

Q&A...

with Allison Shertzer, an economic advisor and economist here at the Philadelphia Fed.



Allison Shertzer

Allison Shertzer joined the Philadelphia Fed as an economic advisor and economist in 2023 after more than a decade teaching economics at the University of Pittsburgh. She is a principal investigator for the Historical Housing Prices (HHP) Project, which is hosted on the Philadelphia Fed website and featured in this issue's Data in Focus. Allison is passionate about delving into archives and visualizing the history of cities through map digitization. She has used this type of historical digitization to study redlining, segregation, and zoning.

1 Michael Coury, Toru Kitagawa, Allison Shertzer, and Matthew A. Turner, "The Value of Piped Water and Sewers: Evidence from 19th Century Chicago," Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia Working Paper (forthcoming).

2 Professor Golden is the recipient of the 2023 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics "for having advanced our understanding of women's labour market outcomes" (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2023/summary/>).

The Historical Housing Prices (HHP) Project was years in the making. What led you to launch this project? Were you recruited? Or did you come to it on your own?

I was collecting land prices from old issues of the *Chicago Tribune* to do work from an applied micro focus, specifically to study the impact of sewers on land values,¹ and Ronan Lyons, an associate professor in economics at Trinity College Dublin, was collecting rents and housing prices from similar newspapers for research with more of a macroeconomic focus. We met at an economic history conference in 2018 and decided to combine forces. We brought on Rowena Gray, an economic historian at the University of California, Merced, to join our team. We've been working together ever since. It's been such a good collaboration because we complement each other so well. Rowena is an expert on historical labor markets and on New York City specifically. Ronan has incredible intuition for housing prices. And I've been constructing large historical data sets my whole career. I think we're the right people to take a fresh look at U.S. housing markets over the long run.

What do you hope your HHP data visualization will accomplish in the social sciences?

The data visualization is an awesome tool for everyone interested in housing prices and affordability, not just economists and other social scientists. Our hope is that the HHP will make it much easier for anyone to produce visualizations that can inform policy or pieces in the popular press.

What led you to focus so much of your work on the creation of novel data sets?

That is what economic historians do. There's been a long tradition of building the data sets that are used in our own work and later by other economists, and this tradition is evolving with the new technological tools that have come online. Economic historians advance the study of economics by bringing data from the past into usable digital form.

How does the field of economic history position itself within the field of economics? Do other economists see economic historians primarily as economists, or as historians?

Forty years ago, there was a much bigger gap between economic history and the rest of economics. That gap has narrowed a lot. Economic historians are now using large data sets and cutting-edge empirical methods. The questions we're asking are still long run or historic in nature. But the methods we use have evolved along with the rest of economics.

Did the economic historians of 40 years ago have to fight their way into the field of economics?

My advisor's advisor, Claudia Golden, the Henry Lee Professor of Economics at Harvard University, has amazing stories of trying to convince people that the long-run trend in women's labor force participation is something worth studying. No one was really studying women in the labor force when she started working on the topic 45 years ago. But economic history is in a great position now with our second Nobel Prize² and a broad recognition that long-run work is important for understanding the current world. I don't think we have to fight so hard to convince the profession and society at large that understanding the past is critical for policymaking.

What kind of personality type thrives in your kind of work?

Being creative and not easily discouraged, because there are many setbacks with historical research. For example, I wanted to study Polish immigrants to the United States in the early 20th century. They're enumerated in the 1900 census, but for the 1910 census all Poles were enumerated as being from Austria-Hungary, the German Empire, or the Russian Empire. Poles were enumerated again in 1920. By then, Poland was an independent state. So how do you study Poles consistently over the early 20th century? I had to spend a few weeks figuring out how I would locate Polish immigrants in the United States in 1910. I think being creative and being able to pick yourself up after all these setbacks are important qualities for doing this kind of work. 