

“Sport in a Middle-Class Utopia: Asbury Park, New Jersey, 1871-1895”

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In 1871 James A. Bradley, a millionaire brush manufacturer from New York, began development of Asbury Park—a seaside resort on the Jersey coast. Bradley was committed to both a number of moral reform crusades and also to efforts being made by sanitariums to improve urban America’s built environment. The town he designed was intended to be more than a resort; it was an experiment in urban planning. Bradley intended to create both a morally and physically sanitized urban environment. It would serve as a model for other American cities.

The moral tone of the resort was governed by Bradley’s commitment to temperance and Sabbatarianism. The emphasis was on wholesome recreation as opposed to the dissipations sanctioned at other resorts. In addition to its high moral tone, Bradley considered his town’s sanitary condition a prime attraction. As the resort developed, emphasis was placed on improved municipal services, especially water supply, sewage disposal, and intraurban transit.

Asbury Park attracted the attention of a number of reform groups who made the resort their summer convention site. The reformers themselves conformed to the profile of the typical visitor to the resort. Asbury Park’s core constituency was the urban middle class.

Sport in Bradley’s middle-class utopia served a number of important functions. Interest in sport dovetailed neatly with the resort’s dual emphasis on health and morality. Sporting activities were also an excellent source of publicity and an agent for generating civic pride.

Asbury Park was a preeminent example of reformer efforts in the period to promote wholesome recreation as a means of combating vice and immorality. Scholars have noted that the control of space and behavior was crucial to solving the problem of unacceptable amusements. Asbury Park was a comprehensive effort at exercising such control.

Reformers were also concerned with the growing divisions among the classes in the city. They worked to restore the “natural relations” among urban residents which city life had disrupted. What has been called the “quest for subcommunity” among urban Americans, however, worked against such a reconciliation.

Asbury Park served the function of a “status community” for its middle-class visitors. Such a community was the creation of status equals who sought to distinguish themselves from those they considered their inferiors.

Bradley succeeded in creating a subcommunity for his middle-class patrons and then offered it as a vision of the urban future. It was a vision he shared with other middle-class reformers who thought that the solution to the physical and moral

problems of the city was to transform the entire urban population into mirror images of themselves. In the mind of the reformer, subcommunity was, in fact, seen as a model for a revitalized metropolis. It was a seriously flawed dream.



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