

Time to Take Another Look At Boss Shepherd's Legacy

By Raw Fisher From Marc Fisher's Blog
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Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, the man who built Washington into a modern city, was the Mayor [BlackBerry](#) of his time, a dynamo who believed in governing through constant action. Shepherd, unlike [Adrian Fenty](#), was the unelected chief of the public works department and later governor of the Territory of [Columbia](#) from 1873 to 1874, but even without a direct mandate from Washingtonians, Shepherd acted as if he'd been ordained to reshape the city, no matter the cost.

In a stunning, three-year whirlwind of spending and construction, Shepherd presided over the building of 260 miles of streets, 183 miles of sewers and similarly dazzling lengths of water and gas mains and sidewalks, as well as ornamental touches such as public fountains. For the better part of Shepherd's reign, the city was a torn-up mess, a massive construction site. (Yes, it sometimes felt that way during [Tony Williams](#)'s two terms as mayor, but the Boss's work was on a different scale entirely.)

Historian [John Richardson](#), a retired intelligence officer who is writing a biography of Shepherd, presented a paper on the Boss's life and work the other day at the annual Washington Studies Conference, a great series of talks and seminars on the District's past sponsored by the Historical Society of Washington. Richardson told the story of a politician-developer-builder whose impact on the city dwarfed that of contemporary figures such as Doug Jemal, [Marion Barry](#) and Tony Williams. Richardson credits Shepherd with "an orgy of development" that turned Washington almost overnight from a backwater with a tiny commercial tax base, a federal government that took huge swaths of land off the tax rolls and a subservient relationship with Congress (sound familiar?) into a modern city.

Richardson compares Shepherd to Robert Moses, the builder who transformed [New York City](#) and its suburbs in the mid-20th century, though Moses's reign lasted far longer and his impact was felt well beyond the city's borders. Shepherd was guilty of "overweening hubris," the historian says, but to a remarkable degree, we still live in the city he built. (Keep that in mind the next time the water main on your street breaks and the paper reports that the infrastructure dates back to . . . the 1870s.)

Richardson seems skeptical of the lore that portrays the Boss as a crook, a bull who did what he wanted to do and enriched his friends with little regard for the people. In fact, the truth, as is often the case, is a bit grayer. Yes, the congressional investigations that went after Shepherd, resulting in his departure for [Mexico](#), found that some of the Boss's cronies did awfully well during his orgy of spending. Some things never change. And, yes, the Boss so badly ruined the city's finances that Congress ended its experiment in allowing the District some control over its own affairs. So we have the Boss to blame for a century without even a sliver of home rule -- and that's a legacy that's hard to portray very happily. But it's also true, Richardson notes, that it was the Boss who earlier had

created the Citizens Reform Movement that persuaded Congress to create the territorial government that gave city residents a say in their own governance.

For many years, the city seemed ashamed of Shepherd. His statue spent years out of public view, tucked away near the sewage treatment plant in Southeast. But the Boss is now back in a place of prominence, outside the [Wilson Building](#), where Shepherd stands as a reminder that while politicians don't always do things on the up and up, those who come to office with bold vision can push through the bureaucracy and the naysayers and really get things done. The Boss stands as a symbol of hubris and excess, yes, but also of the value of oversized personalities who live to achieve.