

Zoning the Industrial City: Planners, Commissioners, and Boosters in the 1920s

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The first comprehensive zoning ordinance in the United States was passed in New York City in 1916. The ordinance established a series of boundaries within the city, creating and separating districts in which different uses of land were permitted; this land use was classified by the height, area of lot, and function of structures on any given lot. Zoning legally codified spatial patterns of shelter, commerce, industry, and leisure in many American cities and towns. It was a new measure in that it applied to all property in a municipality, whether publicly or privately owned. By 1929, over 750 American communities had adopted similar zoning ordinances [Hubbard, 1929, p. 162]. In part, this rapid spread of a new urban planning concept can be traced to such governmental measures as the 1924 Standard Zoning Enabling Legislation drafted by the Department of Commerce under Herbert Hoover and the 1926 Supreme Court decision in *Euclid v. Ambler*, upholding the constitutionality of zoning. In part, however, it can be traced to a growing national network of businessmen and boosters, looking for ways to manage the growth that they were encouraging in their hometowns. Zoning occurred at the intersection of government and business.

One of the seeming ironies of the shift to include private property within the purview of urban planning through zoning is that it occurred simultaneously with this shift to planning being undertaken by municipal entities rather than, or in addition to, private civic or commercial groups. The city government could speak to the importance of community compliance and issues of communal good in a way that one subset of that community could not; certainly, only a governing body had the power to have all citizens comply with the ideas of planning codified by the zoning ordinances. Plans could not be solely on paper, and only the city had the regulatory and financial power to implement the plans and the ability to coordinate all the necessary parties. Private citizens could regulate one another only through mutual agreements, such as

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restrictive covenants. Such methods, however, were not proving to be strong enough deterrents to such situations as the encroachment of industry on housing.

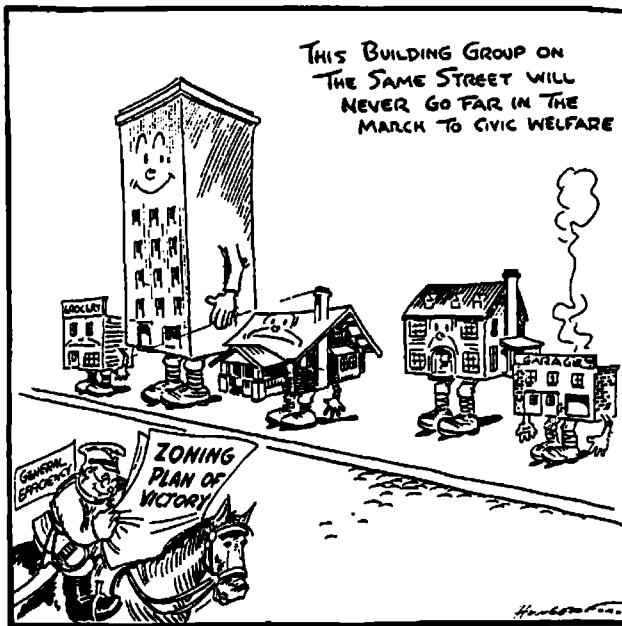
Business models of managing and selling provided metaphors for the ways in which the American urban landscape was shaped by municipal commissions and the businessmen that composed them. Zoning provided both a process, arranging daily life in a city, and a product, an image of urban life. The process was to be managed; the product was to be sold. City planners sold their services to civic groups and commissions in order to create plans; their work encompassed both a process of analysis and the actual planning report, with its maps and written descriptions of suggestions for the future. The commissions in turn marketed the plans to their constituents, in order to form an image of the city as a community that safeguarded its residential areas while encouraging industrial, and economic, growth. Finally, the city as a whole, through the municipal government, local civic groups, and individual citizens, advertised their urban image to industry and potential residents, in order to build a bigger, and presumably more prosperous, city.

Although extensive research has been done on the relationship between zoning and the business communities of large cities such as New York or Los Angeles, these studies do not always provide a template for smaller communities [Willis, 1995; Weiss, 1987]. In the 1920 Census, only 60 American cities had populations over 100,000, and by 1930 this number had risen to only 81 cities. Clearly, most of the 750 communities to implement zoning codes in the 1920s were small cities, whose leaders hoped for growth, but only if well-managed. For assistance with this management, the business communities of these second-tier cities turned to planners such as Harland Bartholomew, one of the most prolific authors of zoning ordinances. Bartholomew's clients serve as the sample for this study. Even in the first decades of its existence, Harland Bartholomew and Associates (HBA), while based in St. Louis, Missouri, worked in a variety of cities and towns across the United States and Canada, completing about 50 comprehensive plans by the early 1930s ["Remarkable," 1921, pp. 456-58]. From Utica, New York to Glendale, California, with stops such as Knoxville, Grand Rapids, and San Antonio along the way, the firm used similar methods and to a certain extent recommended similar programs. The zoning ordinances all exhibited the beliefs that a community should be structured with a separation of functions; that growth was a positive thing if well-managed; and that a city's physical manifestation, economic well-being, and quality of life were interrelated.

The zoning code that became Bartholomew's standard developed over the course of the 1920s. Starting with separate use, height, and area regulations, the firm began to coordinate the three aspects of zoning into a series of classes that regulated all three at once; nonetheless, the plans remained fairly simple, usually with a maximum of 11 classes. The geographic distribution of these classes, while certainly varying with the local townscape, did follow general trends. Since most local industry was already placed in coordination with transportation access, areas along railroads and waterways, and on the outskirts

of cities, were zoned for industrial use. In addition to the central business district, commercial districts were designated along major streets radiating from downtown. The sectors in between these major streets were left for residential development; as a general rule multifamily dwellings were closer to the downtown, while the outerlying areas in the directions opposite industrial development were zoned single-family, with low height restrictions and large requirements for lot size per family. While based on existing conditions, zoning codes regulated unplatted land as well, attempting to regulate future growth and to prevent the juxtaposition of buildings deemed uncomplementary in use or size.

Figure 1: "The Awkward Squad," a cartoon used by *Citizens Committee on the City Plan, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for advocacy of zoning.*



Source: *The American City*, 28 (1923), p. 266.

To say that Harland Bartholomew and Associates' plans for a wide variety of American cities and towns were remarkably similar is not an indictment of the firm. It is more a comment on the desires of their clients – the municipal commissions and civic groups for whom they worked – to structure their cities in similar ways. As the local government, either through citizen pressure or through other channels, turned its attention toward city planning, one of the first steps was to appoint a commission to oversee the process of city planning and zoning. The City Plan Commission was not necessarily to be an administrative part of the government but rather an advisory one, and one that could coordinate the needs of other parts of the city government affected by city planning, such as the public works or parks departments. The commis-

sion usually was the arm of the municipal government that hired consultants to produce a city plan, and worked with them throughout the process to secure needed information and build public support. In the words of Miriam Ross, Secretary for the division of housing and town planning for the Massachusetts department of public welfare, “The work of the city planning commission is three-fold – planning, advising, and selling the plan” [Ross, 1923, p. 132]. The Planning Commissions publicized the importance of zoning in a variety of ways. For example, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the City Planning Commission sponsored a booth at the “City Show,” a municipal fair highlighting the work of the local government [“City Show,” 1920]. Or a Commission might schedule screenings of films such as *Growing Pains*, produced by the Civic Film Service of New York City, which explained and advocated for zoning [“Film,” 1923].

The city planning commissions were not only municipal entities, but also collections of individuals, whose ideas about planning and zoning could be influential. Although these commissions were structured somewhat differently from place to place, they often had a few slots designated by role, such as representatives from the park, public works or school board, and other slots appointed by the mayor from the local citizenry for their interest and dedication to the issue.¹ Bartholomew acknowledged the uniform work that his clients were seeking in a letter to his biographer late in his career; he wrote:

I cannot emphasize too much the fact that I was not at complete liberty to introduce unusual new ideas and concepts in city planning, nor were the city plans produced exclusively my own work... I am not trying to offer excuses but I am merely endeavoring to say that the technical level of most plans was limited to what we could get the members of planning commissions to accept. Since this was such a new field, we seldom found a commission which was willing to venture far from traditional habits and trends.²

So who were these commission members and how did they communicate with one another to disseminate the “traditional habits and trends”?

Eldridge Lovelace, a longtime principal with HBA who joined the firm in 1935 but has researched its earlier work extensively, recalled that the citizens most interested in planning were usually business managers and members of the professions.³ Although there were certainly exceptions, it does appear that the majority of city planning commission members were also members of what

¹ *A System of Major Streets for Evansville*, 1925, pp. 5, 56, Harland Bartholomew & Associates Collection, Washington University Archives, St. Louis, Missouri, Research Collection # 8, Series 1, Box 4. (Subsequent references to this archival collection will be designated “HBA Coll.” with appropriate series and box or volume number.)

² Letter from Harland Bartholomew to Norman Johnston, 30 November 1961, HBA Coll., Series 3, Box 1, File: Correspondence: Norman Johnston/Harland Bartholomew & Associates, 1960-72.

³ Personal conversation with Eldridge Lovelace, 12 June 1997, University City, Missouri.

has been called the professional-managerial class. The commissions were made up of representatives of professional groups whose expertise or local influence would aid the work of the group: newspaper editors, attorneys, architects, engineers, and managers of local commercial and industrial ventures. Two professional groups were overwhelmingly represented: real estate and insurance agents and local bankers, two groups whose own businesses would be directly affected by their hometown's physical development and population growth ["New Zoning Law," 1927; Brigham, 1923, pp. 147-48]. The commissioners were most often men, though occasionally the wife or daughter of a local professional served as well. Two typical boards were that of Des Moines, Iowa's Zoning Commission, whose members included two realtors, a construction company president, the general manager of a local dairy, and the manager of a local newspaper, and South Bend, Indiana's City Planning Commission, whose forces included the head of the local Studebaker plant, an architect, an attorney, a realtor, and an insurance agent, several of whom were also officers of local banks and savings and loans associations [*Des Moines Directory*, 1925; *South Bend Directory*, 1923].

The board members were clearly well-respected figures in the community, the kind of person listed in boldface type in their local directories, but they were not necessarily the most wealthy or largest employers; as a general rule, there were many more vice-presidents of local firms than presidents. The practice of zoning seemed to contradict established laissez-faire business practices and yet, was often largely supported by the business community. It is not surprising that in trying to improve their home communities as they had improved their businesses, a new class of managers and credentialed professionals would apply their own styles of doing work to the city, all the while protecting their own investments of property and business.

If the city was imagined as a business, particularly an industrial firm, zoning could be likened to scientific management, the newly codified form of industrial organization that advocated the separation of work into discrete tasks, arranged for maximum efficiency of the whole process. Frederick Winslow Taylor, the popularizer of these practices in numerous lectures and his book *The Principles of Scientific Management*, suggested that his theory could be applied to all aspects of daily life, not just industrial work. He wrote that his aim was to "prove that the best management was a true science, resting upon clearly defined laws, rules, and principles, as a foundation" [Taylor, 1911, p. 7]. Planning was one form of management, with the city as its object rather than industrial work. As Bartholomew said to residents of Des Moines, Iowa, "The problem...is not one of spreading out the city but making more efficient use of what you now have" ["Build City," 1925].

The process of creating a zoning ordinance began with an extensive study phase reminiscent of Taylor's explanation: "The managers assume the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae..." [Taylor, 1911, p. 36].

As the first part of the zoning process, questionnaires were sent out, polling opinions of building and usage regulations, while resident engineers and city officials compiled local data. Studies began with the mapping of every property in the city with the following classifications: single-family dwellings, two-family dwellings, multi-family dwellings, commercial, industrial, railroad property, parks, cemeteries, public and semi-public buildings and city-owned property, as well as vacant and undeveloped lots, with further study devoted to closer breakdown of types of industrial property [“Remaking,” 1920, p. 16; “Survey,” 1924, p. 227]. While some of these studies dealt strictly with these features of the built environment, others dealt with issues such as traffic counts, types of housing, population density, trolley time zones, or the light projection in all parts of the city. The contract between HBA and the City of Dallas called for over 50 separate computations of the current status of land use, ranging from the percentage of the population housed in single-family residences to retail street frontage per 100 persons in the central business district to a special study of apartments, in order to come up with a zoning ordinance that would pass the required test of “reasonableness.”⁴

Once this background study was completed, the next step, for either Taylor or Bartholomew, was to find the best way to order the institution under examination. The simplest statements of scientific management as outlined by Taylor dictate that component functions of any process should be broken down into discrete steps and each one made to work most effectively in its own right, together contributing to the health and productivity of the whole. Starting with the idea of separating out the functions of daily life into use districts, we can also see in Bartholomew’s work the attempt to further analyze each sector of the city. For example, what institutions would contribute to the smooth functioning of a residence district without detracting from its domestic character? How much commercial frontage would provide the growing population with their needs, without overtaxing the demands of the community, leading to failing businesses and blight? Just as Taylor’s followers determined the numbers of employees working particular times on particular tasks to reach a certain output, Bartholomew’s followers projected specific spatial allocations and relationships between districts.

One argument used to garner support for planning efforts was that just as businesses care about planning and design, so too should municipal entities. Addressing the importance of calculating urban growth over time and planning well for it, Bartholomew wrote in a 1925 report for Des Moines, Iowa, “The sort of anticipatory planning which is being done by the engineer of the telephone company, the water company and the electric company should be duplicated and carried even further by the municipality itself.”⁵ If business and

⁴ “Contract between Harland Bartholomew and Associates and Municipal Corporation of Dallas, Texas,” HBA Coll., Series 5.

⁵ “A Preliminary Major Street Plan for Des Moines, Iowa,” 1925, p. 17, HBA Coll., Series 1, Box 3.

industry provided the models for how to manage the growing city, they also became the criteria on which to evaluate the success of that management. The growth of that city and the success of its business and industry supported one another.

The notions of competition learned in the arena of business and management were applied by the commissioners to the cities in which they lived. Familiar with selling goods and services to one another and to their communities, the city planning and zoning boards commissioned Bartholomew to essentially package their hometowns to sell as well. In a plan for Lansing, Michigan from 1921, Bartholomew explained the importance of good design:

A city is "sold" by its so-called beauty spots. Men have learned to make art and beauty and attractiveness pay. The seller of real estate adds to the price of a lot because it is so situated that he can point to the dignity and character of nearby homes. The automobile manufacturer aims to produce a car of pleasing proportions. Power and speed alone will not sell his cars. Similarly a city must give more thought to 'design.' Mere multiplication of factories and warehouses will not create a perfect city.⁶

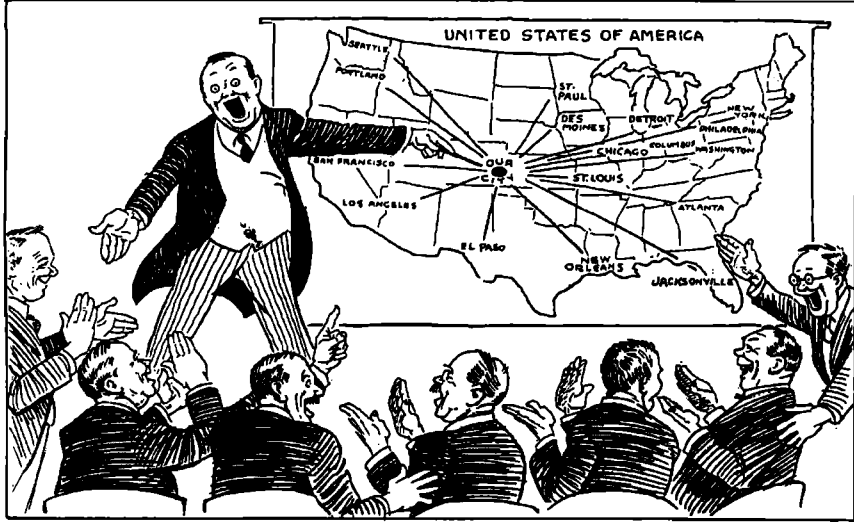
The language of competition between cities suffuses not only the comprehensive plans themselves, but also other sites of booster rhetoric such as accounts of the planning process in local newspapers and directories. Boosters concerned themselves with broadly publicizing the positive aspects of their hometowns, and working toward creating more of these aspects. Usually local businessmen, boosters sought continued growth and prosperity for their communities; the efforts were often coordinated by local chambers of commerce and other civic groups.

Ironically, their publicity campaigns often stressed both what was "unique" about a specific place and what made it "just like" other cities, often ones perceived to be bigger and better. Geographical location, topographical features, climate, new homes, conditions for trade, natural resources, characteristics of the citizens, and, perhaps most important, promise for the future – any and all of these aspects of a city were used to convince visitors to consider that city as a new place to live and work, while convincing current residents to maintain their investment there. Boosters often made specific comparisons to other cities, particularly in the same region, to set off their own. L.B. Jeffries, Industrial Secretary of the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce favorably compared the trade territory of his town to the well-recognized distribution center of Chicago; explaining Des Moines' location as half-way between the center of the national population in Indiana and the center of area in Kansas, he wrote that Des Moines "is the immediate logical market and trade center for this

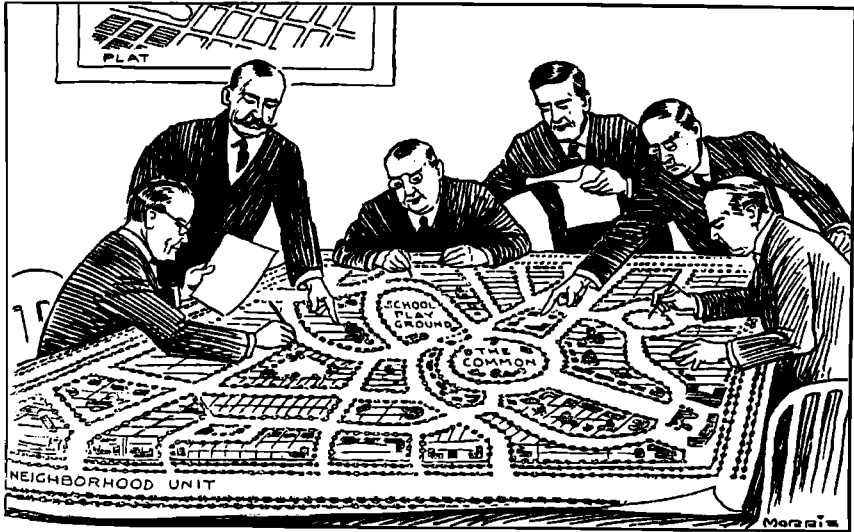
⁶ *The Lansing Plan: A Comprehensive City Plan Report for Lansing, Michigan, 1922*, p.48, HBA Coll., Series 2, Labeled Black Binders, Vol. 34.

extensive territory, its competitors, including Chicago (385 miles distant), being on the outer rim" [*Des Moines Directory*, 1925]. These specific claims were set into a general rhetoric of the beauty, opportunity, and progressive nature of cities and towns.

Figure 2



The Boosters' Ideal—"Let's Put Our City on the Map"



The Planners' Ideal—"Let's Put the Map on Our City"

Source: *The American City*, 38 (1928), p. 99.

Zoning provided one way for boosters to claim these qualities for their cities; the act of zoning showed the town to be progressive, while its effects would preserve local beauty, order, and economic well-being. If reformers presented zoning as a corrective measure against the ills of urban life, and a class of managers saw it as a preventive means of avoiding these ills, boosters were proactive: zoning was a way not only to avoid problems but bring prosperity.⁷ Chicago businessman Charles Ball stated the trend clearly for the Chicago City Club, "Zoning sells a town. An unzoned city is like a dead stock of goods on the shelves" [*American City*, 1922 p. 279; "Did You Ever," 1922, p. 403]. A cartoon in *The American City* in 1928 showed the relationship between boosters and the planners they hired to create comprehensive plans for their towns. While the planners, dressed in conservative dark suits, work with eyes cast downward upon a table-top size map of the city, the boosters jocularly applaud one flashily dressed spokesman as he points to the central location of their hometown on a map of the United States. The planners' ideal was to "put the map on our city" while the boosters' was to "put our city on the map."

The boosters' competitive language does beg the question of what cities were competing for, or to whom they were selling. Having properly zoned industrial districts close to necessary resources, such as waterways or the railroad, along with sites for employees to live, would be a draw to industrialists looking to establish new factories. Bartholomew's clients wanted to use zoning both to attract more industry to their towns, but also keep it within bounds so as to preserve a sense of community fabric. Bartholomew explained the importance of city planning to industry in a plan for East St. Louis, Illinois, in which he wrote:

It is now a generally accepted fact that the industrial city wishing to attract new industries as well as to retain its present ones must offer to the manufacturer not merely good industrial sites, low freight rates and switching charges, and public utility services at economical prices, but the city must also offer to the employees of industries good living conditions, good housing conditions, ample recreation facilities, and those other things which will tend to make life in that city pleasant for the workmen's families.⁸

Certainly related to the competition for industry was the more general competition for population. In an era when local success was equated with population growth, cities sought to attract new residents and homeowners, particularly at a time when rural residents were moving to cities in large numbers. With a zoning ordinance in place, town boosters could ensure the sanctity of their single-family residential districts as safe and appealing places to

⁷ Of course, there were not clear-cut divisions between reformers, managers, and boosters, and many individuals incorporated all three stances into their civic work.

⁸ *A Comprehensive City Plan for East St. Louis*, 1920, p. 55, HBA Coll., Series 2, Labeled Black Binders, Vol. 16.

live and as places that would retain investment value on property, no matter how large the population grew. Growth was applauded as representing the health of a city, and a way to gauge the success of the city in relation to others. The plans that were done in the first fifteen years or so of Harland Bartholomew's consulting career exhibit an incredible faith in the continued growth of American cities. The planner himself believed that some sort of prediction of population growth was a necessary first step to planning, and especially zoning, in order to figure the quantity and percentage of space in any given community that should be figured as necessary for residential space, as well as commercial needs.

Despite the needed base number for such calculations there was no exact science of obtaining it and local constituents were often in disagreement. The HBA plans reveal the firm's own projections based on growth in comparable cities, but also mention the population growth being planned for by the local utilities and Bell Telephone, frequently an even higher number. The Bell Telephone system actually served as a source of information for planners and urban commissioners; known for elaborate predictions of community demographics, the company was said "to cooperate with city officials, chambers of commerce, and other organizations for community betterment" ["Forecasting," 1922, p. 152]. The Des Moines Zoning Commission publicized such predicted population, stating, "Expressed in a different way, [the projected growth] means a new city practically the size of Cedar Rapids or Davenport, built on the outskirts of Des Moines today" ["Figures," 1925]. Bartholomew wrote in correspondence later in his career, "It is especially difficult to recapture... the climate in earlier times with respect to population. In the 1920's it was next to impossible to get any city plan commission to agree on a ceiling of future growth."⁹ These optimistic projections of the 1920s brought an interest in zoning to manage this growth, an interest that ironically outlasted the optimism on which it was based.

Finally, communities could sell themselves not just to individuals or families looking for a new home but to other whole communities, as a model for a quality of life. For example, in the plan for Hutchinson, Kansas, Bartholomew explains the town's responsibility to provide for outerlying rural areas without the amenities of an "industrial city," whether commercial opportunities, parkland, or additional employment. He wrote:

Even more than the 25,000 people residing within the corporate limits are concerned in this matter. As many people as live in the city itself make up the population of Reno County alone outside Hutchinson. Its trade territory is enormous, containing many times as many people as the city. For the most part they are wheat farmers and trades people of smaller communities. They

⁹ Letter from Harland Bartholomew to Norman Johnston, 30 November 1961, HBA Coll., Series 3, Box 1, File: Correspondence: Norman Johnston/Harland Bartholomew & Associates, 1960-72.

come to Hutchinson to enjoy the facilities which only a city of considerable size can support. Hutchinson owes something to this larger population.¹⁰

At the same time, a town like Hutchinson was served in similar ways by larger regional cities such as Wichita, Kansas City, or Chicago. Zoning, though primarily focusing on the needs of the community supporting the measure, also had to take into account potential regional growth in area, population, and industrial products. While the problems of industrial environments were recognized, the primacy of urban settings in this era was obviously growing. What remains striking then is not the willingness but the desire for communities to accept the designation of "industrial cities." For perhaps industrial city meant not just a community with industry as its economic base, but a city that actually functioned like an industry. This industrial city was one in which the constituent parts of the landscape could be managed and the cohesive whole could be sold.

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¹⁰ *Parks and Recreational Facilities, Hutchinson, Kansas, 1920*, pp. 1-2, HBA Coll., Series 2, Labeled Black Binders, Vol. 26.