



Brian Mertens

Brian Mertens is from the San Francisco Bay area and he was very engaged civically during high school, tutoring English at a local elementary school and interning at Options Recovery Clinic, a public drug rehabilitation clinic in Berkeley, California. He also served as editor-in-chief of his school newspaper and as student body president. Throughout his years at Penn, Brian has worked with the Urban Nutrition Initiative, an organization committed to food justice and youth empowerment. He has held a number of positions in the organization including gardener, chef, nutrition educator, office worker, and coordinator. His most recent project involves developing a small healthy food business with eight high school students. The program conveys 21st century business skills and aims to narrow the gap in nutrition access in West Philadelphia. Brian is a Health and Societies major and has always enjoyed learning about food, public health, and history.

CAPSTONE PROJECT

The Crusade for Pure Milk Has Begun: Science, Politics, and Municipal Milk Regulation in Philadelphia, 1889–1914

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From 1890–1914, the Board of Health of Philadelphia embarked on a campaign to sanitize one of the deadliest foods on the market: cow's milk. Public health officials were alarmed by the dangerous condition of the city's milk supply and the risk it posed to children's and infants' health. The research focuses on the Board's ambitious attempt to protect its youngest citizens from the dangers of bad milk and how these new regulations began to establish modern food inspection.

The Board had two main strategies in milk regulation. First, it applied new scientific standards in order to evaluate and approve the quality of milk. Second, it forced those in the dairy industry to become legally responsible for the potential harm caused by their products. These new regulations gave the Board unprecedented power in determining what was considered "safe" within the city. They also standardized the Board's definition of safety throughout Philadelphia and penalized those that did not observe the Board's rules and regulations.

However, the Board was also stymied in some of its regulatory efforts. It was unable to regulate nearby dairies that were outside city limits, which nevertheless continued to sell milk in Philadelphia. The powerful dairy lobby also attempted to block or weaken potential legislation that increased the Board's control over the milk supply. In response to these limitations, the Board had to compromise, retool, and develop new strategies in its continued efforts to guard public health.

The Board of Health's efforts to regulate the city's milk supply are similar to modern concerns over food safety. The debate over what is "safe" and the responsibilities of government, business, and consumers in ensuring this safety remains relevant today. Indeed, as long as humans continue to eat, these issues will remain on the table.