INTRODUCTION

Hayden Wetzel’s monograph on animal control in the District of Columbia is a remarkable achievement. To my knowledge, no one else has carried out a community-level study of comparable depth and scope for any other town or city, making this a wonderful example for other researchers and scholars to follow. It was a prodigious undertaking to locate, examine, and evaluate the suite of municipal laws and statutes involved, to gather popular references and images from the nineteenth century press, and to make gainful use of the limited sources available in organizational archives. It is a richly sourced work, and a well-interpreted one.

As a kind of microhistory, Wetzel’s work contains many insights about the transition from the traditional domestic animal economy to the era of modern pet-keeping. It traces this evolution through social practices, law, and administrative regimes. It is at once a history of municipal government, of public health, of social practices, and of animal protection. The story Wetzel relates is also overlaid with the history of class and race in the city, and of Washington’s status as the nation’s capital.

As a contribution to the history of animal protection, Wetzel’s scholarship helps to situate American’s nineteenth and early twentieth century humane societies as public health institutions, with duties and responsibilities similar to those of a municipal services agency.

But their first charge was to end cruelty. Animal protection was one of the most vital of social reforms in the post-Civil War period, as the first societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals took on cruelty to horses used for conveyance and transportation, the suffering of farm animals transported to slaughter via railroad, animal fighting, inhumane methods of euthanasia, and other problems. A rapidly urbanizing and industrializing society produced more visible and severe cruelty that reformers recognized as a substantial evil. Animal cruelty was also a problem because of its connections to social disorder and domestic violence. For that reason, animal protection had strong ties to the temperance and child protection movements which shared its concerns about the social threats associated with male violence – against animals, against women, against children.

The movement spread rapidly throughout the United States in the period 1866-1900, with independent humane societies forming in both large and small communities. They worked, sometimes at close quarters with municipal authorities and agencies, to address a wide range of issues tied to the presence of animals. By the 1880s, more and more humane societies concentrated their focus on municipal animal control, promoting reforms or taking charge of the dog pounds in their communities. In time, they constructed and operated their own shelter facilities to carry out such work, picking up strays, investigating cruelty, educating the public, and eventually, becoming centers of animal adoption.

As Wetzel demonstrates, in Washington at least, private societies did not always get on well with municipal agencies, or with one another. But they shared a common burden, of ensuring that their community brought a measure of kindness to its dealings with animals, while safeguarding human and animal health. Over time, the evolution of their work and duties came to reflect the growing shift from purely utilitarian attitudes to more affectionate views of animals.
Today, Washington, DC is home to local, regional, and national animal protection societies of great distinction and reach. Wetzel’s monograph grounds their origins and history, too, and stands as a kind of prehistory of present and future developments of which most of the individuals he writes about here could never have imagined.

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