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Editor's Note

Brian M. Ingrassia

Washington, D.C., looms large in this issue of *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.* As Alan Lessoff, a former editor of the journal, wrote in his book, *The Nation and Its City* (1994), Washington is a distinctly *American* city—even though it is nearly unique among American cities, as a place that developed primarily for political rather than commercial reasons. Washington is the nation's seat of government, of course, but it also contains its own communities. Since the nineteenth century, the District of Columbia has had a thriving African American population, while also serving as a home for political leaders, government functionaries, and intellectual luminaries. Washington, moreover, is an origin point for many policies that govern the United States, including the regulation of far-flung economic activity. Appropriately, therefore, the articles and features within this issue examine the dialectic between D.C. and the activities transpiring within, along, and beyond the nation's borders.

In the first article, "'Let the Whiskey Question Alone': William Calvin Chase and Black Anti-Prohibitionist Sentiment in Washington, D.C.," Joseph Williams examines the career of African American newspaper editor William Calvin Chase, of the *Washington Bee*, to illustrate tensions over temperance within the Black community. While a number of Black reformers supported the prohibition of alcohol, Chase was far more concerned with Jim Crow and the overthrow of Reconstruction than he was with the consumption of a tipple or a dram. He used his editorial page to call out those who fixated on substance use while overlooking a broader erosion of rights and social justice. In the second article, "Less a Barrier than a Surprise: Policing Everyday Commerce Along the 49th Parallel, 1880–1910," Benjamin Hoy directs our attention to the Canada-United States border. Although this international boundary is far from Washington, it was hardly far from the thoughts of lawmakers and customs agents. As Hoy shows, the 49th parallel was not much of a barrier in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, or at least it was a permeable one—a liminality that could surprise, often with unexpected duties or arcane regulations, yet did not always stop people or goods from crossing from one country to another. The lives and economic activities of North Americans in Ontario and Iowa, or British Columbia and Washington State, were shaped by policies crafted in D.C. and Ottawa. The third article in this issue pulls us back to the District itself. In "The Natural History of Nations: Simon Newcomb and the Forging of a Postwar American Science," Vincent L. Femia uses the career of noted astronomer and polymath Simon Newcomb (who was born in Canada) to explore the role of science in the post-Civil War United States. For decades, dating back to the 1780s, Americans had debated the merit of a national university as well as other cultural or scientific institutions. And by the 1850s, Joseph Henry's Smithsonian Institution had become an important node of national knowledge production. But in his numerous and varied writings, Simon Newcomb plumbed the national characteristics of science, including the putative racial aspects of knowledge production. As Femia suggests in his critical analysis of Newcomb's thought,

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we can only understand American science if we understand the social and political contexts of its construction. And in this case, those contexts were firmly rooted in Washington, D.C.

Joining these three articles, as well as our usual complement of ten reviews of compelling new books in the field, is a special forum on "Immigration and the American Standard of Living in the Progressive Era," featuring an impressive international roster of scholars. These contributors show us that the American standard of living was formulated and theorized at the same time immigrants streamed into the United States by the millions, and that this was no coincidence—social scientists, indeed, often studied immigrants as a way to determine exactly what made the *American* standard. As Rosanne Currarino—another former *JGAPE* editor—observes in her illuminating essay, for some economists, such as Columbia University's E. R. A. Seligman, the American standard meant "a really good dinner." Or, at least, a good dinner that was *affordable.* (We can only imagine what Professor Seligman and other progressives would say about the current president's recent pronouncements regarding affordability, especially in relation to Walmart's annual Thanksgiving Meal, a retail package that appeared to provide substantially less value for inflation-battered consumers in late 2025 than it did in previous years.) Other pieces in this outstanding forum—by Axel Schäfer, Ylva Kreye, Anja-Maria Bassimir, and Atiba Perilla, along with an introduction by Katherine Benton-Cohen—address topics such as the economic analyses of Isaac Rubinow, the nutrition science of Wilbur Olin Atwater, and the U.S. Postal Service Savings Program. The forum is a tasty treat, and it is an excellent way to understand the lived experience of Americans, including recently arrived Americans, in relation to consumerism and national policy in the Progressive Era. Please dig in and enjoy.

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