Foreword

When people consider urban development many issues come to mind: sewage, finances, policing, transportation, administration . . . Seldom do we think of animal control. The reason for this is that in most cities – certainly in the U.S. – this is one urban problem that has been solved. Virtually none of us have experience with wandering cattle and pigs, or packs of unhoused dogs in our streets and parks. And yet this success did not grow by itself like a weed, but had to be planned and nurtured; it was the result of conscious effort and supportive trends – urbanization, mechanization, our evolving view of animals as pets rather than work-animals – in society.

The present study follows the development of animal control in the specific case of the nation’s capital, Washington, D.C. It grew from a request of the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly, a community group in Southwest Washington, for me to research a modest brick building in its neighborhood for nomination as a city landmark site (which would give it protection from demolition); it turned out to be the old District pound. Entering this virgin topic, I ran into the annual Poundmaster Reports and was soon swept down a current of fascinating and highly entertaining information into an unexplored world of . . . well, the reader will see this world himself. I will say only that I soon had enough information to write the history of the building and then needed to decide what to do with the rest – throw it away, or go on and write up the whole thing. Here is the result.

This is, as far as I can find, the sole general case study of the history of animal control in an American city. In only a few important instances (the establishment of our pound, for example) did I make an attempt to learn what was happening in other places. “Animal Control” here means animals in public places: streets and parks, markets, uninvited in peoples’ front yards – treatment of animals in farms, slaughterhouses, stables, zoos, and other private places is left for someone else to research.

Other topics bypassed are: the role of animals in the local economy; protection of wild animals in the larger parks; such humane concerns as vivisection, treatment of animals in transshipment through the city, and other issues that were essentially lobbying projects; conditions and regulation of veterinarians; racing; circuses and exhibitions; farm regulations; extermination of rodents, insects and other pests; regulation of pet stores; disposal of fish offal from wharves and carcasses from butcher shops and other commercial places; city- and federally-owned animals such as Fire Department horses and police dogs; and hunting regulations. In a few cases these are touched on, usually in footnotes, when I had some information to record. A few notes toward further study of these subjects are given in the Appendix.

I have tried to pay special attention to the popular and legal aspects of leashing dogs in public places, inasmuch as this is such a standard part of our current etiquette.

This study led me a long and enjoyable chase through many local archives and libraries, gratefully acknowledged in the footnotes, bibliography and the related Notes on Sources. Three promising sources are unhappy absent: the records of the Health Officer beyond the published annual reports (including, alas! that office’s ordinances), and records (including opinions) of the Police Court, both of which seem not to have survived; and complaints of early travelers about the city’s unseemly quadrupeds, which would have required thumbing through many, many volumes for the chance observation.

Believing that few would care to re-trace my steps through so much primary material I have been as thorough as reasonably possible with this study; hence the larding of the footnotes. To make further research convenient I have organized all copied material (including texts of all laws and regulations that I found, and a full set of Poundmaster Annual Reports) for deposit in the Washingtoniana Division of the Martin Luther King Library here in the city, where I found so much useful information.
If I am the father of this work then Mr. Bernard Unti of the Humane Society of the United States is its midwife. He oversaw its final trimester, arranged the hospital (publishing venue) and oversaw the actual procedure, all with sympathy and graciousness; I cannot thank him enough. His colleague, Mr. Erich Yahner, patiently formatted the text and illustrations preparatory to uploading and this was an onerous and much-appreciated effort.

Regarding the illustrations: Most of the graphic material seen here comes from contemporary newspapers, often now only available on microfilm, which does not scan or copy well; drawings come through all right but not photographs. Mrs. Laura Friend Smythe (https://www.laurafriendart.com/), a professional artist (and attorney), has reproduced a number of these graphics with great fidelity and to very good effect. All of these drawings are copyright Laura Friend Smythe.

All materials taken from the Evening Star after 1923 are under copyright held now by the Washington Post (which bought the defunct Star holdings); permission to use these items is controlled by the D. C. Public Library system, Washingtoniana Division/Evening Star Collection, which generously allowed me to use them without the usual fee. I also thank the Humane Rescue Alliance has been most kind in giving me access to both the WHS and WARL archives and permission to reproduce this material.

And finally, a sort of apologia: I came into this study without the need so frequently felt by academic writers to demonstrate some great cosmic thesis, or the goal seen in chroniclers of the humane movement to advocate a cause – this is simply a straight-forward history with occasional and obvious conclusions noted. In this modest ambition I have followed the historian’s charge as stated by one of my favorite practitioners, William Prescott, namely that of “advancing the interests of humanity by the diffusion of useful truth.”

I take this opportunity to honor Mr. Kael Anderson, resident of southwest Washington and past president of the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly, who has worked with great diligence to save the history of his community, including the old District pound.