the era speak with shame of their part in the callous decisions taken. But there is little by way of apology for their actions, which

they explain away as unfortunate by-products of the drive to modernize. While they admit that in today's climate of advocacy, such a situation could not recur, similar issues are being faced today with the various plans to dispose of metro Halifax's garbage.

The closing chapter by Bridglal Pachai, head of the Nova Scotia Black Cultural Centre at the time the exhibit was organized, but now Human Rights Commissioner of Nova Scotia, outlines the origins of the province's various black communities. But his twelve-page summary of Black Nova Scotians' history is totally inadequate and has been told better elsewhere by him and others. Dwelling upon the accomplishments of only a few leaders within the black community, logical precursors to Pachai himself, contributes little to the impact of the book.

As important as is the text's presentation of the lived experience of so many individuals, the book is defined as much by its photographs as by its words. The community's remembrance of its past is dramatically portrayed in a wealth of privately-held snapshots of everyday life, complemented by the rich official record of the community. Especially powerful are the photos of Bob Brooks, who worked with the Nova Scotia Information Services during the relocation and recorded its moods in fine detail. Reproduction of these photos, in many ways the most salient reminder of the character of the community, contributes most to our understanding of this important incident in the history of urban development in Canada.

Africville has received a great deal of press as a result of the exhibition and subsequent publicity surrounding the conference and video. In a volatile racial environment such as the one that pervades Halifax/Dartmouth these days, this is a powerful reminder that

such wilful attempts to destroy a community can never again be taken lightly. While it is useful to recall that Africville's relocation was one of several that took place in the Halifax area during the sixties and seventies, it was not even the largest one. In addition, similar efforts at "Urban Renewal" in other communities (most notably in Sydney where the mostly black residents of the "Coke Ovens" were removed from their homes and moved to low cost or subsidized housing) had the same effect.

In discussions of the incident there is a curious acceptance of the stated rationale for the decision to level the community. The question of land use is seldom addressed. What is highlighted is the fact that the site of Africville is now given over to a tiny waterside park, but what is overlooked is that the park sits in the shadow of the Mackay Bridge, completed shortly after removal of the community. As the second one traversing Halifax harbour, the Mackay Bridge has probably contributed more than any other factor to Dartmouth's emergence in the past two decades as the area's most significant industrial park and fastest growing community.

Since it would have been difficult if not impossible to have built that bridge with Africville in place, the value of the land to the urban restructuring of Halifax/Dartmouth was far beyond the immediate costs of assembling the package. In fact it would probably be fair to say that Africville's removal was central to the planning of the economic development of the metro area, its land crucial to the package that permitted expansion of the area's economy to make it the richest city in the region. So it is understandable why governments went to such lengths to justify such a decision, ostensibly undertaken for combinations of humanitarian and aesthetic reasons, but accomplished with a

minimum of fuss and cost against a powerless community.

Africville's residents were never properly compensated at the time of the evictions. Proper valuation of their land has been deliberately avoided to permit the administrative fiction that the actions of two decades ago can somehow be explained by the vagaries of the 1960s politics. This book is part of the continuing story of how former Africville residents are dealing with the impact of that decision on their lives. Whether or not further justice can be theirs remains to be seen, but Formac Press is to be congratulated for doing them justice in the production of this magnificent volume. Historians of Canadian urbanization and anyone interested in the consequences of development will read of their lives and their struggle with great profit.

DEL MUISE
Carleton University

Gary Leupp, *Servants, Laborers, and Shophands in the Cities of Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. Pp. xiii + 237 [264 pages, 36 tables, appendix, notes, index]. \$29.95.)

At the turn of the seventeenth century, Japan experienced an urban construction boom believed to be unparalleled in world history. Following unification under the Tokugawa shogunate in 1600, hundreds of urban nuclei—ports, temple towns, post stations, and castle towns—were established or expanded, attracting warriors, merchants, artisans, and rural migrants by the thousands. By the eighteenth century, the shogun's capital of Edo (precursor to present-day Tokyo) had become the largest metropolis in the world, home to a million souls, and fully a sixth of the Japanese populace is estimated to have lived in towns of one sort or another.

In this lively monograph, Tufts University historian Gary Leupp brings to life the diverse population of laborers who inhabited these new urban centers. Urban workers were a varied lot; as suggested by the title, those discussed here include personal servants (employed both by samurai and elite commoners), shophands in mercantile establishments, and casual laborers. (Pedlars, skilled artisans, shopkeepers and others who were essentially self-employed are excluded from the book's purview, as are prostitutes, actors, and beggars.) Drawing on literature, drama, and polemical essays, as well as population surveys, criminal records, and a wide variety of household and business documents, Leupp paints a portrait of the Tokugawa "ur-proletariat" that is at once quantitatively comprehensive and anecdotally vivid.

According to his preface, Leupp originally entered the archives with an ambitious theoretical agenda: "to demonstrate that wage labor—and hence capitalist relations of production in the specific Marxian sense—had developed to a significant extent in Japanese cities during a period commonly described as 'feudal': (p. xi). Considerable evidence to substantiate such a claim may be found in the pages of *Servants, Shophands, and Laborers*, particularly in the first chapter. Here the author demonstrates convincingly that traditional means of mobilizing workers (through lifetime service and corvee) were simply inadequate for the tasks mandated by the new government—namely, building and servicing mansions for all the regional barons in Edo, and performing the myriad tasks associated with an ambitious program of urban construction. Since conscripting peasants for massive and long-term projects would have jeopardized the rice crop, and since a century of pervasive labor shortages rendered lifetime service impractical, the

feudal authorities were forced—against their better judgment—to permit the widespread use of short-term labor contracts. In the process, labor became "commodified", and proletarians became transformed into wage workers. As Leupp concludes, "the Japanese case is perhaps unique in that the feudal ruling class, in resolving its internal conflicts, played so great a role in generating revolutionary change" (p. 28).

Yet having made this case at the outset, Leupp essentially drops it for the remainder of the book. No single argument ties together the rich material brought together in the succeeding chapters; indeed, the author deliberately eschews any overarching theoretical position. (Significantly, his introduction is a mere four pages, and the book has no conclusion save a suggestive three-paragraph afterword.) Instead, he contented himself with the more modest task of "describ[ing] how human relations were radically affected by the tremendous expansion of the money economy during the Tokugawa period" (p. xii).

In this, the book is a resounding success. Three of the remaining five chapters deal specifically with servants. The first gives a careful accounting of servant types and functions, differentiated by gender, employer, and rank. A wide-ranging discussion of master-servant relations follows, yielding revealing passages on sexual liaisons (and abuses) as well as information on wages and other compensation. The section on servants concludes with an analysis of their place in society, interrogating their image in popular literature and drama, their relations with other classes, and their social mobility. The final two chapters of the book, by contrast, are devoted to the rougher world of casual laborers (most of whom were employed in the construction and transport trades), and conclude with an overview of government