

# ARCHIVO HISTORICO DE LA CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES

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Sources enabling scholars to recreate the complexity and texture of daily life in historical Buenos Aires are extremely valuable. In the past, descriptions by visitors to the city, occasional articles in contemporary newspapers, and some government reports have provided glimpses of life in nineteenth-century Buenos Aires. Now the documents recently made available by the Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires are adding tremendously to knowledge of the period and therefore deserve special attention. A depository for documents dealing with city government, the Archivo has gathered thousands of items dealing with the day-to-day administration of Buenos Aires between 1856 and 1909. These documents are an important, yet unexploited, source of information on every facet of daily life affected by the government. Anyone interested in the history of Buenos Aires during the half-century preceding World War I will be richly rewarded by a visit to this archive.

The documents are organized by governmental *departamentos*—Obras Públicas, Gobierno (which includes Justicia and Municipalidad), Economía (which includes Finanzas and Comercio), and Salud Pública. These agencies provided a variety of services, regulated activities, and taxed individuals and entities. The Departamento de Obras Públicas built and maintained the streets and the water and sewage systems. The government also maintained a system of neighborhood public health commissions. After local doctors identified those having cholera, yellow fever, typhoid, or other communicable diseases, the sick were sent to the hospitals and the dead were buried in one of the three cemeteries maintained by the *municipio*. Inspectors also visited apartment buildings to enforce municipal health and safety codes. Although municipal employees did not always execute these functions faithfully, their activities and records provide the material for the Archivo.

The records of the departments responsible for each of the respective government functions have been catalogued by the Archivo, and it has published indexes of its holdings for two periods. The *Indice temático general, 1856–1866: Corporación Municipal* was published in Bue-

nos Aires in 1981; and the *Índice temático general, 1880–1887: Gestión Torcuato de Alvear* was published in 1983. The years 1867 to 1879 are currently being catalogued by the staff of the Archivo. These indexes list the information alphabetically and by topic. The index for the period 1880 to 1887 gives a good idea of the richness and variety of these holdings. The index exceeds two hundred pages and is divided into fifty-nine general topics, including Beneficencia, Comercio, Edificios, Enfermedades, Industria, Justicia, Policía, and Prostitución. Each general topic is subdivided into a number of categories. For example, Edificios as a topic is subdivided into Inspecciones, Conventillos, and Desalojo (evictions). Each category is followed by a listing of year, department, and box number.

The handwritten documents contain much information not currently available from any other source. The Departamento de Obras Públicas recorded its personnel, costs, and accomplishments. The Departamento de Economía kept records of city income from rents and taxes under Finanzas. The Departamento de Salud Pública reported on cases of communicable disease, mortality rates, and housing inspections. The Departamento de Gobierno recorded judicial proceedings, such as evictions and court cases involving property condemnations, in the section on Justicia. The Departamento de Economía kept track of business permits, inspections, and regulations in the section on Comercio. Under the listing of Gobierno, the Municipalidad reported on personnel, city council meetings, and the actions of the mayor.

By augmenting the sources of information on life in the city of Buenos Aires in the half-century preceding World War I, the Archivo can help answer many important questions. Scholars such as James Scobie and Samuel Baily have made extensive use of census information, city statistics, and contemporary sources. Scobie began to study the concepts of *barrio* and *cuadra*, or neighborhood and block identity.<sup>1</sup> His use of the manuscript data from the 1895 national census enabled him to inquire into the interrelationships among residents of a particular street. He ascertained the names, ages, occupations, ethnic backgrounds, and number of children in each household. The documents in the Archivo could add to this kind of analysis because they identify the owners of houses and businesses and the kinds of commercial establishments on a certain street over a period of years. This information provides a description of the neighborhood as it changed over time. Was there a correlation between the ethnic background of store owners on a street and that of the residents? Did occupation, family, or ethnic ties dominate in particular buildings? How much movement was there among the residents? Did a concept of block identity develop apart from ethnic or occupational ties, or did it remain a part of this larger identity?

The data in the Archivo will similarly facilitate understanding of the economics and politics of development. Scobie used municipal reports and national and municipal censuses to identify several locational factors that influenced the pattern and the rate of the city's growth at the end of the nineteenth century. The port made Buenos Aires the hub of Argentina's commerce. The federalization of the capital reduced the conflict between the province of Buenos Aires and the rest of the country. The improvement and expansion of the transportation system led to population shifts away from the center of the city toward the outskirts, resulting in changing property values near transportation corridors.

The documents available in the Archivo enable researchers to go even further. They give many details about the transportation system over the entire period catalogued. They contain information on rates and expansion of service, line maintenance, and rights-of-way. Thus one can determine how decisions were made regarding rights-of-way, who benefited from the decision to construct a trolley line on a certain street, and what criteria were used to decide whether a foreign or native company should receive a concession.

Samuel Baily has studied the role of Italian immigrants in the development of Buenos Aires and New York City.<sup>2</sup> He has compared the experiences of these immigrants in economic and political matters and has tried to develop measures to compare living conditions. The statistics in the Archivo's documents on city services, mortality rates, housing conditions, and transportation could be correlated to give a clearer picture of health and living conditions in Buenos Aires for the period.

Baily has also researched the membership rosters of Italian immigrant societies and the records of Italian businesses and publications. The documents in the Archivo can be useful in providing information on the relationship between the city government and these immigrant organizations in such matters as tax exemptions, building permits, and licenses for activities.

Additional questions can be asked about voluntary organizations of Spanish, Italian, and other ethnic groups. What were the politics of charity? Which ethnic, mutual aid, or other organizations were granted tax-exempt status? How was such a decision made? What were the criteria? What were the relationships between various city administrations and the many societies?

The role of the city government in regulating charities is only one of the areas covered in the Archivo. It contains documents on health and housing as well. Such information can be useful to current Argentine writers such as Oscar Yujnovsky and Juan Suriano.

Yujnovsky, in his article on housing, cites municipal health regu-

lations in Buenos Aires as indicators of the city administration's concept of its role as protector of the poor and keeper of public health and hygiene.<sup>3</sup> He also describes attempts at public housing and efforts of the city officials to maintain sanitary conditions as evidence of the ruling group's concept of development.

Suriano views the role of government through evictions as evidence of defense of private property and authority. "En tiempos normales," wrote Suriano, "la solicitud de desalojo era despachada por los jueces en 48 horas y rápidamente se hacía efectiva la expulsión del demandado en presencia del oficial de justicia y el propietario."<sup>4</sup> Were the rights of the tenants ever recognized by these justices of the peace? Did these city officials know of the abuses of landlords who refused to sign a rent receipt for the first month until the third month's payment was made, thus "proving" that the tenant was two months in arrears?

The documents in the Archivo bring these issues to life. For example, Caja 7 for the year 1883 (under the listing of Conventillos) contains a request from the Public Health Commission that the tenants in the conventillo at Colón 462–474 be evicted and that repairs be made to the building to correct unsanitary conditions.

These health and safety inspections may have been feared more by tenants than by landlords. Lack of rental income after the eviction of the tenants did not always force owners to make necessary repairs. Some owners got around repairs by making cosmetic changes or by razing the building for new construction. The tenants, on the other hand, had to find new homes, which was particularly difficult if they had been evicted on short notice or soon after paying the month's rent. Although some tenants were able to move in with friends, others were forced to live on the street until they found new housing.

In some instances, municipal action may have benefited the tenants. A conventillo located at Paraguay 331–339 (cited in Caja 12 for 1884) was in such poor sanitary condition that the district health inspector requested that the tenants be evicted. The municipal building inspector also reported that structural damage made the building unsafe for habitation. Building engineers later examined the building and ordered it torn down.

Other reported cases of eviction involved accusations by owners against women tenants who were prostitutes. Señor Eustaquio Esperon wrote to municipal officials (cited in Caja 1 for 1880) on behalf of his wife, Doña Victoria Segismundo, who owned property at Córdoba 213 and 215. Doña Victoria wanted two tenants, Doña Clementina Morales and Doña Rosario Rosas (reportedly prostitutes), to be evicted from the building according to municipal codes.

The relationship between such crucial groups as the city government and the developing middle classes can be studied through the

Archivo's documents on commercial, industrial, and other business establishments. Published municipal statistics, such as the census of 1887, detail the number of commercial and industrial establishments. But more important than ascertaining the numbers of butcher shops, soap factories, cafes, and landlords is finding out more about how these commercial activities operated on a day-to-day basis. The Archivo's documents can provide this information.

The records in the Archivo can be important in clarifying issues such as the class of specific groups. The information in the Archivo indicates that one should be careful about describing property owners as a class because they seem to have been a diverse group. For example, one box of documents (Caja 9, 1885) contains many requests for permits to establish *inquilinos*, the city's term for rental housing units. The requests came from men and women whose names indicate a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and the buildings they owned varied in size. Even the city's definition of *inquilinato* was confusing, and the number of units listed changed over time.

The holdings of the Archivo help clarify the term *inquilinato*, as used in city statistics for rental housing units. Much literature from the period treats *inquilinos*.<sup>5</sup> Municipal censuses and other works enumerated these buildings from the 1880s on. Yujnovsky, in his article on housing, listed the number of *inquilinos* in Buenos Aires for seventeen years between 1881 and 1919, using information gathered from five different sources.<sup>6</sup> The number of *inquilinos* listed oscillated between eighteen hundred and twenty-one hundred during most of these years. Was the yearly variation in the number of *inquilinos* due to construction of new units, demolition of old houses, or some other reason? Was it an important aspect in the lack of available rental units in Buenos Aires?

Information in the Archivo reveals that this variation often resulted from changes in the ownership of buildings, which caused them to be deleted from or added to the tax rolls upon which the statistics were based. Before being registered as an *inquilinato*, each building had to meet municipal health and safety regulations. If the building passed these inspections, it would be listed as an *inquilinato* on the city's tax register. All *inquilinos* were considered businesses and were subject to special taxes, as well as to continued health and safety inspections.

When a building changed owners and the new owner decided that the building was not going to be used as an *inquilinato*, he or she would petition the city to remove the building from the register. Such petitions were made constantly. Buildings were added and dropped from the register whenever a significant change occurred in the use of the building. Because of these changes, one has to be careful in correlat-

ing the variation in the number of inquilinatos with construction or with even the supply of rental units. Many owners may have wanted their buildings removed from the register to avoid paying taxes.

These examples suggest the usefulness of the holdings in the Archivo. Located on Calle Coronel Pringles 342, Planta Alta, the Archivo is open daily, and its director, Estela Pagani, encourages the utilization of the Archivo. Some limitations exist, such as the lack of photocopying facilities on the premises (although the staff is willing to copy materials elsewhere) and the cumbersome filing system. Even after the appropriate box is located through the index, many papers must be sorted before finding the items sought. But the rewards vastly outweigh these limitations. The documents span a key period in the growth of the city of Buenos Aires and Argentina. An enormous variety of material and topics is included, and little of this information has been used to date. Researchers with the time to peruse these documents, especially those who are willing to ask new questions and reexamine old assumptions, can find answers that will increase understanding of daily life in Buenos Aires at the turn of the century.

#### NOTES

1. James Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870–1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).
2. Samuel Baily, "The Adjustment of Italian Immigrants in Buenos Aires and New York, 1870–1914," *The American Historical Review* 88, no. 2 (Apr. 1983).
3. Oscar Yujnovsky, "Políticas de vivienda en la ciudad de Buenos Aires (1880–1914)," *Desarrollo Económico* 14, no. 5 (July–Sept. 1974).
4. Juan Suriano, "La huelga de inquilinos de 1907 en Buenos Aires," in *Sectores populares y vida urbana*, edited by José Pedro Barrán, Benjamín Nahum et al. (Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 1984), 218.
5. See Samuel Gache, *Les Logements Ouvriers a Buenos Aires* (Paris, 1908); Eduardo Wilde, *Curso de higiene* (Buenos Aires, 1878); Adrian Patroni, *Los trabajadores en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1908); Guillermo Rawson, "Estudio sobre las casas de inquilinato de Buenos Aires" (1885), *Escritos Científicos* (Buenos Aires, 1928); República Argentina, Departamento Nacional de Trabajo, *Boletín*, 1907, no. 3; 1911, no. 16; 1912, no. 21. Buenos Aires, Dirección General de Estadística, *Censo de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1887, 1904, 1910*.
6. Oscar Yujnovsky, "Políticas de vivienda," 357, table 6.

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