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## Review of *Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis* Edited by Andrew Hurley

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**Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis.** Edited by Andrew Hurley. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997. xi+319. Illustrations, references, index. \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 1-883982-15-4), \$19.95 paper (ISBN 1-883982-16-2).

The thirteen articles in this fine volume make a strong contribution to the intellectual effort to put the environment back into urban history by elevating it from a mere “stage” or “setting” to an active independent variable which shaped the course of urban development. The authors’ collective goal is to demonstrate that the residents of St. Louis and its region were engaged in a dynamic interaction with the environment from the origins of human settlement in the area, and that the actions and strategies they undertook to generate urban development were shaped as much by the environment as by their economic, political, social, and cultural values.

The shifting nature of this interaction between urbanizing man and the environment is drawn vividly in a series of topical articles arranged in chronological order. At times nature indeed acted directly upon humans, supporting the work’s general thesis. Yet one also observes residents gaining the upper hand and subsuming environment into the matrix of decisions that urbanizing people carry out to push economic development forward. As the villages of Native Peoples grew larger, they faced more disease and demographic decay, and thus began to disperse. When European-American settlers chose town sites, they paid close attention not only to the geography of the rivers and the resource base of the region, but also to the hydrologic cycle of the rivers, and avoided settlement on flood plains (a decision that saved St. Louis many times, including in 1993, from serious flood damage). In doing so, they understood or gradually came to understand that St. Louis was located at a point of intersection or in a “zone of encounter” between different geographic, climatic, and geological regions, a fact that reinforced St. Louis’ booster self-image as a future center of both regional and national economies.

When new forms of transport emerged, the demand for fuel denuded the river banks of trees, intensifying floods and compelling residents to seek more flood control through dams and levees, while vacating the bottoms for higher ground. Such open ground would, fatefully, become the locus of rail and then manufacturing activity. This concentration of industrial power, which tapped nearby coal supplies, pitted industrialists who sought further to protect low-lying land by building levees against residents and workers who, in living near the industries, were most affected both by the air and water pollution they caused and the increased destructive power of the river. As the city developed and supplanted the natural environment with a man-made "second nature," the consequences of that growth—disease, fire, animal infestation, and air and water pollution—increased, forcing residents to respond with ever more systemic and integrated water and sewage systems, street construction and maintenance programs, fire prevention policies, smoke abatement and rodent control programs, nuisance legislation, and land use zoning. Like urbanization itself, each of these strategies and initiatives to create a rational urban geography and environment was limited and differentiated by available capital, the strength of the economy, and the socio-economic status of the reform advocates. The individualistic and limited political economy of St. Louis, combined with the regional fragmentation of jurisdictions, exacerbated the inability of the city and surrounding counties to respond collectively and systemically with more comprehensive integrated regional programs until the recent past.

Such analyses both support and contradict the main thesis of the volume. It is apparent that environmental forces deeply affected the process of urbanization. It is also apparent, however, that rather than being indifferent to environmental concerns, residents sought to fine tune and achieve a balance in their interaction with the environment within a complex decision-making process that weighed the desire for economic progress and urban development, within an individualistic free market political economy, against the costs of maintaining environmental purity or balance. Urban residents in the past experienced urbanization as a centripetal process of economic development which, by drawing on both local and outside resources, increased population and land use density and thus intensified human interaction with the environment, often permitting its exploitation and destruction. As cities developed, they, like all systemic forces, generated ever greater amounts of waste and residual effects, thereby altering and adversely affecting the environment further. The interaction between humans and the environment became a systemic balancing act with residents trying to develop

more integrated systems of control to manage, neutralize, eliminate, or use the increased waste production of the system and mitigate its environmental impact.

In their desire to elevate the environment from the status of a background setting or place, *Common Fields*'s authors occasionally oversimplify urbanization and relegate it, in turn, to the background. Likewise, they occasionally overdraw and oversimplify what are complex issues by judging human action by the political and moralistic rhetoric of environmental declension that views humans as exploiters and desecrators of a once pristine and balanced environment, as well as by assessing residents' historical actions and strategies against an idealistic vision of a rationally planned city. Hence they underplay some of the complexity in the dynamics of decision-making that goes into constructing any city over time. Though St. Louisans were generally reluctant to support infrastructural development and environmental control until adverse conditions became so extreme that residents realized their city's reputation and economic future were at stake, they still experienced and recognized the rich complexity of this interaction, struggling, as they are still doing today, to achieve some economic, legal, and social balance. Such economically-based decisions were, of course, class-based and, as the editor rightly notes, had negative consequences for African Americans and thus added a racial and class dimension to St. Louis' discursive environmental policies.

Environmental urban history should strive to be deeply grounded not only knowledge of environmental processes, but also in a complex understanding of the process of urbanization itself. This volume makes a solid contribution towards that goal and provides a strong argument for the further integration of environmental with urban, social, and economic history. **Timothy R. Mahoney**, *Department of History, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.