

**"COUNTRY LIFE WITHIN CITY REACH":  
MASCULINE DOMESTICITY IN SUBURBAN AMERICA, 1819-1871**

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## ABSTRACT

Maura D'Amore  
"Country Life Within City Reach":  
Masculine Domesticity in Suburban America, 1819-1871  
(Under the direction of Philip F. Gura)

In "*Country Life Within City Reach*," I explore the process by which text-fueled reveries of clerks transformed the terrain surrounding New York, Boston, and Philadelphia from rural townships into commuter suburbs over the course of the nineteenth century. As railroad networks expanded and young men found themselves physically and socially confined in small offices and rented garrets, books and periodicals offered escape. Contrasting industrialization, overcrowding, disease, and expense with the restorative effects of the natural environment on body and mind, authors, editors, architects, and reformers urged men to leave their work behind in the city at the end of each day. In park-like suburban settings, they could defend the boundaries of personhood against feelings of urban anonymity and powerlessness through domestic flourishes and activities that bespoke individual dreams and aspirations. Brooklyn, Hoboken, Chestnut Hill, Concord, and a host of other suburban towns ballooned in the 1850s and 1860s, as middle-class men constructed houses and communities from plans outlined in periodicals, pattern books, novels, and domestic treatises. While prominent female domestic reformers such as Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Beecher, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Harriet Beecher Stowe preached the virtues of labor and sympathy, viewing leisure with suspicion and

allowing it only in the service of a greater good such as healthful exercise or community building, writers such as Washington Irving, Donald Grant Mitchell, Nathaniel Parker Willis, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Robert Barry Coffin, and William Dean Howells cultivated a masculine domesticity of self-nurture in suburban environments as an antidote to the malaise of urban life and the strictures of feminine self-sacrifice. Representations of “country life within city reach” established the groundwork for popular conceptions of suburban domestic life that remain with us today.

for Jonathan

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## Introduction

### **Suburban Dreaming**

“Take, too, the city school-boy and his mates, and see them with uncontrollable instincts pouring forth from the avenues of the town to revel in the ragged grass of the suburbs, to sit, haply, beneath the shadow of a tree, or to bathe in waters that dimple over beaches of sand, instead of beating against piers of weedy timber ... Nor is this feeling limited to certain classes of men, nor is it incident only to our earlier years. It is the prospect of some ideal home in the country, that often binds the merchant to the town, in order that he may win a competency to retire with; binds him to the desk until his head begins to silver over, and habit has made the pursuit of wealth a necessity. It is this ideal future that often haunts the statesman with pictures scarcely less seductive than ambition itself, with prospective hopes, which he promises himself some day shall be realized—some day, when his labors are over, and the nation is safe. It is this that passes like a vision before the eyes of the soldier in the solitary fortress; this that lulls and cradles the mariner to sleep, in his oaken prison; this that leads the angler into the depths of the solemn woods; this that depopulates cities in the sweet summer time.” (Frederic S. Cozzens, *The Sparrowgrass Papers*, 1856)<sup>1</sup>

If the recent critical success of *Mad Men* is any indication, suburban nostalgia is alive and well. The surprise hit television drama, which aired its first season on AMC in the summer of 2007 and won a Golden Globe for best TV drama in 2008, follows a group of 1960s advertising executives as they shuffle between their day jobs on Madison Avenue and their evenings and weekends in the suburbs of New York and New Jersey. The main character, Don Draper, is a mysterious, brilliant ad-man who struggles to come to terms with his identity

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sparrowgrass Papers: or, Living in the Country* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1856), pp. 248-249.

and life-purpose over the course of each season, all the while juggling a secret history and city mistresses with his suburban domestic routine [Images 1-4]. As viewers learn more about Don (played by Jon Hamm) and his wife Betty (January Jones) in addition to members of the supporting cast, characters that



Image 1.  
Stills from the show's opening sequence.

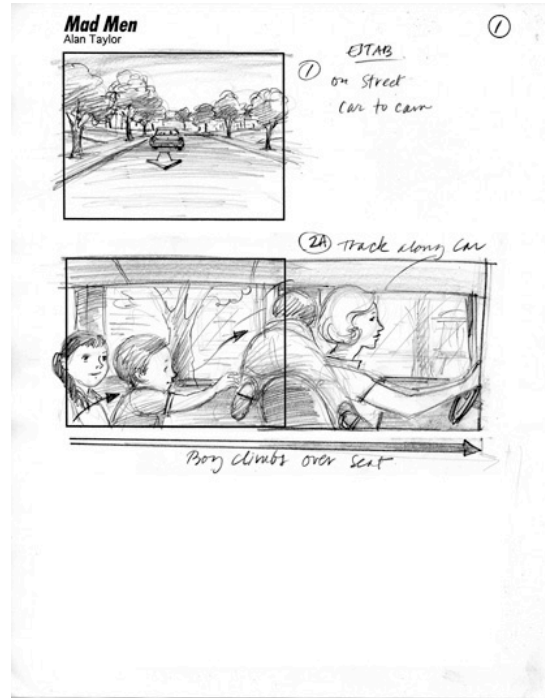


Image 2.  
Storyboard for Season 1, Episode 2.



Image 3.  
Don and Betty at home.



Image 4.  
Roger Sterling and Don at work.

initially appeared to be stock cut-outs are revealed to be complexly driven, committed, questioning, and conflicted individuals who sense the ways in which their work and home lives define and constrict them even as they also obviously experience moments of desire, pleasure, happiness, love, and creative fulfillment in their drab offices and manicured suburban boxes. The fact that *Mad Men*'s cult following coincides with public conversations about the impending "death of suburbia" as a combined result of new urbanism and the "greening" of America, rising gas prices, the subprime mortgage crisis, and a tanking economy raises questions about the show's success, and more specifically, about how so many people can embrace the 1960s aesthetic that *Mad Men* embodies at the same time that they decry the shells of communities that have been left to rot, or worse, to be occupied by ethnic minorities and working-class families who suddenly cannot afford to go anywhere else.<sup>2</sup>

In the last episode of Season One, Don presents an ad campaign for a new Kodak slide projector, and his pitch takes on surprisingly personal overtones as he stocks the mechanism with slides of family photos. When the Kodak representatives ask if he has found a way to "work the wheel" into his ad, Don replies:

Technology is a glittering lure, but there is the rare occasion when the public can be engaged on a level beyond flash—if they have a sentimental bond with the product. My first job—I was in-house at a fur company, with this old-pro copywriter, a Greek named Teddy. And Teddy told me the most important idea in advertising

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Lara Farrar's article on CNN.com from 16 June 2008, "Is America's Suburban Dream Collapsing into Nightmare?" (<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/TECH/06/16/suburb.city/?iref=mpstoryview>). Also relevant is Allison Arieff, "What Will Save the Suburbs?" from her "By Design" Blog, *New York Times* online, January 11, 2009 (<http://arieff.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/what-will-save-the-suburbs/?emc=eta1>).

is “NEW”—it creates an itch. You simply put your product in there as a kind of Calamine Lotion. But he also talked about a deeper bond with the product: nostalgia. It’s delicate, but potent. [carousel starts up; photos of the Draper family appear, one after another, as Don continues speaking] Teddy told me that in Greek, nostalgia literally means “the pain from an old wound.” It’s a twinge in your heart, far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn’t a spaceship; it’s a time machine. It goes backwards, forwards, takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It’s not called the wheel; it’s called the carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels, around and around and back home again to a place where we know we are loved.<sup>3</sup>

The clip ends with a mock-up for the “Kodak Carousel.” While Don’s presentation is intended to market a specific product, the juxtaposition of his words with candid snapshots from his suburban home life links nostalgia to the domestic sphere. As Don self-consciously voices his desire for a past that never really was, he reflects on the decisions he has made and the paths he has taken. His presentation takes on the quality of metanarrative when viewers of the clip interrogate their own investment in a show that invites a similar sense of nostalgia through the invocation of a ritualized, historically situated suburban lifestyle.

In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, geographer David Lowenthal describes nostalgia as “the foreign country with the healthiest tourist trade of all.”<sup>4</sup> If we apply this notion to the concept of suburbia, as the “Carousel” clip from *Mad Men* invites us to do, we gain a new perspective on a phenomenon that has transformed and defined the shape of the American built environment in important ways, leaving its imprint on ideas of home, family, work, leisure, class,

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<sup>3</sup> My own transcription of a clip from Season 1, Episode 13 of *Mad Men*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985. Reprint New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 4.

and community. Even the earliest suburban developments around New York, Boston, and Philadelphia in the middle decades of the nineteenth century were both forward- and backward-looking in orientation—fundamentally nostalgic attempts to infuse utopian visions of the past with the perspective of the present. By considering the ways in which suburbia reflects and creates nostalgia, we can begin to understand how landscapes that appear to be static, uninspired, unoriginal, and stale might be wrapped up with desires for the distance provided by travel to foreign countries and accompanying experiences of touristic play. We can then assess the acts of appropriation and exclusion that take place in the formation of suburbs, the groups of people who plan and enjoy these particular domestic vacations, and the ways in which the space between urban and rural America can simultaneously function as a place of escape and embrace.

After all, what is the suburban landscape if not alien and infinitely unknowable? Popular movies like *The 'Burbs* and *American Beauty*, television series that include *Weeds*, *The Sopranos*, and *Desperate Housewives*, and books such as Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* testify to the weirdness of clipped lawns and pre-fab houses, not to mention the people who live in them. In the words of Thomas Harris in *The Silence of the Lambs*, "This was somebody's environment, chosen and created, a thousand light-years across the mind from the traffic crawling down Route 301."<sup>5</sup> Artist Sarah McKenzie's aerial paintings of suburbs [Image 5] similarly highlight the strangeness of suburban neighborhoods, of human efforts to dig patterns into the earth with economy, rapidity, precision, and consummate reproducibility. And could we not, viewing

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<sup>5</sup> *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988. Reprint New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 53.

McKenzie's *Aerial 65*, apply Don's designation of nostalgia as "the pain from an old wound" to the impulse that led to suburbanization in the first place, and to



Image 5. *Aerial #65* by Sarah McKenzie, 2003

ask if its construction was and is gendered in any way? In her study of the "[t]he richness, the potency, the continued repetition of the land-as-woman symbolization in American life and letters," Annette Kolodny argues that "[i]f we seriously contemplate any meaningful reordering of our relations with our landscape, then we need ... a better grasp of the ways in which language provides clues to the underlying motivations behind action; provides clues, if you will, to our deepest dreams and fantasies."<sup>6</sup> What would happen if we took a new look at the history of American suburbia through the lens of print culture?

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<sup>6</sup> *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. ix.



What stories might emerge if we were to dig into an archive that prides itself on erasure, endorses gendered mentalities and behaviors as inevitable, and attempts to map a supposedly universal dream onto the built environment? How did language shape suburban landscapes, interactions, and identities in the nineteenth century, and why is it relevant today?

\*       \*       \*

In 1867 Donald Grant Mitchell published *Rural Studies, With Hints for Country Places*, a collection of essays compiled as a meditative guide for men who sought to relocate beyond America's urban centers. Within its pages, he criticized housewives for a brand of utilitarianism that left no room for "true home relish" in its unceasing commitment to organization, cleanliness, temperance, and morality. Designating "livability" as the ultimate goal of "a man's sense of domesticity," he urged his readers to infuse the suburban home space with a spirit of playfulness and leisure. This project positions Mitchell and other male authors within the physical and imaginative milieu of America's earliest suburbs in order to explore the ways in which print culture shaped community formation in the nineteenth century. Drawing from archival resources and employing methodologies based in textual analysis, book history, and material culture studies, I argue that writers and publishers cultivated a masculine domesticity of self-nurture in suburban environments as an antidote to the malaise of urban life and the strictures of feminine self-sacrifice. Representations of "country life within city reach" established the groundwork for popular conceptions of suburban domestic life that remain with us today.

Recent studies of literary geographies and the geographic imagination by scholars such as Martin Brückner, Anne Baker, and Hsuan Hsu have demonstrated that in an era of industrialization and technological change, Americans embraced print culture as a source of information about themselves and the world around them. Their reading practices, in turn, impacted the shape of the built environment, from home architecture and interior decoration to community design and social organization. In *“Country Life Within City Reach,”* I explore the process by which text-fueled reveries of clerks transformed the terrain surrounding New York, Boston, and Philadelphia from rural townships into commuter suburbs over the course of the nineteenth century. As railroad networks expanded and young men found themselves physically and socially confined in small offices and rented garrets, books and periodicals offered escape. Contrasting industrialization, overcrowding, disease, and expense with the restorative effects of the natural environment on body and mind, authors, editors, architects, and reformers urged men to leave their work behind in the city at the end of each day. In leafy-bowered homes on the border between nature and civilization, they could experience the freeing sensation of a bird’s-eye view of business concerns. Brooklyn, Hoboken, Chestnut Hill, Concord, and a host of other suburban towns ballooned in the 1850s and 1860s, as middle-class men constructed houses and communities from plans outlined in periodicals, pattern books, novels, and domestic treatises.

Donald Grant Mitchell’s desire to reclaim the word “homeliness” from the “[p]retty-faced women [who] have corrupted it” suggests that critical assessments of feminine domesticity do not adequately address the range of Americans’ relationships to home in the nineteenth century. *“Country Life Within*

*City Reach*” demonstrates that textual evidence of a masculine desire to escape a home life that was orchestrated by women does not indicate disinterest in the domestic sphere; rather, men were looking to the home space for the fulfillment of different needs. While prominent female domestic reformers such as Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Beecher, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Harriet Beecher Stowe preached the virtues of labor and sympathy, viewing leisure with suspicion and allowing it only in the service of a greater good such as healthful exercise or community building, proponents of masculine domesticity rejected service of family, God, and nation in favor of self-rejuvenation and aesthetic gratification. Nineteenth-century print culture offered men relief from urban anonymity and powerlessness through experiences of quiet contemplation in the library, plant propagation in the garden, whispered intimacies at the hearth, impromptu celebrations with male friends in the dining room, and beer-making in the basement. In park-like suburban settings, they could defend the boundaries of personhood through domestic flourishes and activities that bespoke individual dreams and aspirations.

My first chapter situates Washington Irving, a wildly popular cultural interlocutor whose personal life and writings established the prototype of the domestic-minded man for the generation of American authors who occupy the center of my study, within the context of early suburbanization surrounding northeastern cities in the first half of the nineteenth century. Reflecting on the ways in which landscape registers new social, economic, and political realities, Irving’s 1819 story “Rip Van Winkle” comments on men’s attempts to establish a domestic regime on their own terms upon finding themselves in an alien, disorienting environment. By the 1840s, Irving himself had become something of

a Rip Van Winkle to American readers and authors who made pilgrimages to visit him at Sunnyside, his home along the Hudson River. At a time when novels, periodicals, and advice manuals had begun to link bachelors with an urban sporting culture of sex, alcohol, gambling, and indolence, Irving used his sketches and authorial presence to craft an alternate vision. From his position outside the city, he presented a new model of domestic masculinity for a newly industrialized nation.

The following five chapters analyze articulations of masculine domesticity by Irving's successors as case studies in the different ways in which print culture impacted suburban community formation in the mid nineteenth century. In each instance, I spatially situate authors within their lived environments in order to ground considerations of domestic practice and ideology. Chapters Two and Three examine the literary careers of two under-studied authors who used their celebrity to popularize the benefits of life outside but within reach of American cities to readers. While Nathaniel Parker Willis's weekly editorial letters about his home on the Hudson River prompted him to characterize the *Home Journal's* readership as a suburban print community devoted to the art of living well, Donald Grant Mitchell's writings about his home outside of New Haven, Connecticut suggested that the suburbs would provide fulfillment to men whose frustrations with feminine domesticity echoed those expressed in his bestselling *Reveries of a Bachelor*. In their own ways, each writer capitalized on print's capacity to capture the imagination and influence behavior as they outlined the process of transforming a suburban plot into a monument to selfhood for the man of business.

The final three chapters offer a closer look at the creation of textual suburbs by canonical authors as literary responses to conversations about “country life within city reach” in print. By reading *Walden* within the context of urban clerk culture and popular pattern-book literature in Chapter Four, I argue that Henry David Thoreau sought to address in a new way the well-published desires and concerns of the nation's city-trapped young men through the cultivation of unreal estate at Walden Pond. Through an examination of suburban communitarian reform propaganda of the sort voiced in Albert Brisbane's *New York Tribune* columns in Chapter Five, I claim that Hawthorne employs the character of Miles Coverdale to link a new physical space in America—that of the suburb—to the literary genre of the romance in *The Blithedale Romance*. Chapter Six analyzes gender politics in the short-lived genre of the country book through an exploration of popular humorist Robert Barry Gray's representation of the suburban man as an epicure who utilizes culinary aesthetics to assert authority over his wife in the kitchen. I close the study with an assessment of the influence of mid-century masculine domesticity on the development of businessmen's streetcar suburbs towards the end of the century through the lens of William Dean Howells's *Suburban Sketches*.

\* \* \*

Although we tend to associate Ralph Waldo Emerson with a Transcendental philosophy that valued nature over technology, in “The Fugitive Slave Law” he urged those in search of “the readers and thinkers of 1854” to [l]ook into the morning trains which, from every suburb, carry the business men into the city to their shops, counting-rooms, work-yards, and warehouses.” As

they commuted, they read newspapers that connected them to other individuals “not only virtually but actually.”<sup>7</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, new communities were forming on the page and in the earth. In its most abstract sense, suburbanization is an act of colonization and a process of gating facilitated by appropriation and exclusion as much as by advancement and association. As railroad networks expanded and telegraph lines multiplied, bodies and words changed the geography of our nation in ways that continue to reverberate today, sometimes in the most unexpected of ways. A February 14, 2009 article in the *New York Times* about the safety of internet browsing entitled “Do We Need a New Internet?” described a recent computer virus outbreak as “a harbinger heralding the arrival of a darker cyberspace, more of a mirror for all of the chaos and conflict of the physical world than a utopian refuge from it.”<sup>8</sup> Invoking an early vision of the Internet as a suburb of the physical world, the piece reported that experts now think that the only way to fix the problem is to start over:

What a new Internet might look like is still widely debated, but one alternative would, in effect, create a “gated community” where users would give up their anonymity and certain freedoms in return for safety. Today that is already the case for many corporate and government Internet users. As a new and more secure network becomes widely adopted, the current Internet might end up as the bad neighborhood of cyberspace. You would enter at your own risk and keep an eye over your shoulder while you were there.

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<sup>7</sup> Both quotations are from “The Fugitive Slave Law.” *Miscellanies*. Vol. 11 in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 12 Vols. (1903-4. Reprint New York: AMS Press, 1979), p. 218.

<sup>8</sup> Markoff, John, “Do We Need a New Internet?”, *New York Times* 14 February 2009. Accessed online 2/26/2009 ([http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/weekinreview/15markoff.html?\\_r=1&emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/weekinreview/15markoff.html?_r=1&emc=eta1)).

This comparison of a new Internet to a “gated community” and the current Internet as the “bad neighborhood” hearkens back to nineteenth-century concerns about safety, privacy, association, exclusion, and identity. Thoreau’s warning against suburban wanderlust—“the bad neighborhood to be avoided is our own scurvy selves”<sup>9</sup>—seems ripe for meditation in the twenty-first century. By tracing the literary geography of early suburbanization, *“Country Life Within City Reach”* invites a reassessment of the extent to which nineteenth-century masculine domesticity contributed to the thought patterns and social behaviors that govern gender dynamics, aesthetic preferences, domestic associations, and business practices today.

What began four years ago as a recognition of a gap in critical approaches to nineteenth-century domesticity—the discovery of ample evidence in mid-century print culture that American men were interested in the domestic sphere and sought to position themselves within it—evolved into a study of the roles played by male writers in the formation of America’s earliest suburbs in the 1840s and 1850s. In the course of tracing the articulation of masculine domesticity in novels, poems, essays, and semi-autobiographical narratives written by nineteenth-century writers such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Donald Grant Mitchell, Nathaniel Parker Willis, Barry Gray, Frederic Cozzens, William Curtis, and William Dean Howells, I quickly realized that these men often spoke idealistically about domestic possibilities outside but within reach of northeastern cities. Again and again, they identified the landscape between city

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<sup>9</sup> *Walden* (1852. Reprint Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 42.

and country as a space where men could establish a home life on their own terms, in an environment that was separate from the business center but remained within easy access for commuting purposes.

Certainly, I had read *The Machine and the Garden*, and I felt that even with all the heavy-handedness of the myth-symbol school of thought, Leo Marx was on target (as Annette Kolodny would be, for her own project, a decade later) when he argued that “[t]o appreciate the significance and power of our American fables it is necessary to understand the interplay between the literary imagination and what happens outside literature, in the general culture.”<sup>10</sup> But I was dissatisfied with his delineation of “two kinds of pastoralism,” the one, rather predictably, “popular and sentimental,” and the other “imaginative and complex.”<sup>11</sup> It was Marx’s “popular and sentimental” group that captured my attention, especially because his dismissal seemed so intricately bound with issues of the 1960s, when the book was published. Two years after Pete Seeger first sang Malvina Reynolds’s “Little Boxes,” Marx invoked the twentieth century to define sentimental pastoralism:

An obvious example is the current “flight from the city.” An inchoate longing for a more “natural” environment enters into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life (with the result that we neglect our cities and desert them for the suburbs). Wherever people turn away from the hard social and technological realities this obscure sentiment is likely to be at work. We see it in our politics, in the “localism” invoked to oppose an adequate national system of education, in the power of the farm bloc in Congress, in the special economic favor shown to “farming” through government subsidies, and in state electoral systems that allow the rural population to retain a share of

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964. Reprint New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *The Machine in the Garden*, p. 5.



political power grossly out of proportion to its size. It manifests itself in our leisure-time activities, in the piety toward the out-of-doors expressed in the wilderness cult, and in our devotion to camping, hunting, fishing, picnicking, gardening, and so on. But there is no need to multiply examples; anyone who knows America today will think of many others.<sup>12</sup>

On one level, his account sought to pinpoint something fundamentally American, and as a literature scholar with a background in American Studies, that impulse intrigued me. But he also seemed to be really angry with rural America, or perhaps simply frustrated with the poseurs who had claimed it as their own. He connected words like “flight” to “leisure” and “feeling” and placed them in opposition to the imaginative complexity associated with “cities” and “hard social and technological realities.” Aligning lesser pastoralism with “the lower plane of our collective fantasy life,” “a mawkish taste for retreat,” and the “soft veil of nostalgia,”<sup>13</sup> he contrasted it with the “design” of the complex pastoral (marshaled by such writers as Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville) that “brings a world which is more ‘real’ into juxtaposition with an idyllic vision.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite Marx’s assertions, many of the writers who penned what he calls pastorals did not eschew technological innovation, and even popular authors were self-conscious about their desire to “retreat” beyond the city. As I demonstrate in Chapter Two, Nathaniel Parker Willis left New York City for health reasons late in his literary career, but he ceaselessly reflected on the effects of the railroad and telegraph on print distribution and community formation, even going so far as to suggest that his readership constituted a print suburb

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<sup>12</sup> *The Machine in the Garden*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *The Machine in the Garden*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> *The Machine in the Garden*, p. 25.

defined by lifestyle choices and gated by technology rather than geography. It was not a matter of real men engaging industrialization and sentimental men retreating from it—the impulse to separate work and home life was a much more complex process for all individuals who contemplated it. Nostalgia and escapist fantasy contributed to the architecture of suburban America, but so did technological innovation and social activism. While the term “pastoralism” accesses the idealism that motivated early removals to suburban areas in the nineteenth century, it does not adequately represent the goals of those relocations. By and large, men who dreamt of houses outside the urban center did not hope to return to the land—they wanted to retain their jobs in the city and retire each evening to a more natural environment outside but within reach of it. The suburban trend marked a new orientation to home life that *The Machine in the Garden* does not adequately define or assess.

Critical analyses of the authors that Marx designated the “lesser pastoralists” have been relatively few and far between, and they remain understudied even today. When names like Donald Grant Mitchell, William Curtis, and Nathaniel Parker Willis are mentioned by scholars of nineteenth-century American literature, they tend to be referenced fleetingly as “feminized” men.<sup>15</sup> These characterizations draw from a short section of a chapter on the periodical press in *The Feminization of American Culture* in which Ann Douglas bemoans mid-century “male sentimentalists” as “essentially secular sentimental authors of the genteel Irvingesque school” who “wrote whimsical, light,

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Nina Baym’s brief discussion of T. S. Arthur, N. P. Willis, and “George” Mitchell in *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 13.

epistolary sketches” focused around “feeling.”<sup>16</sup> In Douglas’s view, these writers were wrongly celebrated by nineteenth-century readers over the works of more “serious non-commercial writers” like Melville and Emerson, the true “intellect[s]” who authored “sophisticated narratives.”<sup>17</sup> Echoing Marx, she explains how “magazinists” such as Longfellow, Willis, Mitchell, and Curtis

built their professions on a form of evasion – of their country, of their own identity, and of their occupation itself. They made of apparently aimless wandering a vocation, a vocation which perforce always retained amateur rank... they confessed to indolence. They pleaded implicitly for a special status, that of perpetual child, of the observer licensed only because he is incapable of participation. They dodged achievement, and could be surprised and elusive in the face of success: they wished to be considered amateurs, even idlers, not men working hard to achieve their literary goals.<sup>18</sup>

In keeping with their soft themes, according to Douglas, they dabbled in imprecise, unregimented genres such as the sketch, which, in her words, “concerns itself with the small, the ‘picturesque’ ... the literary analogue to the architectural style its promulgators would choose for their semi-rural, semi-suburban homes.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977. Reprint New York: Noonday Press / Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1998), p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> *The Feminization of American Culture*, p. 235.

<sup>18</sup> *The Feminization of American Culture*, p. 237.

<sup>19</sup> *The Feminization of American Culture*, p. 238. Douglas also dismissed the sketch because she saw it as explicitly commercial in a way that novels and essays were not, explaining it as a form that “despite its apparent timidity, is self-indulgent in mood and shrewdly commercial in purpose. Like any potentially mass-produced object, its lack of pretension as art makes it more appealing as an article of consumption; it can be read casually, then forgotten” (p. 238). In other words, she and Leo Marx shared a distrust for mass culture and consumption. For a more recent (and sympathetic) assessment of the sketch as a nineteenth-century literary genre, see Kristie Hamilton’s *America’s Sketchbook: The Cultural Life of a Nineteenth-Century Literary Genre* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1998). Hamilton celebrates the sketch for its form rather than denigrating it and argues that “[t]he aesthetic of fragmentation that evolved within and around this genre brought into the open, and made thinkable, the disruptions within modernization that the novel smoothed over with coherence and closure” (pp. 8-9).

Douglas's off-hand reference to architecture still fascinates me, and not only because of the ability of her tone to decimate a perfectly intriguing topic of study,<sup>20</sup> so great is her distrust of the male sentimentalists. In the midst of an argument about the explosion of female power in the nineteenth century,<sup>21</sup> Douglas briefly insinuates that the "docility" of these writers "is deceptive," that "in the midst of their humility lies a hidden animus against the forces which humble them," and their "gentlemanly narrators are not quite as kindly, as insignificant, as assimilable to feminine tastes as they seem on first glance." She continues, "It is as if they publicly disarm themselves of all dangerous weapons in order not to be suspected of carrying poison, submit[ting] partly in order to gain the chance to be at close range, intimate with the enemy," whose "ambiguities reflected their own aspirations and conflicts."<sup>22</sup> Even as she portrays the male sentimentalists as sneaky, power-hungry wimps in *The Feminization of American Culture*, belittling their output and influence, her lines reveal a desire to expose their covert operations. Just as Marx's narrative registered the politics of the 1960s, Douglas's representation of nineteenth-century men as the intimate enemies of women reflects a second-wave feminism that colors her readings and influences her conclusions.

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<sup>20</sup> I would soon find out that I was not the only person interested in exploring "literary analogues" to mid-century domestic architecture. As if taking Douglas's criticisms as an invitation for closer examination, Adam Sweeting's *Reading Houses and Building Books: Andrew Jackson Downing and the Architecture of Popular Antebellum Literature, 1835-1855* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996) returns to the authors that she denigrated within the context of housing trends associated with A. J. Downing.

<sup>21</sup> In a nutshell, Douglas argues in *The Feminization of American Culture* that as women found social purpose and identity in the production and consumption of sentimental literature and culture, male authors and ministers were forced to adopt sentimental forms and court female audiences in order to retain any sort of status or power in a society where their cultural, political, and religious authority was quickly eroding.

<sup>22</sup> *The Feminization of American Culture*, pp. 238-239.

It also suggests that she was not quite comfortable with her representation of these men as “feminized.” Rather surprisingly, while criticisms of Douglas’s argument have spawned an entire field of domesticity studies, the positions of and roles played by men in the home have remained untouched, largely as a result of a continued refusal on the part of scholars to accept the notion that concepts of “masculinity” in the nineteenth century were not incompatible with a sincere engagement with the politics and possibilities of home life. Looking back at a genealogy of scholarship that nuanced our sense of the range and influence of domestic practices and ideologies, it seems strange that such a gap remains. In their recovery of and attention to women’s writing (specifically in relation to sentiment and domesticity), Jane Tompkins, Nina Baym, Gillian Brown, Marianne Noble, Lora Romero, and so many others have radically impacted our understanding of American literature and culture.<sup>23</sup> Their work also paved the way for a reconsideration of the doctrine of separate spheres in the last fifteen years that has introduced a whole host of new problems and considerations that are waiting to be addressed.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the fact that masculinity studies exploded in the 1990s alongside new approaches to domesticity, the two remained largely separate. Scholars of the history of masculinity such as E. Anthony Rotundo, Michael Kimmel, Mark

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<sup>23</sup> Tompkins, Jane, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Baym, Nina, *Women’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1870*; Brown, Gillian, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1990); Noble, Marianne, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Romero, Lora, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> For criticism of separate spheres ideology, see Lora Romero’s *Home Fronts*, in addition to Davidson, Cathy N., and Jessamyn Hatcher, Editors, *No More Separate Spheres!* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) and Elbert, Monika, Editor, *Separate Spheres No More: Gender Convergence in American Literature* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000).

Carnes, Karen Lystra, Thomas Laqueur, Dana Nelson, and Howard Chudacoff exposed the ways in which American masculinity has been defined in relation and response to various anxieties, and while their studies complemented the findings of the leading critics of sentiment and domesticity, there was not much overlap.<sup>25</sup> Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler's edited collection *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect* still stands as one of the few examples of texts that attempt to bring the two fields together.<sup>26</sup> Turn-of-the-century studies of masculinity such as Howard P. Chudacoff's *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* engage questions of men's relationship to home and family, but for most critics of mid-century domesticity, men exist completely outside the home.

While a more recent focus on private/public distinctions in American literature and culture has caused arguments about men retreating from technology to be replaced by claims that men sought privacy above all else, the oversights remain the same: a refusal to link men with domestic practices and ideologies. In her recent book *Inexpressible Privacy*, Millette Shamir continues the trend:

Margaret Marsh and Dolores Hayden each illustrate how, although urban decentralization and the ideology of domesticity arose coextensively in the second third of the nineteenth century,

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<sup>25</sup> Rotundo, E. Anthony, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Kimmel, Michael, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); Carnes, Mark C., and Clyde Griffen, Editors, *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Lystra, Karen, *Searching the Heart: Men, Women, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Laqueur, Thomas W., *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), and *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003); Nelson, Dana D, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); and Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> *Sentimental Men* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

they developed not only independently but also in conflict with each other. Domesticity was propagated primarily by and for women and centered on the social, familial, and material goals of the home, whereas the move to the suburbs was orchestrated by men and centered on the primacy of isolated privacy. As a matter of fact, middle-class women often opposed the move to the suburb.<sup>27</sup>

While Shamir's nod to suburbanization marks an opportunity to utilize new studies of literary geographies in an attempt breathe new life into studies of domesticity, she shuts down the opening by defining "domesticity" as exclusively feminine and assuming that men sought silent isolation above all else. One need look only to the literature of early suburbanization, though, to see that this was not the case. These images from Barry Gray's *Ale: In Prose and Verse* are only two of many examples of men picturing themselves in relation to a new community linked by aesthetic preferences and shared habits.<sup>28</sup> While the first image shows male friends enjoying pints in an urban tavern [Image 6], their communion of spirits is facilitated by their ability to escape urban business concerns in a natural environment in the second image [Image 7]. In "*Country Life Within City Reach*," I argue that men such as the ones pictured below were interested in more than relaxation and drinking; they turned to the suburbs for new ways of thinking about themselves and their communities in a rapidly changing, oftentimes disorienting and alienating world. While the men I treat in this study wanted to escape from certain people and certain economic, cultural, and social developments, to say they sought privacy does not capture the depth

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<sup>27</sup> *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 202.

<sup>28</sup> Gray, Barry, and John Savage, *Ale: In Prose and Verse* (New York: Russell's American Steam Printing House, 1866).

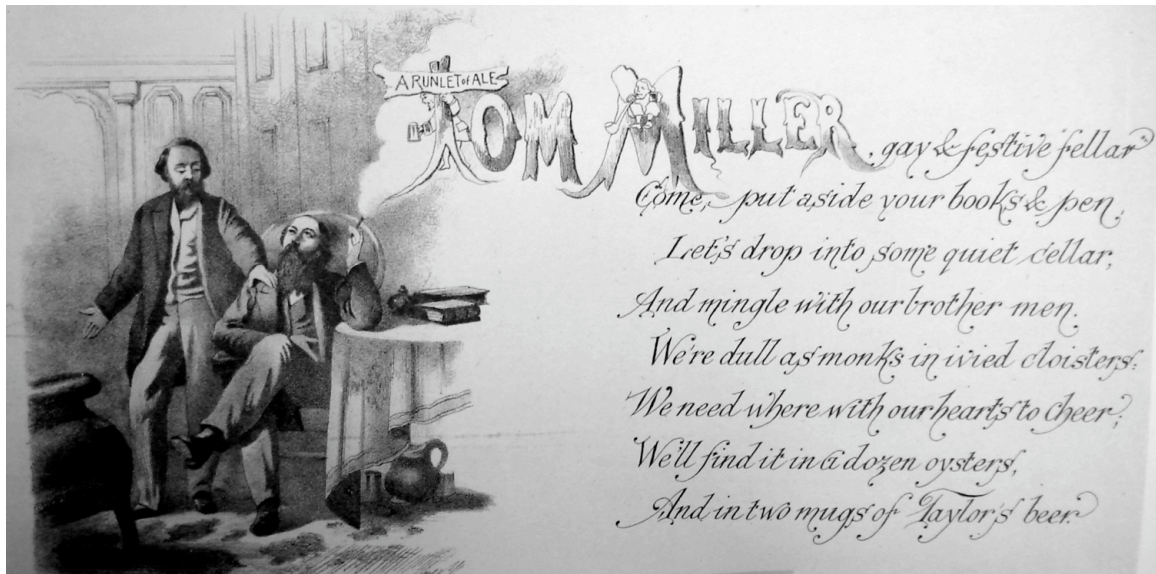


Image 6.

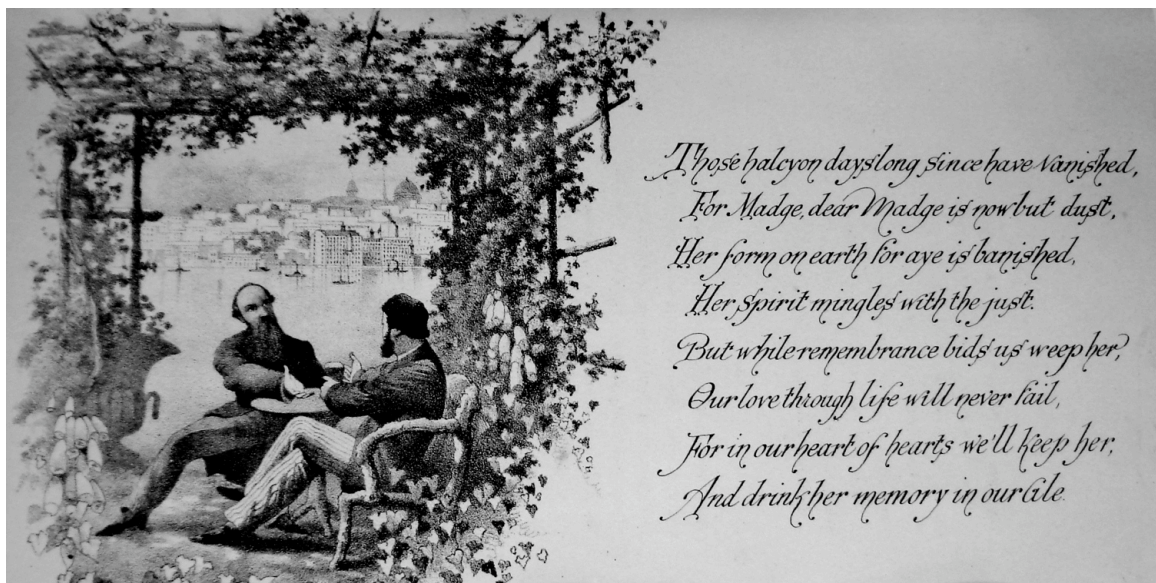


Image 7.

and range of their plans and reflections. Like Bartleby and his boss in Melville's tale, they already felt "alone, absolutely alone in the universe," trapped within an urban environment where their work was anonymous, meaningless, and



unending.<sup>29</sup> The dream of a suburban home left its mark on print culture, from novels and stories to pattern books, behavior manuals, advertisements, and essays in periodicals and magazines. The masculine vision of domestic life that unfolded from these texts constituted a viable alternative to the feminine domesticity that scholars have come to know so well.

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler addresses himself to the desires and anxieties of men in nineteenth-century American literature, and reflects on their retreat into nature and an eternal childhood to escape from women.<sup>30</sup> Speaking of the difficulty of reading this retreat, he ultimately turns to the story of Rip Van Winkle to illustrate the archetype that he sees replicated throughout American literature:

What is posed originally as an innocent lark soon becomes problematic; for the myth of Rip is more than just another example among the jollier fables of masculine protest; it is the definition, made once and for all ... of a fundamental American archetype. In some ways, it seems astonishingly prophetic: a forecast of today's fishing trip with the boys, tomorrow's escape to the ball park or the poker game. Henpecked and misunderstood at home, the natural man whistles for his dog, Wolf, picks up his gun and leaves the village for Nature – seeking in a day's outing what a long life at home has failed to provide him. It is hard to tell whether he is taking a vacation or making a revolution, whether his gesture is one of evasion or subversion; but in any case, he seeks some ultimate Good symbolized by the keg of excellent Hollands and the male companions, who do not even talk (that is the province of his wife), merely indicate the liquor and continue with their game – their eternal playtime in the hills.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Melville, Herman, "Bartleby, the Scrivener." *Piazza Tales* (1856. Reprint Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960. Reprint Urbana-Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> *Love and Death in the American Novel*, p. 341.

Disregarding the outdated attempt to trace a single trope throughout all great American literature, Fiedler's troubling of Rip's siesta, and by extension, the actions of men like Hawthorne's Wakefield or Twain's Huck, still has something to tell us about the possible pitfalls of characterizing men's retreat from a female-centered model of domesticity as simply escapist or their desire to leave civilization for nature as simply pastoral. The truth is messier and more difficult to categorize. In their decision to act, these men (whether fictional or historical) wield power, and in their rejections of one thing they assert the absence of something necessary (or alternately, the presence of something unnecessary). As for vacation/revolution, evasion/subversion—it seems to be a matter of both, rather than one or the other. In this project, I attempt to acknowledge that complexity, because I do not think it is something that has gone away. Even in the most banal, fake suburban communities, where every house looks staged and every family seems mass-produced from some mold that we can no longer locate, serious work is afoot. Returning to David Lowenthal's association of nostalgia with tourism, we would do well to heed his warning that "like other tourists, those to the past imperil the object of their quest."<sup>32</sup> Many of these men found themselves unable to realize the dreams that they had envisioned, the domestic programs that they outlined. However, their visions for the suburban communities they established, both in print and in practice, succeeded in changing the standards of home life for generations of Americans, long after their books and columns were published and far beyond the northeastern cities they expanded. Their suburban dreaming brought about social and geographic shifts with which we still live and that we are only beginning to understand.

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<sup>32</sup> *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985. Reprint New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 4.

## Chapter 1

### **Colonizing the Countryside**

Everyone knows the story of Rip Van Winkle: henpecked husband goes for a ramble in the mountains, meets some ninepin-playing midgets, drinks their beer, gets drunk, and falls asleep, discovering upon his return home that twenty years have passed, his wife has died, and the colonies have thrown off the yoke of the British Crown. It is a lot to take in, for Rip, villagers, and readers alike—so many gaps, so many unanswered questions. What happened to Rip while he was gone? Were the little men real, and if so, who were they, and why were they so melancholy? And perhaps most importantly, is someone toying with us? Rip's likeability hinges on the accidental nature of the events that transpire, but hints of domestic dissatisfaction and discord litter his incredible account. Did he intend to leave his wife for twenty years? Was it really a coincidence that he returned only after her death?

Washington Irving's 1819 sketch resists closure. Just as Rip comes down from the mountain and finds an alien community in place of the village he knew so well, so are readers left wondering how to integrate an account of a "Big Sleep," as Leslie Fiedler calls it, with an otherwise straightforward tale of one man's desire to escape a home life that he associates with constant nagging and

useless labor.<sup>1</sup> I would like to return to “Rip Van Winkle” in the opening chapter of this dissertation to set the stage for the writers and texts that I cover in the six essays that follow. By examining Rip’s domestic desires and discontents within the context of an American landscape in transition from one way of life to another in the early decades of the nineteenth century, as Irving invites us to do, we can begin to consider literature’s ability to register social change and shape practice and ideology. And by contemplating Irving’s own model of a bachelor’s domesticity at Sunnyside in the 1840s and 1850s, we can see the extent to which, even in the nineteenth century, a celebrity could popularize a lifestyle for a generation of writers and readers.

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“Rip Van Winkle” opens with a historical frame. The narrator, Geoffrey Crayon,<sup>2</sup> informs readers that the story was found among the papers of Diedrich Knickerbocker, an old New York gentleman who had a penchant for researching Dutch families in the Hudson River Valley.<sup>3</sup> It centers around the extraordinary experience of “a simple good natured fellow” (*SB*, p. 61) named Rip Van Winkle whose Dutch ancestors had enjoyed an illustrious history in the Hudson River

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960. Reprint Urbana-Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Crayon styles himself as a bachelor narrator in the vein of Robert Burton, who described himself in his Preface to the *Anatomy of Melancholy*—cited by Irving on his title page to *The Sketch Book*—as “[a] mere spectator of other men’s fortunes and adventures, and how they play their parts; which methinks are diversely presented unto me, as from a common theatre or scene” [*The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819-1820. Reprint Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000)]. All further references will refer to this edition and will be abbreviated *SB*).

<sup>3</sup> The narrator characterizes him as the sort of person who would approach houses and their inhabitants “as a little clasped volume of black-letter, and studied it with the zeal of a bookworm” (*SB*, p. 57).

Valley. Unfortunately for Rip, he did not inherit any of his distant relatives' admirable qualities—he "was one of those happy mortals, of foolish, well-oiled dispositions, who take the world easy, eat white bread or brown, which ever can be got with least thought or trouble, and would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound" (*SB*, p. 65). His avoidance of any "profitable labor" (p. 63) creates a tension between himself and his wife, Dame Van Winkle, who constantly chastises him for his shortcomings. The narrator describes Rip as "meek," "obedient," and "henpecked," "rendered pliant and malleable in the fiery furnace of domestic tribulation" (pp. 61-62), an emasculated man who is treated more like a wayward child than a husband by his wife.

There are hints, however, that Rip's spouse might not be the sole source of his woes. After all, he has been married twice before, and he refuses to make any effort to placate Dame Van Winkle, ignoring her angry outbursts and attempting to avoid her whenever possible. A lazy disposition is not entirely to blame, either; he exercises "diligence" and "perseverance" (*SB*, p. 63) when fishing, hunting, husking corn, building stone walls, assisting other people's wives, and finishing odd jobs for neighbors. "[I]n a word," the narrator remarks, "Rip was ready to attend to any body's business but his own" (p. 63). As a result, his farm stands in disrepair and his children run ragged. Although he claims that he does not attend to his own domestic duties because his efforts are doomed to fail, it seems just as likely that he simply does not like to be told what to do. The narrator depicts the home as a battlefield, with Dame Van Winkle announcing victory. As the loser, Rip "was fain to draw off his forces, and take to the outside of the house—the only side which, in truth, belongs to a henpecked husband" (pp. 65-66). Associating the home space with tasks and criticisms, mistakes and

tribulations, activities and mental states that he would rather do without, Rip locates freedom elsewhere. He frequents the local inn for conversation and philosophizing with other men, but it is nature that offers “his only alternative to escape from the labour of the farm and the clamour of his wife” (p. 69). In the woods with his gun and dog Wolf, his sole “domestic adherent” (p. 66), he can forget his troubles and relax unmolested.

By rehearsing the details of Rip’s marital situation early in the story, Irving (via Knickerbocker via Crayon) establishes a domestic pretext that complicates our ability to read the events that follow. While Rip’s experience appears to be completely accidental and inexplicable, concerns about his home life with Dame Van Winkle bookend the account—her reaction to his prolonged absence is the last thing he thinks of before following the small man up the mountain and his first worry upon waking on the hillside, sans dog, with a rusty gun, creaky joints, and a foot-long beard. Rip himself seems to be confused about what happened to him, almost in disbelief of the bowling party he witnessed and the keg that he sampled. Moreover, the narrator invites us as readers to question the tale’s veracity by providing possible alternate interpretations or explanations of occurrences at key points in the narrative: the Dutch men remind Rip of a painting that hangs in the village parson’s parlor, the bowling balls sound like thunder, and once he has re-established himself in the village as a storyteller it takes him a little while to settle on one version of what transpired. Rip’s irrepressible joy at the discovery that his wife has died in his absence and the fact that it is this intelligence that finally prompts him to divulge his identity to his daughter leave us uneasy in our ability to trust the tale, despite Knickerbocker’s appended endnote attesting to its authenticity.

Writing in 1960 about Irving's sketch, Leslie Fiedler points out that "[t]hough the myth of Rip Van Winkle embodies the sketch of an alternative to married life ... the mountain spree is tucked into a few lines."<sup>4</sup> While it is relatively easy to see what Rip wanted to escape—wife, work, and responsibility—his domestic designs are less clear. Not only do we lack knowledge of what occurred during the twenty-year span in which he was away, but we are unable to access the needs and desires that led to his respite in nature, if that is indeed where he went. All we know is that, ultimately, he appears pleased with the course of events, as he no longer has to deal with "petticoat government" (SB, p. 92) and can come and go from his daughter's house as he pleases. Furthermore, towards the end of the tale, we learn that it was "a common wish of all henpecked husbands in the neighbourhood, when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draught out of Rip Van Winkle's flagon" (p. 93). Although the shock of discovering his house in shambles, his dog starving, and his friends long gone momentarily unnerves him, Rip's sole source of anxiety relates to the situation of finding himself "alone in the world" (p. 86). Once he has reunited with his children and settled into the role of town storyteller, he voices no regret. After all, while Wolf might not recognize him, he is regarded as an Odysseus of sorts: no longer treated like a child, he is "reverenced as one of the patriarchs of the village" (p. 91). For the other men of the town, especially, Rip's ramble points toward the viability of an alternative to domestic "despotism" (p. 92). Like Rip, they believe that the ability to be "a free citizen of the United States" has less to do with "the changes of states and empires" than the politics of life at home (p. 92).

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<sup>4</sup> *Love and Death in the American Novel*, p. 343.

In *A Fictive People*, Ronald Zboray examines reading practices amidst economic upheavals in the nineteenth century, focusing particularly on “the role of reading in contributing to a new, modern definition of the American self.”<sup>5</sup> His claim that “some Americans turned to novels and stories to help them address the personal challenges of rapid development and the diverse emotional experiences it brought” seems ripe for consideration in relation to the story of “Rip Van Winkle.” Zboray argues that fiction provided comfort to disoriented, overwhelmed readers, as “any illusion of order, of explanation, in a time of largely inexplicable disorder, had the potential both to sell and to heal.”<sup>6</sup> While Zboray might overstate his case, Washington Irving’s popularity testifies to his ability to speak to readers both within the United States and in Europe.<sup>7</sup> In addition to becoming the first American writer to be celebrated in England, he achieved an unprecedented level of popularity in the United States, spawning a literary circle of successors who cultivated his style and interests in the 1850s and 1860s. Often referred to as “Geoffrey Crayon” by his contemporaries, Irving sanctioned and sometimes even promoted slippage between his personal identity and fictional creations as he publicly reflected on the political, economic, and social changes of the early nineteenth century. In *The Sketch Book*, he utilized the figure of Rip (and more generally, the bachelor figure of Geoffrey Crayon) to

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<sup>5</sup> *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. xvii.

<sup>6</sup> *A Fictive People*, p. xvii.

<sup>7</sup> In *Artistic Voyagers: Europe and the American Imagination in the Works of Irving, Allston, Cole, Cooper, and Hawthorne* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), Joy Kasson provides an excellent overview of Irving’s literary success (and the period of 1815-1819 as a watershed period in defining his own artistic identity) in a transnational context; see also “Rip Van Winkle Awakes, 1815-1819” in Andrew Burstein’s *The Original Knickerbocker: The Life of Washington Irving* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), pp. 109-132.



voice concerns about the fate of masculine freedom and self-expression in a rapidly industrializing nation that ostensibly valued labor and production over all else. In his public and private life as well as in his writings, Irving outlined a new model of masculine selfhood that defined itself in relation to a new domestic order. While in 1819 Irving intimated that men like Rip would have to leave their families (at least for a while) in order to experience true contentment and personal fulfillment, over the next few decades he would become an outspoken proponent of their ability to reconcile self and community, leisure and labor, bachelorhood and marriage in the borderland developments that had begun to appear outside but within reach of northeastern cities.<sup>8</sup>

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In the 1820s and 1830s, towns similar to the one depicted in “Rip Van Winkle” experienced massive growth spurts. As northeastern metropolitan areas expanded in response to immigration, industrialization, and transportation innovations, the shape and organization of surrounding communities changed alongside them. While Jeffersonian agrarian ideals continued to resonate for many Americans, a new business mentality had begun to leave its mark on the landscape, inflecting those ideals in unprecedented ways. Trains and steamboats initiated the process of transforming sleepy villages into bustling urban satellites as they shuttled goods and people from city to country. Soon after the establishment of steam ferry access between New York and Brooklyn in 1814, for

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<sup>8</sup> My use of the term “borderland” is indebted to John R. Stilgoe, who in *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) defines mid-nineteenth-century borderland spaces as occupying “a zone *between* rural space and urban residential ring” (p. 10).

example, Brooklyn Heights became a popular residential spot for wealthy city merchants, and as early as 1836, construction began on a planned community in New Brighton on Staten Island. Designed by British émigré architect John Haviland, the three rows of villa homes overlooked the water and boasted steamboat access to lower Manhattan throughout the day [Image 8].<sup>9</sup> An article

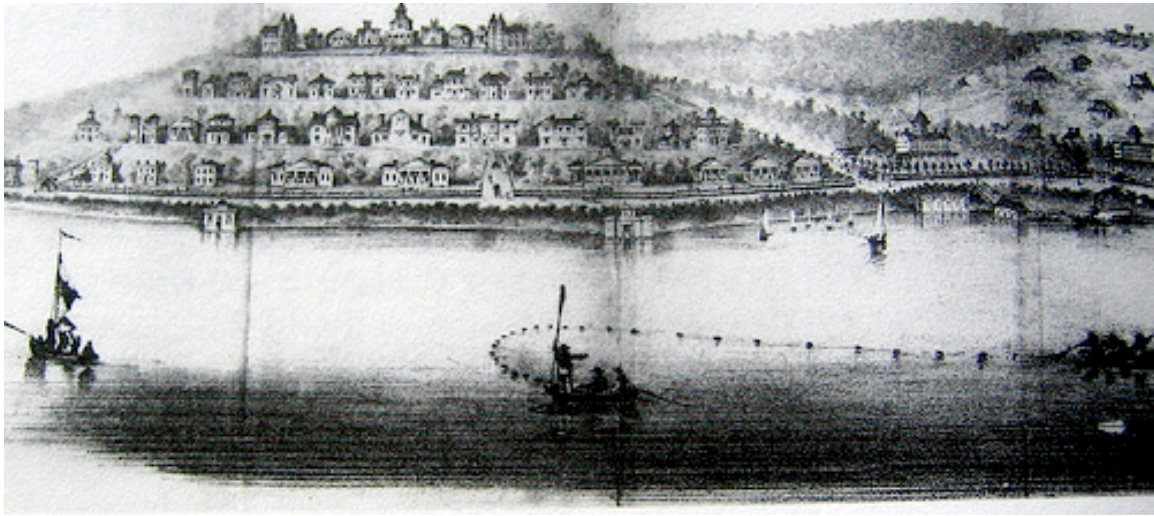


Image 8. George A. Ward, *Description of New Brighton on Staten Island...* New York 1836. Lithograph by P. Mesier, detail. Milstein Division of History, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations (Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, p. 48)

in the *Knickerbocker* magazine from September 1838 commented on Long Island's population explosion in the 1830s, as "[v]illages enlarged their borders, and aspired to the rank of cities; wide avenues intersected the country in all

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<sup>9</sup> Robert A.M. Stern offers a detailed overview of New Brighton in *The Anglo-American Suburb* (London: Architectural Design; New York: Distributed by St. Martin's Press, 1981), p. 19. In yet another example of early suburbanization surrounding New York City, in 1831 the New York State Legislature granted a railroad charter to the New York and Harlem Railroad, prompting the *Morning Courier and Enquirer* to announce that Harlem "would soon become a suburb where commuters would be able to enjoy a comfortable house on an acre or two of land with 'a garden, orchard, dairy, and other conveniences'" (quoted in Stern, *The Anglo American Suburb*, p. 100).

directions, and the wiseacres, with pupils dilated with amazement, exclaimed, 'What a change!'"<sup>10</sup> According to the article's author, new suburban trends caught the area's Dutch farmers by surprise; the town of East New York, for example, appeared almost overnight:

They laid out four-and-twenty avenues, called after all the States of the Union. They addressed a circular, couched in handsome terms, to all classes of citizens in the metropolis. They invited the artisan, the mechanic, and the manufacturer, who could there pursue their arts more easily, and be free from the exorbitant rents and charges of the town; and the man of leisure, for the site was unequalled for country-seats, and the air came pure and fresh from the bay... The enterprising founders, to give an impulse to 'improvements,' built a tavern; I should have called it a hotel. They got a post-office established, which will be a great convenience to the future population. ... The speculating spirit at last invaded all the ancient towns and villages on the island. Flatbush and Nyack, Newtown and Hell-Gate; Head-o'-the-Fly and White Pot, the Alley and the Bowerie, Black Stump and Buttermilk Hollow; Flushing, noted for its Princely gardens, and the rural Jamaica, abounding in beautiful maidens, and the sandy Rockaway, and the barren Springfield; Great Plains and Little Plains; Bog Lots and Drowned Meadows; Cedar Swamp and Crab Meadow; Hempsted, occasionally called Clam-Town, Mosquitoe Cove, now called Glen Cove, Success Pond, now called Lakeville, Sand Hole and Hungry Harbor, Patchog and Sweet Hollow, Jerusalem, Babylon, and Cow-neck, Mount Misery, Jericho, Buckram, Great Neck, Little Neck, and Horse Neck, Old Man's Fire Place, Shinnecock.... and Montauk Point.<sup>11</sup>

The piece goes on to discuss the impact on the aforementioned "rage for speculation"<sup>12</sup> of plans for a future railroad that would make Long Island a connecting link between New York and Boston. Using periodicals to advertise their residential properties to a wide range of individuals, suburban developers sought to convince urban dwellers of the possibility of a better life in the

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<sup>10</sup> "Rural Tales and Sketches of Long Island, No. 1—The Kushow Property: A Tale of Crow-Hill," *Knickerbocker* (September 1838), pp. 191-192.

<sup>11</sup> "Rural Tales and Sketches of Long Island," pp. 194-195.

<sup>12</sup> "Rural Tales and Sketches of Long Island," p. 191.

surrounding countryside. In an effort to popularize and profit from a desire for “country life within city reach,” their activities effectively reshaped the earth and erased the landscape’s history.<sup>13</sup> As rural America was hit particularly hard by the financial Panic of 1837, that process of colonization was only accelerated, forcing farmers to relocate either further away from metropolitan markets or, alternately, into the city as members of the dispossessed poor.<sup>14</sup>

These transformed villages began to be populated by “gentlemen farmers” as early as the 1820s, men who worked in the cities and maintained their primary residence there but wanted to move their families to the surrounding countryside, at least during the hot summer months.<sup>15</sup> As Kenneth T. Jackson explains, transportation developments during this period had the effect of emptying out the urban centers even as people continued to move to cities in the nineteenth century, “demonstrat[ing] that enormous growth to metropolitan size was accompanied by rapid population growth on the periphery, by a leveling of the density curve, by an absolute loss of population at the center, and by an increase in the average journey to work, as well as by a rise

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<sup>13</sup> The past was not the sole erasure in the exodus from cities as a place of residence. The *Knickerbocker* article alludes to the undesirable presence of farmers in the suburbanizing locales, but lower-class laborers also shared the landscape with the gentlemen farmers, artisans, and intellectuals who relocated beyond the urban center. In *Bronx Accent*, Lloyd Ultan and Barbara Unger detail the paths of Irish immigrants from New York City to the suburban Bronx as hired farmhands, gardeners, and servants in the first decades of the nineteenth century [“Out of Town: The Suburban Bronx, 1800-1898,” *Bronx Accent: A Literary and Pictorial History of the Borough* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 35]. According to Ultan and Unger, these early Irish immigrants settled in areas that included Highbridge, Mott Haven, and Kingsbridge, while the German immigrants of the 1850s established themselves in Morrisania.

<sup>14</sup> Annette Kolodny provides a succinct overview of this process in her Introduction to the 1986 Penguin edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, pp. vii-xxx.

<sup>15</sup> For more information about gentlemen farmers, see Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), p. 23, and John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 45. Stilgoe discusses “hobby farming” in *Borderland*, Chapters 9 and 10.

in the socioeconomic status of suburban residents.”<sup>16</sup> Anxious to retain a distance from the manufacturing, dirt, overcrowding, and class diversity of the city while retaining easy access to their urban workplaces, the prospect of “country life within city reach” became increasingly alluring to middle and upper middle-class Americans in the new century. Associating nature with rest and recreation rather than labor and production, they turned to previously rural areas with novel plans for the landscape.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 20. See Chapter 2 of Jackson’s book, “The Transportation Revolution and the Erosion of the Walking City,” for a detailed account of this transformation. *Crabgrass Frontier* contains the most comprehensive account of the relationship between early suburbs and transportation, providing an excellent pre-history to Sam Bass Warner’s *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). Even Jackson, however, admits that “[t]ransportation change is not a sufficient explanation for the initial development of the suburban trend” and recognizes that “[f]or the underlying causes of the increasingly stratified and segregated social geography of great American cities, as well as their relatively low density as compared to Europe, we must look not just to transportation technology and the powerful mechanical forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution but to the development of new cultural values” (pp. 42, 44). Henry Binford echoes this assessment in *The First Suburbs: Residential Communities on the Boston Periphery, 1815-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): “[T]hose who created the first suburban communities (1820-1850) were peripheral residents trying to exploit opportunities available at the city’s edge – opportunities in suburban land speculation, small business, and unscheduled transportation. Few of these early suburbanites were daily commuters, but many of them sought to make a home in the suburbs while profiting from the city’s nearness” (p. 2). He continues: “The extension of the journey to work, for example, antedated streetcars, railroads, and omnibuses, began indeed in the walking city era, and began to *change* both city and suburbs before mass carriers allowed mass commuting. Similarly, the process of speculative residential development at the edge of the built-up area, which later became strongly oriented to the streetcar network, began in the 1830s, when no one foresaw a city built around public transportation. Indeed, in the thirties, forties, and fifties, before mass transportation had much impact, American suburbs took on many of their characteristic traits” (p. 4).

<sup>17</sup> It is important to recognize that the interests of the gentlemen farmers conflicted with those of the rural farmers who lived nearby. As Dolores Hayden explains, the initial clash between farmers whose livelihood was based on agriculture and the wealthy families whose breadwinners worked in the cities “became a sustained economic conflict between those who viewed the landscape as a place to rest from profiting elsewhere and those who viewed it as a place to make a profit” (*Building Suburbia*, p. 22). This new, distinctly urban, man approached any farming as a hobby rather than a career and typically limited agricultural pursuits to a kitchen garden, a fruit orchard, possibly a vineyard, and an ornamental landscape of attractive trees, shrubs, and flowers. Characterizing the transition in land ownership as an exercise in progressive nation-building, books and magazines encouraged the distinction between the farmers who previously lived on the land and the gentlemen farmers who had begun to settle it as they outlined the process whereby the new residents could buy a run-down farm from the lazy, lower-class rural people and transform it into a “country seat” within ten years.

Returning in the 1830s to the Hudson River Valley he had written so much about, Washington Irving reworked the standard pose of the gentleman farmer. He had first visited Tarrytown as a teenager, when he spent a summer at his brother's house there in an effort to escape a yellow fever epidemic in New York City.<sup>18</sup> After seventeen years abroad (he had written *The Sketch Book* while in Europe), he returned to the U.S. in 1832 to great acclaim. In addition to *The Sketch Book*, he had written three other popular volumes, *The Knickerbocker's History of New York* (1820), *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), and *Tales of a Traveller* (1829), and New Yorkers were happy to welcome the father of American literature back to the city that he had made famous. Upon learning that his nephew had recently purchased the land next to a small Dutch cottage that Irving had depicted in "Wolfert's Landing," he wrote to his sister while traveling through the West of his inclination to buy the adjoining property. By the time he settled along the Hudson River, twenty-five miles north of Manhattan (near Tarrytown) in 1835, he had become one of the United State's first literary celebrities, a figurehead for a rising generation of young authors. The eventual acquisition and renovation of the spot was closely followed by the press.

When Irving bought the house for \$1800, it was a two-room Dutch farmhouse [Image 9], and although he hoped to expand it substantially, he also wanted to retain the colonial-era elements that drew him to it in the first place. Over the next fifteen years, as steamships and trains intruded upon the Hudson River Valley landscape, he renovated and expanded the home with the help of his artist friend, George Harvey. Influenced by the picturesque style that was

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<sup>18</sup> Cater, Harold Dean, *Washington Irving & Sunnyside* (Tarrytown, NY: Sleepy Hollow Restorations, Inc., 1957), p. 3.

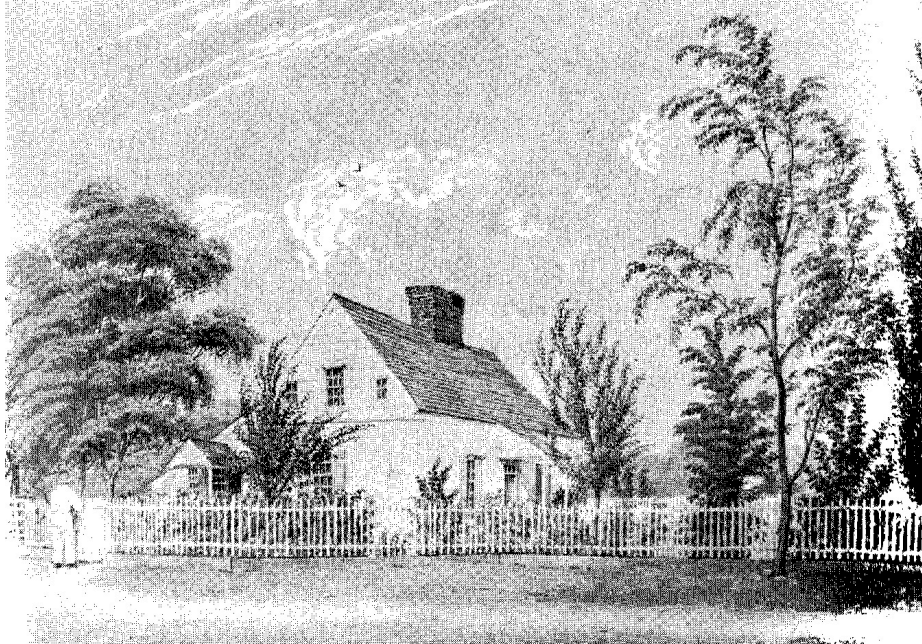


Image 9. *The Old Cottage Taken Previous to Improvement*,  
watercolor attributed to George Harvey, c. 1835

then in vogue,<sup>19</sup> Irving made a special effort to fashion an abode that reflected a personal aesthetic [Image 10]. He added features—such as a weathervane—that hearkened back to an earlier time in New York’s history, but he also modernized the structure with indoor plumbing, an ice box, and a cast iron stove. Each detail was the result of careful consideration, as Irving corresponded voluminously with Harvey about individual rooms as well as the surrounding grounds [Image 11].

Although initial improvements were complete by the end of 1836, the home grew with Irving, as a material embodiment of his personality and

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<sup>19</sup> W. Barksdale Maynard discusses Irving’s invocation of the picturesque in relation to his home at Sunnyside in *Architecture in the United States, 1800-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 88-92.



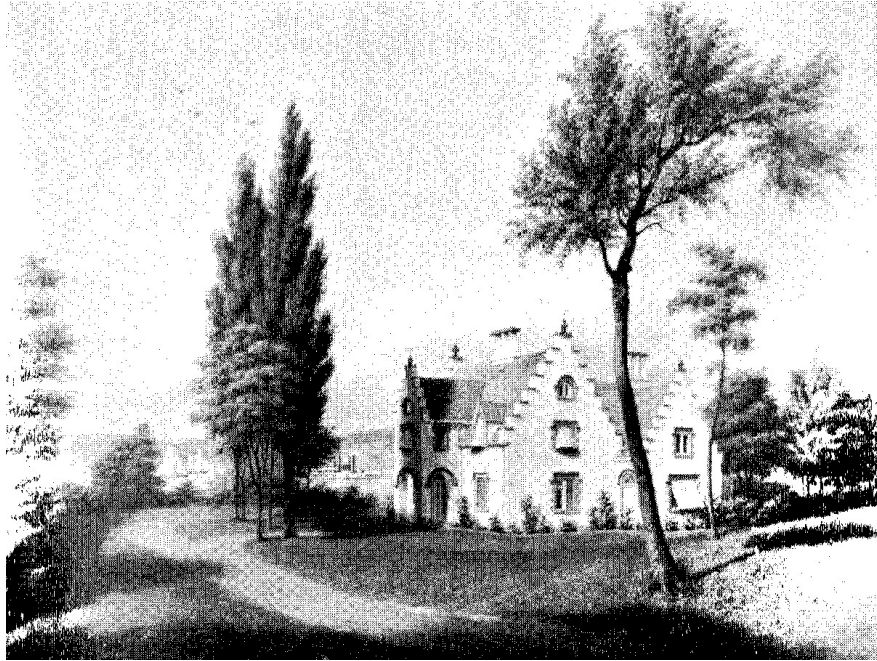


Image 10. *The Van Tassel house, the residence of Washington Irving, Esq.,* watercolor by George Harvey, c. 1836-1840

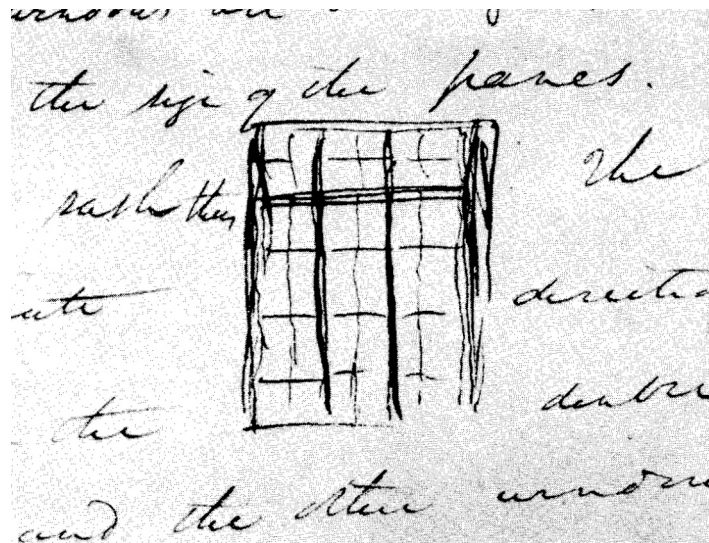


Image 11. *Sketch of window, Guest Room, Sunnyside,* by Washington Irving, in letter to George Harvey, dated November 23, 1835

interests, a retreat from the world of business and an inviting habitation for friends and relatives. His widowed brother Ebenezer, who would soon sell his



own house in the city and relocate to the cottage along with his five daughters,<sup>20</sup> chronicled the progress in letters to relatives. Even before the paperwork was completed, he detailed their plans to “clear away all the old out-houses, fences, and rubbish” in favor of “a clear green lawn,” and by the end of June 1835 he described Irving’s “purposes enlarging the house, preserving its present old Dutch style, and making it an inviting and comfortable nook for the family” and insisted that “[i]t can, at a small expense, be made a charming little place.”<sup>21</sup> Soon enough, Irving himself began referencing his “nest,” or “snuggery,” as he often called the cottage, in letters—although it was not until 1841 that he christened it with the name “Sunnyside.” A. J. Downing, the domestic reformer and landscape architect who lived nearby in Newburgh, took note of Irving’s plans for the house and included an image of it (drawn by another influential architect of the day, A. J. Davis) in his 1841 *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Cottage Residences, and The Architecture of Country Houses*, as an ideal example of a “cottage ornée.”<sup>22</sup> For an erstwhile man-of-leisure whose entrenched bachelorhood was largely a result of untimely death of his young fiancée Matilda Hoffman in 1809 and financial troubles in early adulthood, he turned a potential regret into a boon by publicly aligning his life at Sunnyside with a new model of suburban manhood.

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<sup>20</sup> Initially, the relocation was financially motivated – the Panic of 1837 struck him particularly hard – but health problems also contributed to his decision to reside there permanently.

<sup>21</sup> Ebenezer Irving to William Irving, June 1, 1835 (New York), Sleepy Hollow Restorations Library; Ebenezer Irving to William Irving, June 30, 1835 (New York), Sleepy Hollow Restorations Library. Both quoted in Cater, *Washington Irving & Sunnyside*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> According to at least one architectural historian, because Sunnyside prompted Downing to devote more thought to the small-scale residence, it can be regarded as an important “precursor of American suburban design” [Robert M. Toole, “An American Cottage Ornee: Washington Irving’s Sunnyside, 1835-1859,” *Journal of Garden History* 12:1 (January-March 1992), p. 69].

In his *Treatise*, Downing remarked that Irving's Hudson River cottage was "even more poetical than any chapter of his *Sketch Book*."<sup>23</sup> Irving had worked hard to facilitate such comparisons. A note to his brother Peter written in 1835, for example, evoked a prospect that would have made Rip Van Winkle proud with its "sweet green bank in front, shaded by locust trees, up which the summer breeze creeps delightfully... one of the most delicious banks in the world for reading and dozing and dreaming during the heats of the summer."<sup>24</sup> He relished the domestic comforts that the cottage provided him, even as a bachelor. Downplaying the typical gentleman farmer's mastery of livestock and farming in favor of forging a domestic ethos that centered around relaxed hospitality, edifying leisure, and self-expression, he challenged Americans to rethink their conceptions of bachelorhood, to take another look at figures like Rip and Geoffrey Crayon. Bryce Traister observes that Irving's writing responded to early nationalist notions of the bachelor as either a dangerous threat to the social order or as a trope for "failed and ineffectual masculinity" by domesticating the single male in a way that "render[ed] him simultaneously harmless and authoritative: a voice of genteel charm whose ironic detachment both aggressively and defensively asserts what 'true' national character looks like."<sup>25</sup> The author attempted the same sort of rehabilitation and reorientation of popular understandings of men's relation to home life through his public association with

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<sup>23</sup> *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Cottage Residences, and The Architecture of Country Houses* (1841. Reprint New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1921), p. 185. For more information on A. J. Downing, see Chapter Three.

<sup>24</sup> Washington Irving to Peter Irving, December 25, 1835 (New York), Pierre M. Irving, III, pp. 82-3. Quoted in in Cater, *Washington Irving & Sunnyside*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>25</sup> "The Wandering Bachelor: Irving, Masculinity, and Authorship," *American Literature* 74:1 (March 2002), p. 116, p. 113.

Sunnyside. As a bachelor, Irving was socially aware, community oriented, aesthetically informed, historically grounded, and open to possibility. His bird's-eye view of society from outside the city acted as an aid to reflection on everything from marriage to industrialization. Whether writing in his study, perusing his grounds, or hosting a dinner party, his lifestyle suggested that Dame Van Winkles need not hold sway over all domestic matters. Men who were overburdened and overwhelmed with business transactions, health concerns, familial obligations, and identity crises could nurture themselves in nature, enjoying privacy and refinement within a larger network of men united in a joint restorative effort to recoup, buttress, and enshrine an essential element of themselves within the built environment.

Describing the suburb in *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, Robert Fishman references the primacy of the single family house, surrounded by green trees and open skies. He insists upon the importance of approaching suburbia, even in its early incarnations in late eighteenth-century London and the early nineteenth-century United States, as a cultural artifact that reflects the values of those who reside there:

Suburbia can thus be defined first by what it includes—middle-class residences—and second (perhaps more importantly) by what it excludes: all industry, most commerce except for enterprises that specifically serve a residential area, and all lower-class residents (except for servants). These social and economic characteristics are all expressed in design through a suburban tradition of both residential and landscape architecture. Derived from the English concept of the picturesque, this tradition distinguishes the suburb both from the city and from the countryside and creates that aesthetic 'marriage of town and country' which is the mark of the true suburb.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Bourgeois Utopias* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987), p. 6.

Applying Fishman's rubric to Sunnyside helps us see Irving's engagement with contemporaneous trends. Sunnyside's location along the Hudson River contributed to its public association with Irving's identity towards the end of his career, even as he left in 1842 to serve as the U.S.'s Minister to Spain for four years. It served as a welcome retreat from the bustle of New York City, without being inaccessibly remote. He sounded upbeat about the effects of his celebrity on the neighborhood in a letter to his sister Sarah from 1840, in which he claimed that she would "hardly recognize Tarrytown, it has undergone such changes" and attributed them to his influence: "My residence here has attracted others; cottages and country seats have sprung up along the banks of the Tappan Sea, and Tarrytown has become the metropolis of quite a fashionable vicinity."<sup>27</sup> Upon his return to the United States in 1846, he commenced plans for a tower and other revisions that would better accommodate Sunnyside's growing number of inhabitants and visitors. In addition to a constant stream of tourists who viewed the property from steamboats, celebrities in their own right such as John Jacob Aster, Fitz-Greene Halleck, Edward Everett Hale, James Kirke Paulding, and Frederic S. Cozzens admired Irving's home and grounds, in many cases sharing their sense of the place with periodical readers afterwards. He planned lavish dinners each Christmas, and his hosting abilities were touted as extraordinary. Indeed, although he rued the arrival of the Hudson River Railroad in 1848 for ruining his sleep (the company offered him \$3500 as compensation for land damages), he continued to receive guests even into old age.<sup>28</sup> As the 1850

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<sup>27</sup> Washington Irving to Mrs. Sarah Van Wart, November 25, 1840, quoted in Butler, Joseph T., *Washington Irving's Sunnyside* (1967. Reprint Tarrytown: Sleepy Hollow Restorations, 1974), p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, Tom, *The Hudson: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 193.

painting *Sunnyside from the Hudson* [Image 12] makes clear, Irving's "snuggery" was truly suburban: recognizing itself as an object of display, a mark of



Image 12. *Sunnyside from the Hudson*, oil on canvas, artist unknown, c. 1850

success, and source of inspiration, it also communicated a belief in the possibility of locating one's self in nature, the ability to mark the material environment in a powerful and lasting way, and the importance of privacy to gather one's thoughts and create something new.

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In his recent history of the suburb, John Archer argues that in the nineteenth century, "[b]uilding a house was an effort to establish a material and rhetorical apparatus that could sustain and advance the economically and politically more liberated self in a world of competitive individualism."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 183.

Fancying himself a “gentleman cultivator”<sup>30</sup> at Sunnyside, Irving modeled the process by which a home could become a life’s work, a record of personhood, for a generation of readers who had become captivated by his literary style and authorial persona. Downing advised that “[a] person of correct architectural taste will carry his feeling of artistical propriety into the interior of his house, and confer on each apartment, by expression of purpose, a kind of individuality.”<sup>31</sup>

“The true artist,” according to Downing,

breathes a life and soul, *which is beauty*, into the dead utilitarian materials, stone and wood, and they speak a language that is understood as readily as that of animate nature. The mechanic blocks out the stone from the quarry, he even gives to it the semblance of the human form, but only the sculptor moulds the cold marble into a passion or a sentiment that endures for ages, and strikes men of speech dumb with its voiceless eloquence.<sup>32</sup>

Writing to his sister Catherine from Madrid in June 1843 while she was house-sitting Sunnyside in his absence, Irving invoked his own faith in the ability of humans to speak through a landscape, long after their deaths: “Everything concerning dear little Sunnyside is interesting to me. My heart dwells in that blessed little spot; and I really believe that when I die I shall haunt it; but it will be a *good spirit*, that no one need be afraid of.”<sup>33</sup> Twenty four years earlier, Irving’s Peter Vanderdonk had made a similar claim about the mountain sprites that had accosted Rip Van Winkle when he assured his audience that the

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<sup>30</sup> Washington Irving to Mrs. John P. Kennedy, November 11, 1853 (Sunnyside), Letters to John P. Kennedy, VIII, p. 15. Quoted in Cater, *Washington Irving & Sunnyside*, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> *Cottage Residences; or, A Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottage-Villas, and Their Gardens and Grounds: Adapted to North America* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842), p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Cottage Residences*, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Washington Irving to Mrs. Catharine Paris, June 21, 1843 (Madrid), Yale University Library. Quoted in Cater, *Washington Irving & Sunnyside*, p. 23.

Catskills “had always been haunted by strange beings.”<sup>34</sup> Irving undoubtedly hoped that his presence would be felt by visitors to the Hudson and that he would hold vigil over later American writers just as Hendrick Hudson had over Rip.

Christian Schussele’s 1863 painting *Washington Irving and His Literary Friends at Sunnyside* [Image 13] testifies to the success of Irving’s vision. Four



Image 13. *Washington Irving and His Literary Friends at Sunnyside*, Christian Schussele, oil on canvas, 1863

years after the author’s death, Schussele conjured a gathering of well-known mid-century male writers at Sunnyside, men who emulated Irving’s writing content and style (often referencing him directly in their acknowledgements and essays) and modeled their professional identities on the author-celebrity prototype that he had established. From Henry T. Tuckerman, Oliver Wendell

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<sup>34</sup> SB, p. 90.

Holmes, William Gilmore Simms, Fitz-Greene Halleck, and Nathaniel Hawthorne to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, John Pendleton Kennedy, and James Fenimore Cooper, Irving's protégés were in the process of adapting and refining his lifestyle to a new generation of readers. With the spread of railroad lines and growth of large-scale manufacturing, an explosion of suburban communities outside New York, Boston and Philadelphia over the course of the 1840s and 1850s made the isolated examples of early suburbanization in the 1820s and 1830s appear quaint in comparison. Irving's attention to the fate of manhood in an industrializing society, and his insistence on men's capacity to mediate the potentially devastating effects of the world of business by cultivating the domestic realm on their own terms, seemed particularly prescient and evocative to the writers pictured in Schussele's painting. Publicly reflecting on his pilgrimage to Sunnyside in an 1857 issue of *The Home Journal*, Nathaniel Parker Willis, another author depicted in the assemblage, marveled at "the spell in [the] inner sanctuary" of Irving's home. As the old writer showed him original architectural drawings of various rooms, Willis could not help but feel as though he was in the presence of Geoffrey Crayon of *The Sketch Book*. Remarking that additions to the house were products of "gradual pleasure toil," he urged readers to think of the residence as one of Irving's "works" that was constructed very much as his *Sketch Book* had been and assured them that "the playful and affectionate reciprocity between Geoffrey Crayon and his readers, is the key-note of Washington Irving's life at home."<sup>35</sup> For Willis and many other male writers of the mid-nineteenth century, Irving represented authorial success on a level they could only hope to achieve. His

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<sup>35</sup> Willis, Nathaniel Parker, "Willis at Sunnyside," *Home Journal* (August 15, 1857), p. 2.



home, his work, and his relationship with readers were models, though, that would be replicated, modified, expanded, and refined by writers engaged in a collective, if motley, effort to reshape the literary and literal space between country and city in the United States over the course of the century.

## Chapter Two

### **“Close Remotenesses” Along the Hudson: Nathaniel Parker Willis’s Suburban Aesthetic<sup>1</sup>**

In 1855, popular writer, editor, and socialite Nathaniel Parker Willis published *Out-doors at Idlewild; or, The Shaping of a Home on the Banks of the Hudson*, a collection of essays written about his home that had originally appeared in his *Home Journal* magazine between 1853 and 1855.<sup>2</sup> Although the essays covered a wide range of topics related to life in the suburbs of New York City along the Hudson River, they shared a focus on the role of aesthetics in domestic life. Recalling his design for a gate to mark the entrance to Idlewild, for example, Willis mentioned that he “had taken pencil and paper to bed” and “spent hours in the combination of lines and curves to express what I wanted the entrance of my cottage to say.” Ultimately, he realized that his goal was essentially “[a]n autobiography that would latch and swing upon a hinge.”<sup>3</sup> Here and elsewhere in *Out-doors at Idlewild*, Willis communicated a desire to transmit

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay will appear in the Fall 2009 issue of *Early American Studies* as part of a special issue on the Hudson River Valley in arts and letters.

<sup>2</sup> Willis founded the weekly newspaper with George Pope Morris in 1846 and edited it until his death in 1867. Morris, a famous song writer, had been editor of the *New York Mirror* since 1823, and he and Willis had worked together for that publication as well as others in the 1820s and 1830s. For a concise history of their working relationship, see Cortland P. Auser’s *Nathaniel P. Willis* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969). Originally published as the *National Press: A Home Journal* but renamed *The Home Journal* after only eight months of publication in order to downplay political associations.

<sup>3</sup> *Out-doors at Idlewild; or, The Shaping of a Home on the Banks of the Hudson* (New York, C. Scribner, 1855), p. 65; *Home Journal*, May 14, 1853, p. 2. Further references will refer to this edition of *Out-doors at Idlewild* and will be abbreviated *OI*. *Home Journal* issues will be abbreviated *HJ*.

his personality to even the smallest details of his home and the surrounding landscape. He asserted the notion that the right combination of “lines and curves” could embody something more than themselves; with the help of aesthetics, the domestic environment could voice selfhood. Through his writings about suburbanization in the Hudson River Valley in the early 1850s, Willis invited *Home Journal* readers to join him in a reconceptualization of the home as a reflection of personality and a mark of distinction.

Willis sometimes invoked nostalgia for an eighteenth-century European past when aristocratic gentlemen signaled wealth and status through their agrarian estates, but he manipulated that impulse in his writings to suggest that Americans could display class markers (regardless of their actual earnings or pedigree) through tasteful home design, landscaping, and decoration. Influenced by the Jacksonian era’s emphasis on principles of meritocracy and social mobility, Willis wanted to democratize taste by replacing inheritance (both in terms of wealth and blood) as a mode of class distinction with one based on mastery of the art of living well.<sup>4</sup> His stated goal was to use the pages of the *Home Journal* to cultivate a republican “aristocracy of the mind” in the United

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<sup>4</sup> In this stance, he was part of a broad cultural shift that has been discussed and debated by historians such as Douglas T. Miller in *Jacksonian Aristocracy: Class and Democracy in New York, 1830-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); David P. Handlin in *The American Home: Architecture and Society, 1815-1915* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979); Jack Larkin in *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790-1840* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Stuart Blumin in *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Charles Sellers in *Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Richard L. Bushman in *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); Martin J. Burke in *The Conundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Jeffrey P. Sklansky in *The Soul’s Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Daniel Walker Howe in *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, Eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

States.<sup>5</sup> He wrote extensively about domestic architecture, landscape, objects, and décor in the magazine, arguing that attention to details in these categories would transmit a spirit of well-being and happiness to one's person and property. Taste, a sense that could be acquired by individuals of all economic backgrounds, would allow his readers to connect with the physical spaces and landscapes they inhabited in ways that previously had only been available to the elite.

Willis's experience with his gate, and his decision to write about it in *Outdoors at Idlewild*, speak to a complex sensibility that emerged alongside America's earliest suburbs in the mid-nineteenth century. During the 1850s, due in part to the expansion of railroads, increased immigration into northeastern cities, cholera outbreaks, high rents, industrialization, and concerns about air quality, many Americans began to look towards the urban periphery for new constellations of domestic life. Residential development in Brooklyn, Harlem, Staten Island, Trenton, and Hoboken ballooned, judging from newspaper reports of property transactions, home construction, locations of railroad depots and post offices, and public works projects such as sidewalks and streetlights.<sup>6</sup> Technological advances in publishing and wider distribution along new transportation routes facilitated the spread of information about suburban

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<sup>5</sup> *Home Journal* XI (July 7, 1855), p. 2. Quoted in Auser, *Nathaniel P. Willis*, p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> For the history of American suburbanization, see Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Henry C. Binford, *The First Suburbs: Residential Communities on the Boston Periphery, 1815-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); W. Barksdale Maynard, *Architecture in the United States, 1800-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003); and John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). On urban sprawl and the exodus from cities as place of residence, see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Urban Threshold: Growth and Change in a Nineteenth-Century American Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

community formation through the medium of print.<sup>7</sup> Over the course of writing about his relocation from New York City to the Hudson River Valley, N. P. Willis identified an opportunity to capitalize on these developments, linking the *Home Journal's* readership with the geographic and imaginative space of the suburbs. From his weekly letters about Idlewild to editorials by architects on suburban homebuilding and advertisements for domestic appliances and furniture, Willis sought to fashion a print community that embodied a lifestyle associated with “country life within city reach.” Even as he told readers that his magazine offered a path to class mobility, though, he simultaneously hinted that the suburban ethos detailed in its pages was not open to everyone and that it was desirable *precisely because* it was exclusive. Inherent in his message, in other words, was the recognition that aesthetics could be applied for purposes of dissociation as well as association, especially in the suburbs, where homeowners could leave behind the cares and obligations of the work world as they embraced a private sphere of cultivated leisure.

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<sup>7</sup> For information on expansions in print distribution networks and their effects on authors, publishers, and readers, see especially William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (1959. Reprint Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) and *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870: The Papers of William Charvat*, edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1968); Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michelle Moylan and Lane Stiles, Eds., *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); Sarah Wadsworth, *In the Company of Books: Literature and Its “Classes” in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006); Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); the American Antiquarian Society, *The Industrial Book: 1840-1880*, Scott Casper, et. al., Eds., Vol. III in *The History of the Book in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

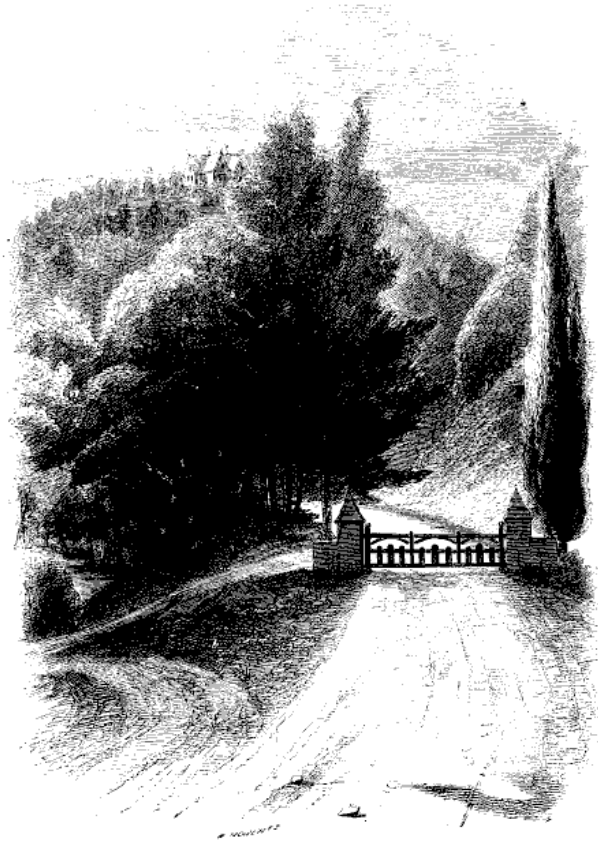


Image 14. Frontispiece to *Out-doors at Idlewild*

"Country Life Within City Reach" at Idlewild

The first image readers saw when they opened *Out-doors at Idlewild*, even before the title page, was a drawing of the gated drive leading to Willis's estate [Image 14]. This frontispiece served as an orientation to the text. While the title invited readers to follow the path to his home (barely visible above the trees) in

the pages that followed, the gate in the engraving evoked a sense of exclusion, marking what lay beyond as a place of sanctuary where privacy was valued. Alternately extending an invitation to partake in his private thoughts and simultaneously suggesting that his life could not be attained by others, the gated drive embodied the “close remotenesses” Willis mentioned inside the book. Explaining that his “cottage at Idlewild ... is a pretty type of the two lives which they live who are wise – the life in full view, which the world thinks all; and the life out of sight, of which the world knows nothing,” he asserted control over his readers’ curiosity even as he offered glimpses into his private domain (*Ol*, p. 134). He was able to add intrigue to his own domestic existence by intimating that neither he nor his house was an open book. *Out-doors at Idlewild* and the editorial letters in the *Home Journal* that had preceded it included small peeps into Willis’s domestic space, transforming a relatively routine home life into an extended tease of self-revelation. By doing so, he modeled the techniques by which an individual, in the words of critic Sandra Tomc, could learn to marshal the home space as “a site for the mobilization of the new energies of self-making” in a new society.<sup>8</sup> Taste and aesthetics were powerful in the domestic sphere

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<sup>8</sup> “An Idle Industry: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Workings of Literary Leisure,” *American Quarterly* 49:4 (1997): pp. 780-805. For Tomc, Willis’s pose of leisure functions as another manifestation of the “close remotenesses” that I discuss. In this essay and in “Restyling an Old World: Nathaniel Parker Willis and Metropolitan Fashion in the Antebellum United States,” *Representations* 85:1 (Winter 2004): pp. 98-124, she questions critical interpretations of “the author’s denial of work [as] a protective response” to the pressures of a newly industrialized world by scholars such as William Charvat, Michael T. Gilmore, Lawrence Buell, David Leverenz, Ann Douglas, and Gillian Brown. Instead, she posits the behavior of Willis and other antebellum authors who have been labeled “genteel” or “aristocratic” as registering “crucial changes in the idleness ethic from the early republican to the antebellum periods” (“An Idle Industry,” p. 781). I would add Adam Sweeting’s *Reading Houses and Building Books: Andrew Jackson Downing and the Architecture of Popular Antebellum Literature, 1835-1855* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996) to her critical genealogy for his association of a “genteel aesthetic” (p. 62) with the picturesque in the works of Willis, Irving, Bryant, Sedgwick, Curtis, Mitchell, Warner, and Cummins. More recently, in *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), Millette

because they *withheld* even as they invited appreciation, retaining the promise of future pleasures and signaling the presence of something too valuable to be put on display for all to see. The fact that Willis felt the need to construct a gate in the first place, after all, reflected an urge to mark the entrance of his property, suggesting that something out of the ordinary lay beyond.

So what *did* the gate enclose? In material and historical terms, it marked the boundaries of Idlewild, a fifty-acre property located in a planned development at Cornwall along the Hudson River. Long the retreat of choice for New York's literati, the Hudson River Valley was home to Washington Irving as well as A. J. Downing, who operated his famous nursery out of Newburgh. In 1836, Freeman Hunt, future founder and editor of *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review*, had called the Hudson "the greatest thoroughfare of the Union" and mused that the Hudson Highlands in particular would soon be in demand:

Its scenery throughout is magnificent, and in this particular region sublime. Health and happiness dwell among its hills, and every luxury that the earth can yield is wafted by its waters. It is within a few hours' journey to New York, and the facilities of access are unexampled in convenience, economy, and opportunity. The day is not distant, when the entire banks of the Hudson will be dotted with villas of the refined and elegant.<sup>9</sup>

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Shamir explores manifestations of a desire for isolated, negative privacy in antebellum literature as a possible response to industrialization. Tomc's argument fills a gap in scholarship on literature and industrialization in the mid nineteenth century by attempting to address the ways in which Willis and other often ignored or cast-off authors "coalesced, absorbed and disseminated emergent discourses of middle class upward mobility" ("An Idle Industry," p. 782) despite previous assumptions to the contrary. For another attempt to reframe our understanding of leisure in the nineteenth century and beyond, see Tom Lutz, *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> *Letters about the Hudson River, and Its Vicinity* (New York: Freeman Hunt & Co., 1836), p. 3. The letters were originally written for the *American Traveller* magazine between 1835 and 1836.



Willis himself had commented upon suburbanization along the Hudson as early as the 1840s, noting in an article for the *New Mirror* that “[t]here is a suburban look and character about all the villages on the Hudson which seems out of place among such scenery. They are suburbs; in fact, steam has destroyed the distance between them and the city.”<sup>10</sup> In 1849, when Swedish author and intellectual Fredrika Bremer was touring the United States with her hosts Mr. and Mrs. Downing, she marveled at the interconnectedness of country and city along the Hudson:

New York receives butter, and cheese, and cattle, and many other good things from the country; and the country, with its towns and rural abodes, receives coffee and tea, and wine, and wearing apparel, and many other things from New York, and, through New York, from Europe. The little town of Newburgh maintains alone, by its trade from the country and back, two or three steam-boats. When one sees the number and magnificence of steam-boats on the Hudson, one can scarcely believe the fact that it is not more than thirty years since Fulton made here his first experiment with steam power on the river, and that amid general distrust of the undertaking.<sup>11</sup>

The Hudson River Railroad train would make its first trip from New York City to Poughkeepsie at the end of 1849, and it was running eight daily round-trips between Albany and the city only two years later. By mid-century, the combination of efficient steamship travel (which became more cost effective as a result of transportation competition) and frequent railroad access had transformed communities along the Hudson River into bustling New York

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<sup>10</sup> “The Catskill Mountains.” *New Mirror* 1:23 (September 9, 1843), p. 353. See also Willis, N. P. *American Scenery*. 7 vols. London: George Virtue, 1840.

<sup>11</sup> Bremer, Fredrika. *Homes of the New World*, Vol. I. 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1854), p. 49.

suburbs, highly desirable to men who worked in the city but preferred to live in nature.<sup>12</sup>

Willis had a longstanding interest in writing about the benefits of living outside American cities; in 1839 he had published a popular book of sketches about life along the Susquehanna with his first wife, Mary Stace, called *A L'Abri, or The Tent Pitch'd*, which became more well known under its 1840 title *Letters from Under a Bridge*.<sup>13</sup> At Glenmary, the cottage in Oswego, New York that he had purchased in 1837, he found a welcome retreat from the bustle of New York City, as well as a private environment where he and his wife could start a family. As the letters to his doctor-friend that comprise the volume make clear, the domestic retreat influenced his feelings about the relationship between mind and matter. Detailing the ways in which a country existence had improved his outlook on life and overall state of health, he proclaimed, "I like my mind to be a green lane, private to the dwellers in my own demesne."<sup>14</sup> Although financial difficulties would force him to sell Glenmary and return to New York City in 1842, his experience there established a predilection for a home in nature, separated physically and mentally from the world of business.

After the death of his wife during childbirth in 1845, another escape from the city seemed especially necessary. A trip to Europe (accompanied by his

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<sup>12</sup> Tom Lewis's *The Hudson: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) provides an excellent overview of the ways in which travel by steamship and railroad transformed the landscape along the Hudson River in the nineteenth century; see especially Chapter 6, "The Democratic River" (pp. 150-186), Ch. 7, "Definers of the Landscape" (pp. 186-224), and Ch. 8, "River of Fortunes" (pp. 225-253).

<sup>13</sup> *A L'Abri, or The Tent Pitch'd* (New York: Samuel Colman, 1839); *Letters from Under a Bridge* (London: George Virtue, 1840; New York: Morris, 1844).

<sup>14</sup> *Letters from Under a Bridge* (London: George Virtue, 1840), p. 13.

young daughter Imogen and her nurse, Harriet Jacobs) did little to quell his grief, though; for much of the visit he suffered from what his doctors diagnosed as “brain fever.”<sup>15</sup> Upon his return in the spring of 1846, he threw himself into work with a frenzy that belied his literary posturing as a man-about-town without a care in the world. For a man whose personal style and antics had made him one of the most well-known magazine writers of his generation, there were certain aspects of his life that he sought to keep private.<sup>16</sup> Willis hoped that a combination of prolific writing, social engagements, and a new wife would help him recover from personal devastation and plaguing health problems.

Unfortunately, even a second chance at married life with a young wealthy woman named Cornelia Grinnell failed to assuage feelings of discomfort in either arena.<sup>17</sup> Diagnosed with “rheumatic pleurisy” in 1848, Willis struggled with ailments that included vertigo, occasional blindness, and a persistent, bloody cough (doctors would finally link his symptoms with epilepsy in the 1850s). To make matters worse, in 1850 he became embroiled in the most famous divorce trial of the century. Upon being identified by a servant as a one-time

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<sup>15</sup> In his 1885 biography of Willis, Henry A. Beers states that Harriet Jacobs was a servant in the Willis household between 1842 and 1861. After her escape North, she “was engaged by Willis as a house servant when he went to Glenmary” and stayed with him intermittently until the beginning of the Civil War, when, according to Beers, Willis “bought her freedom out and out” as a result of the frustrations he experienced when she “had to leave the Willises and go into hiding at Boston and elsewhere” to avoid capture by her former owners [*Nathaniel Parker Willis* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1885), p. 285].

<sup>16</sup> According to Fred Lewis Pattee in *The Development of the American Short Story* (New York: Bilbo and Tannen, 1966), Willis “was the best paid magazinist of his generation: in 1842 he was receiving from four magazines \$100 a month each for tales and sketches and he had other literary income nearly as large” (p. 80). For Willis’s biography, see Beers, *Nathaniel Parker Willis*; Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Auser, *Nathaniel P. Willis*.

<sup>17</sup> He married Cornelia Grinnell, niece and adopted daughter to Massachusetts Congressman Joseph Grinnell and almost twenty years his junior, on October 1, 1846, on the eleven-year anniversary of his first marriage.

paramour of Mrs. Edwin Forrest, wife of the famous tragedian associated with the Astor Place Riot of 1849, Willis was tracked down and beaten by the actor in Washington Square in June 1850.<sup>18</sup> News of the park spectacle and proceedings from the divorce trial kept Willis on the defensive between 1850 and 1852, in both print and society. Many in the press portrayed him as a weak (albeit humorously unfortunate) victim who had sought to protect an innocent woman. Although he was eventually exonerated, the ordeal exhausted him physically and took a toll on his nerves.

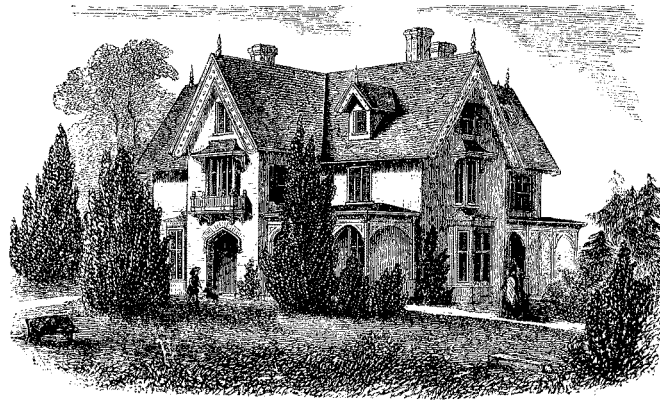
Given the circumstances, it is understandable that Willis sought a permanent removal from the city in the early 1850s.<sup>19</sup> His time at Glenmary had made him keenly aware of the advantages of an unscrutinized existence, and his

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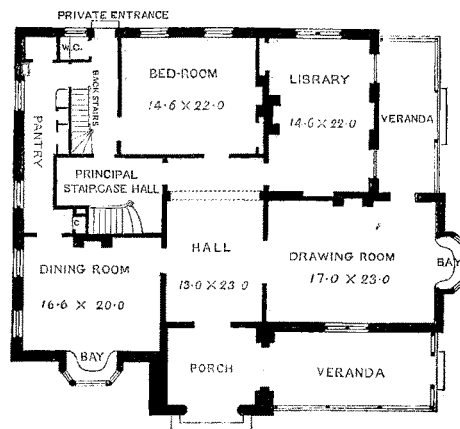
<sup>18</sup> For many historians, the Astor Place Riot has become symbolic of the divide that developed (and was criticized) between the “Codfish Aristocracy” of Whiggish political leanings and the “Broadway B’hoys” of the immigrant-heavy American working class. English actor William Charles Macready and his New York rival Edwin Forrest became symbolic of the two sides as Forest’s supporters descended on the Astor Place Opera House on May 7, 1849, where Macready was starring in *MacBeth* (Forrest played MacBeth at the Bowery Theater on the same night), throwing food and objects on Macready on stage. By the afternoon of the May 10 performance, over 20,000 people had gathered outside Astor Place. Rioting quickly broke out and the National Guard responded, leaving eighteen dead and many wounded. See Richard Moody, *The Astor Place Riot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958). Willis had become friendly with Forrest when they were introduced at the Tremont Hotel in 1830, and he and his second wife, Cornelia Grinnell, became especially close friends with Edwin’s wife Catherine. Even in response to the riot, Willis was sympathetic to Forrest, asserting that “WEALTH IN A REPUBLIC, SHOULD BE MINDFUL WHERE ITS LUXURIES OFFEND” (*Home Journal*, 26 May 1849, p. 2). Nonetheless, when news of the impending Forrest divorce broke in early 1850, Willis chose to defend Catherine’s honor, both in society and in print. See Chapter Six of Baker’s *Sentiment & Celebrity* for a detailed account of this event and the divorce scandal as a whole.

<sup>19</sup> We can also locate his decision more broadly within the context of changing conceptions of the relationship between author and reader in the antebellum period. On the relationship between mid-century print networks and the culture of celebrity, as well as questions of professional identity and literary ownership, see Mary Kelley, *Public Woman, Private Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Melissa Homestead, “‘Every Body Sees the Theft’: Fanny Fern and Literary Proprietorship in Antebellum America,” *New England Quarterly* 74:2 (June 2001), pp. 210-237, and *American Women Authors and Literary Property, 1822-1869* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Millette Shamir, *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). Thomas Nelson Baker situates Willis within these new developments in *Sentiment & Celebrity*.

new wife's dowry provided more than enough money to purchase land and build a home in the Hudson River Valley. The Willis family took a particularly well-timed summer vacation in 1850 to a boardinghouse in the Hudson Highlands. That fall, they purchased property in a new residential community called "The Hudson Terrace." Willis contracted Calvert Vaux, the famous architectural associate of A. J. Downing who soon would partner with Frederick Law Olmsted to design Central Park, to fashion a house for him, and construction began in the autumn of 1852. His plan [Image 15] eventually graced



RESIDENCE OF N. P. WILLIS AT IDLEWILD, ON THE HUDSON.



PLAN OF PRINCIPAL FLOOR.

Image 15. "Residence of N. P. Willis at Idlewild, on the Hudson," frontispiece to *Villas and Cottages* (1857) by Calvert Vaux

the frontispiece to Vaux's 1857 home pattern book, *Villas and Cottages*, as an example of a model suburban domicile.<sup>20</sup> A home outside New York City promised to separate Willis's public persona from his private life, allowing him more control of how people accessed him and when. Undoubtedly influenced by trends in home design and community formation that had been initially popularized by Downing (who had become, over the course of the 1840s, the most celebrated proponent of suburban living in the United States), Willis would attempt to remake his image by endowing his new home with the tone and characteristics of his more ideal self.<sup>21</sup>

Ensconced within the protective shell of his domestic surroundings, Willis could cultivate the aura of a retired, respected American author and tastemaker in the pages of his magazine and in selected outlets such as Vaux's handbook while also controlling the extent to which readers were aware of his illness. As the view from his study window in an 1858 article on Idlewild in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* illustrates, Willis took pride in sharing the landscape that he felt embodied his priorities and talents so perfectly [Image 16] (*OI*, p. 156; *HJ*, 3 Sept. 1853, p. 2).<sup>22</sup> While he often wrote about visits from popular literary figures

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<sup>20</sup> Vaux, Calvert. *Villas and Cottages*. 1857. Reprint New York: Da Capo Press, 1968.

<sup>21</sup> Downing's architectural pattern books, which included *Cottage Residences; or, A Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottage-Villas, and Their Gardens and Grounds: Adapted to North America* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842) and *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1850), argued that the environment in which the practice of domesticity occurred was just as important as the tasks and ideals themselves. For more information on his impact on nineteenth-century culture, see *Prophet With Honor: The Career of Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), edited by George B. Tatum and Elisabeth Blair MacDougall, as well as David Schuyler's *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). On Calvert Vaux, see Francis R. Kowsky, *Country, Park, & City: The Architecture and Life of Calvert Vaux* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) and William Alex, *Calvert Vaux, Architect and Planner* (New York: Ink, Inc., 1994).

<sup>22</sup> Richards, T. Addison, "Idlewild: The Home of N. P. Willis," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January, 1858, p. 152.



Image 16. "Idlewild: The Home of N. P. Willis,"  
*Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (January 1858)

such as Washington Irving, J. P. Kennedy, Charles Dana, James T. Fields, and Bayard Taylor, he also opened his gates to tourists (such as the people sitting on benches in the image) at designated hours and happily estimated that "five thousand people, at least, pass daily under my library window" along the Hudson (*OL*, p. 50; *HJ*, 23 April 1853, p. 2). Because his location allowed him to control access in a way that he could not in the city, he could afford to welcome visitors, whether in person or in print, in to his home space; after all, as he reminded readers at the closing of *Out-doors at Idlewild*, he decided when "the gate of Idlewild is here shut upon the pen that is their servant" (*OL*, p. 519; *HJ*, 7 Oct. 1854, p. 2). Especially regarding his health, Willis valued his privacy. Even though he wrote fairly extensively about his respiratory troubles, dedicating *Out-*

doors at Idlewild and his 1859 collection *The Convalescent* to “his fellow sufferers” and addressing many of his editorials as open letters to one of his personal physicians, T. O. Porter, he sought to keep his epileptic attacks a secret from anyone other than his wife and doctor. Largely as a result of selling his home in the city and taking up primary residence at Idlewild, he succeeded in doing so until his death in 1867.<sup>23</sup>

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The Willis family sold their New York house in the spring of 1853 and moved to Idlewild on July 26.<sup>24</sup> Willis chronicled the relocation process in weekly letters to the *Home Journal* between April 2, 1853 and August 5, 1854. Through these essays, he celebrated a new development in American domestic life which he referenced in the column’s running title: “Out-doors at Idlewild; or, Country-Life Within City Reach.” Rather than focusing exclusively on his individual experience, Willis sought to communicate the joys of suburban living for readers who might be contemplating similar transitions, as the prefatory remarks from his co-editor George Pope Morris to the first column illustrate:

[W]e have a new feature to offer from the pen of Mr. Willis, and one that we believe (at this period of taste for *picturings of real life*) will be pre-eminently attractive. He proposes to give a series of sketches descriptive of Country-life within City-reach. Our readers

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<sup>23</sup> Preface to *Out-doors at Idlewild*, p. v. The name of Willis’s physician is provided in Beers, *Nathaniel Parker Willis*, p. 225. According to Beers, in the 1850s “[h]is disease finally declared itself as epilepsy, and resulted at the last in paralysis and softening of the brain. He was subject for years to epileptic fits, occurring periodically, usually on the tenth day ... After Willis’s death, one of his physicians, Dr. J. B. F. Walker, printed some ‘Medical Reminiscences of N. P. Willis,’ in the course of which he said: ‘Not only was he a martyr to the agonies of sharp and sudden attacks, but he suffered all the languors of chronic disease... there has hardly been a man of letters doomed to such protracted torments from bodily disease’” (pp. 348-349).

<sup>24</sup> Beers, *Nathaniel Parker Willis*, p. 328.



are acquainted with one successful effort in this class of writing. His *Letters from Under a Bridge* described *mere country life*, as experienced in a remote retirement on the Susquehannah [sic]. For the last year or two he has been taking advantage of the new facilities given by improvements in railroads and steamboats—uniting the repose and beauty of rural life with the comforts and advantages of easy access to the city. He finds much in this which is new. It forms a combination of the desirable qualities of the true mode of life, which he thinks well worth describing and making familiar to the world (*HJ*, 1 Jan. 1853, p. 2).

Recognizing that “many” of his readers were “on the point of yielding to the new movement—business in the city, home in the country,” Willis positioned himself as an expert on the establishment of suburban “comfort and loveliness” (*OL*, pp. 193-194; *HJ*, 22 Oct. 1853, p. 2). Even though he failed to provide detailed advice within his columns on *how* readers should accomplish the goal of a residence beyond the city, he offered an argument for their presence there, in addition to positioning Idlewild as a model of success to which they could aspire. Praising development along the Hudson in his first letter, he exclaimed that the river would soon be “but a fifty-mile extension of Broadway” and invited his readers to imagine its banks as a “suburban avenue—a long street of villas, whose busiest resident will be content that the City Hall is within an hour of his door.”<sup>25</sup> There was no reason to remain in the city after work, according to Willis, when transportation could easily shuttle the man of business from the urban center to the beauties of nature. Outside but within reach of American cities, readers could participate in new domestic trends as they learned how to infuse their surroundings with a sense of self on an unprecedented scale.

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<sup>25</sup> *Out-doors at Idlewild*, p. 17; Willis, “The Highland Terrace Above West Point,” in *The Home Book of the Picturesque: or American Scenery, Art, and Literature*, ed. George P. Putnam (1852; Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967), p. 111.

In these *Home Journal* letters, Willis presented information about his life at Idlewild as local examples of what readers could expect from the suburban experience more generally. As he detailed his successes and failures in planting various trees, shrubs, and vegetables, or his desire to clear new paths and construct landmarks such as gates, benches, and bridges, he modeled the decisions involved in shaping a landscape outside but within reach of American cities, even as he recognized that the Hudson River Valley was suburban only in the loosest sense. Unlike many of his readers who would be better served to establish themselves in Brooklyn due to cost considerations and the necessity of commuting on a daily basis, Willis could afford to live in a community that was more rural city than suburb. Nevertheless, while surveying the Hudson on daily walks and horseback rides, he contemplated the restorative effects of nature on the spirit for Americans were concerned about poor air quality due to the overcrowding of metropolitan areas. Descriptions of interactions with his neighbors and accounts of daily trips to Newburgh for groceries were meant to dispel fears of isolation for prospective middle-class home-buyers from the city. Reflecting upon his morning writing sessions in the study, family meals in the dining room, outdoor picnics with the children, and discussions with his wife at the hearth, Willis invited his readers to consider plans for their own houses, to imagine themselves moving through spaces that were similar in kind if not in degree and enjoying domestic activities in an environment that availed itself of the amenities of urban and rural areas while eliminating the drawbacks of each.

In an “Out-doors at Idlewild” essay from 1854, Willis reflected on the process whereby a personal aesthetic could evolve from an experience with a landscape. In a sense, he was pinpointing a remarkable new method of branding

that co-opted the domestic environment even as it defined itself in opposition to the goals and motivations of the business world:

Separate a rural spot from the rest of the world, either by poetry or property—only putting around it the fairy ring of thought-haunt, where your love and sadness are at home—and it is curious how you are made gradually conscious that there is a *genius loci*, a spirit, inhabiting just what you have fenced in with thoughts or rails. (*OI*, pp. 513-514; *HJ*, 7 Oct. 1854, p. 2).

As his articles about Idlewild gained a following, Willis sought to capitalize on the unique position that he occupied as editorial advisor to readers who were considering moving to suburban areas in the 1850s. He recognized that in the process of describing his surroundings in the Hudson River Valley each week, he was “indirectly advertis[ing]” a lifestyle that was defined by close remotenesses, both geographically and aesthetically (*OI*, pp. 193-194; *HJ*, 22 Oct. 1853, p. 3). His domestic environment was as much the creation of his mind as a physical landscape, and he invited readers to visit that space in *Home Journal* columns. Once he realized that he acted as gatekeeper both to the entrance to his property at Idlewild and to more broadly based desires on the part of readers for information about how to transform their surroundings into reflections of their best selves, Willis attempted to extend his notion of a “*genius loci*,” or “thought-haunt,” to his magazine as a whole.

#### A Spirit in Things: Textual Suburbanization in the *Home Journal*

Specifically, beginning in the 1850s, Willis encouraged readers to think of the *Home Journal* as a suburban community in print. One of the major benefits of a home like Idlewild, or any domestic existence on the urban periphery, he

insisted in his columns, was that it allowed its owners to feel like they could call a part of nature their own. In an essay from the May 14, 1853 he explained:

Each April morning, to drop the reins upon the neck of your horse, and look, charmed, around, seeing that Nature did *not* go to bed, used up and tired, the night before, as *you* did, but has been industriously busy upon the leaves and blossoms while you were asleep ... is, somehow, a feeling that has in it the bliss of *ownership*. The morning seems made for you. The fields and sky seem *your* roof and grounds. The air and sunshine, fresh colors and changing light—all new, and not a second-hand thing to be seen—nothing to be cupboarded and kept over for to-morrow, or for another guest—gives a delicious consciousness of being the first to be waited on, the one it was all made and meant for. A city April, in comparison, is a thing potted and pickled, and retailed to other customers as well. (*OL*, pp. 62-63; *HJ*, 14 May 1853, p. 2)

Drawing from his own experiences in the Hudson River Valley, Willis envisioned a magazine that would provide readers with benefits similar to the ones described above. As publishing networks expanded and became increasingly difficult to navigate, Willis promised customized guidance in the *Home Journal*. Subscribers would no longer feel like anonymous statistics in a world that packaged material for mass consumption and maximum profits. Even if they did not own a home in the suburbs or failed to apply some of the recommendations contained within the *Home Journal* to their own lives, he urged them to embrace the unique benefits of a lifestyle-based print network and to think of him as a friendly counselor who was devoted to their individual needs.

Willis had established the foundations for this innovative vision of readership over the course of two decades in the New York publishing world. As he had explained in an 1846 column for the *Evening Mirror*, “An apple given to you by a friend at table is not like an apple taken from the shelf of a huckster ... the friend’s choice alters the taste and value of the apple, as the individual

editor's selections or approbation gives weight and value to the article."<sup>26</sup> Early on, Willis understood how to utilize the medium to his advantage, framing his editorial role as that of a helpful guide through a potentially overwhelming and disorienting forest of news and literature. He invited readers to get to know him through his "weekly visit" and made an effort to suffuse the magazines he edited with evidence of his personal style and interests.<sup>27</sup>

It was his decision in February 1846, however, to found *The National Press: A Journal for the Home* with his long-time friend and collaborator Morris that laid the foundations for this new conception of a periodical as a textual neighborhood. Less than a year after the death of his first wife, Willis decided to ground his efforts in the domestic environment, a focus that he and Morris solidified in November when they changed the title to *The Home Journal*. In keeping with their earlier ventures, the new magazine included forays into high society gossip and information about cultural events in New York City, but for the most part, its content was comprised of articles, stories, and advertisements that appealed to readers' home interests and obligations. This in itself was not significant; after all, *Godey's Lady's Book* had been in continual publication since 1830 and was widely considered the most successful domestic magazine in America. What differentiated the *Home Journal*, however, was the editorial decision to name "the man of business" and "the Domestic Fireside and Family Circle" as its primary audiences, straddling a gap that previous periodicals had

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<sup>26</sup> Willis, "Ephemera," in the *Complete Works of Nathaniel Parker Willis* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1846), p. 650. Quoted in Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity*, p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> Willis, "Ephemera," in the *Complete Works of Nathaniel Parker Willis* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1846), 650. Quoted in Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity*, p. 92.

avoided by addressing either the businessman or the domestic sphere to the exclusion of the other.<sup>28</sup> The first issue of the newly re-titled *Home Journal* addressed itself “[t]o the circle around the family table” and promised to “divert the mind” from business with “matter which is instructive, companionable, and amusing” at the same time that it “pick[ed], arrange[d], condense[d], and g[ave] in small compass, the ‘cream and substance’ of the week’s wilderness of newspaper reading.”<sup>29</sup> By emphasizing that men returned home each evening to their families, the new magazine promised to bring the family together at the end of each day by re-integrating businessmen into the domestic sphere. Willis assured men particularly that time allocated to the *Home Journal* would be well-spent: not only would they be kept abreast of important news, but they would also learn strategies for transmitting a bit of the work world’s efficiency and sense of purpose into the home environment.

As a four-page weekly folio with seven columns per page and few illustrations, the periodical’s structure reflected its goal of providing pleasurable recreation for the family with readers’ needs to be informed members of society. Stories under headings such as “Romance and Reality” and “Gems of Prose” typically comprised the first page.<sup>30</sup> The second page included Willis’s weekly

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<sup>28</sup> *National Press*, February 14, 1846, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *The Home Journal*, I (November 21, 1846), p. 2. Willis founded the weekly newspaper with George Pope Morris in 1846 and edited it until his death in 1867. Morris, a famous song writer, had been editor of the *New York Mirror* since 1823, and he and Willis had worked together for that publication as well as others in the 1820s and 30s. Originally published as the *National Press: A Home Journal* but renamed *The Home Journal* after only eight months of publication in order to downplay political associations, the periodical was renamed *Town and Country* in 1901, and the magazine is still published under that name today. It is the oldest continually-published magazine in the history of the United States.

<sup>30</sup> According to Mott, it was the paper’s policy not to pay contributors, but big-name writers like Grace Greenwood, Marian M. Pullam, Anne Lynch, Mrs. Ellett, and Barry Grey most likely received payment for their work. In Poe’s obituary in the paper (October 20, 1849), the editors

editorial letter, letters from correspondents, recaps of major news, and listings of cultural events around New York City. The third page was full of advertisements (for lamps, cakes, daguerreotype galleries, picture frames, *Godey's*, carpeting, folding bedsteads, wedding cards, "Batchelor's Hair Dye," and hemorrhoid cures), bank transactions, marriages and deaths, and a "Useful Information" column that addressed subjects such as how to grow trees and vegetables, home remedies, recipes, and price/quality comparisons of appliances such as refrigerators, coffee makers, and ice-cream freezers. The *Journal's* final page usually reprinted fiction from other newspapers, especially foreign ones, and included more essays and poems as space permitted. In each issue, Willis argued for the importance of his role as an editor who carefully chose the most important news briefs and the most edifying stories. Invoking an early version of keeping up with the Joneses in the November 21, 1846 issue, he remarked, "In this enlightened age, people grow inferior to their neighbours, if they do not 'keep up with the times.' All who would be respectable must 'know the news.' Yet newspapers are numberless, and, in their very multitude, even those who have access to them become bewildered with the confusion of matter." Under his guidance, the *Home Journal* would cull the "'cream and substance'" from other papers, enabling families to remain abreast of current events without having to sacrifice time set aside for entertainment (*HJ*, 21 Nov. 1846, p. 2).

The magazine's growing popularity in the late 1840s and early 1850s testified to Willis's shrewd business sense. Even as Morris oversaw financial

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claimed that he had worked for them for a few months as a critic and sub-editor. N. P. Willis's sister Julia wrote anonymous literary reviews for the paper, but he famously refused the work of his other sister, Sara Willis Parton (Fanny Fern). It is commonly claimed that Fern wanted payment for her work, and Willis refused out of principle and because he did not see its merit in the first place. Fern sought revenge for the snub in her loosely autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall* (1855), an exposé of her family that cast Nathaniel as the selfish, dandified editor Hyacinth Ellet.

considerations and claimed to be the voice of practicality behind Willis's artistic genius, it was Willis's entrepreneurship that enabled the periodical to access middle-class fantasies of upward mobility. While his editorial efforts from the 1830s had reflected a desire to appear more aristocratic than he was in reality, by the mid-nineteenth century he had found a way to portray his rough-edged outsider status as an asset rather than a hindrance. Characterizing *The Home Journal* as a source-book for individuals who sought to integrate beauty into their daily routines, Willis figuratively annexed the home space as a location where individuals with a common bond congregated for conversation and inspiration. The periodical communicated a sense of thriftiness and accessibility even as column subjects and advertisements insisted that the opportunity to experience domestic refinement was a marker of American cultural advancement. In his editorial capacity, Willis argued that attention to aesthetics would not only improve the quality of home life but also put individuals in control of their own class status. As he stated in a column entitled "Society and Manners in New York," "To look well-bred has a value in this metropolis, at present, which gives more social rank than in any other capital in the world."<sup>31</sup> Luckily, taste could be learned, especially in the United States, where persistent effort and an earnest openness to new experiences "puts Americans over time as electricity puts news over distance."<sup>32</sup> Just as the telegraph, which had begun to be utilized by newspapers in the 1840s, had created an invisible fence that brought individuals into a shared space regardless of physical location, "*sympathetic association*" via a

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<sup>31</sup> Undated *Home Journal* column reprinted in Willis, *Hurry-Graphs, or, Sketches of Scenery, Celebrity, and Society, Taken from Life* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1851), p. 285.

<sup>32</sup> Willis, "Society and Manners in New York," *Hurry-Graphs*, p. 286.



shared belief in the power of aesthetics in the domestic sphere would link readers of *The Home Journal* (HJ, 15 Feb. 1851, p. 2).<sup>33</sup>

Willis's vision for *The Home Journal* mirrored his physical movement from city outward. In February 1851, he and Morris refined their primary goals in an attempt to fashion a literary space that would house the needs of a particular type of reader. A new tag-line emerged, "For the Cultivation of the Memorable, the Progressive, and the Beautiful," which was followed by a quotation from Goethe: "We should do our utmost to encourage the beautiful, for the useful encourages itself." Advertising new features, the February 15, 1851 issue proclaimed that "[t]his widely-circulated weekly is now acknowledged to be the most indispensable drawing-room gazette of the country." Flaunting the paper's popularity, the editors insisted that "[a] home is hardly complete, we think we may safely venture to say, without the HOME JOURNAL, which is the CHRONICLE OF ALL THAT INTERESTS ALL CLASSES OF SOCIETY, and of the intelligence which most enlivens an American Home" (HJ, 15 Feb. 1851, p. 2). Allocating more space and prominence to columns about life in the suburbs than periodicals such as *Godey's* which marketed themselves exclusively to women, the *Home Journal* had found its niche. Coverage of trends in home construction and community development suggested that country life within city reach constituted the ideal domestic arrangement for American men and their families. In the March 15 issue, Willis incredulously asked why businessmen would not prefer to reside in nature, given recent transportation developments: "Cities will soon be places for business only – not for residence. Railroads will soon take you

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<sup>33</sup> A month earlier, in the January 4 issue, Willis marveled that there were three subterranean telegraph lines in operation across the Hudson River (p. 2).

‘most anywhere’ as quickly as an omnibus takes you up town, and then, who would make his home in the city?” He explained that the magazine’s columns were written and selected “[i]n anticipation of this spread of New-York over a rural city of fifty miles square.” As a new geography for home life, “rural cit[ies]” and their suburban counterparts necessitated new orientation and advice, and Willis and his columnists professed “[w]isdom in the art of living” (*HJ*, 15 March 1851, p. 2), a masculinized approach to domesticity for spaces that had been designed with men’s needs in mind. Form and function, as the author of a *Home Journal* running column on “Perfecting the Home” made clear, had more to do with each other than some might suppose, and the periodical’s purpose was to help subscribers experiment with that relationship in their homes by providing “new or useful ideas on the means and manner of making life agreeable” (*HJ*, 15 March 1851, p. 2) for the family as a whole.<sup>34</sup>

Willis intimated that suburban homeowners were more likely to devote themselves to the art of living well than people who lived in urban or rural communities. Their decision to establish homes outside but within reach of American cities suggested that they had capital at their disposal but wanted to spend it intelligently, in ways that would improve their quality of life while remaining true to their democratic roots. Identifying “[c]omfort and fitness in a home,” as “a universal want,” he offered to help readers navigate the more intangible but increasingly important qualities of “taste” and “style” in home design and decoration (*HJ*, 1 March 1851, p. 2). Channeling A. J. Downing as he articulated a desire for “counsel that is both cheaper and more practical” than the

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<sup>34</sup> The “Perfecting the Home” series ran on the second page of the *Home Journal* each week from March 1, 1851 to April 19, 1851 and was signed by an architect “G. W.”

advice provided by architects and landscape gardeners to the wealthy, Willis understood that he was “mak[ing] a profession of *giving a start*” to his middle-class readers in the pages of the *Home Journal* (*OI*, pp. 385-386; *HJ*, 7 May 1854, p. 2). He argued that just as editorial choices made his magazine a “welcome visitor” to his subscribers, landscape, architecture, and interior decoration influenced the ways people experienced place. Using Idlewild as an example, he sought to demonstrate how objects and materials could become vessels for the spirit, manifestations of the owner’s personality, in the suburban environment in a way they could not in other locales. Customization was key in that regard: articles urged men especially to consider the type of family they wanted to have and what sorts of activities they wanted to pursue after work and on weekends, and to modify their layouts and appointments accordingly.

In the course of providing information about new railroad lines and planned developments, interior decoration and landscape architecture, Willis cast suburban homeownership as an “investment of a stock” in “secured health and renewed strength” for the entire family (*HJ*, 31 May 1851, p. 2). Commenting upon the transformation of communities outside Boston, he even depicted commuting time as a boon to a harried businessman:

The old residents, leaving the low and reclaimed land to foreign labourers, plant themselves in the suburbs. There they build tasteful houses, with flower-plats and gardens; availing of the frequent omnibuses, or of special trains run almost hourly, and commuting for passage at \$20 to \$40 a year; they reach their stores and offices in the morning and at night sleep with their wives and children in the suburbs. No time is lost, for they read the morning and evening journals as they go and return. Some of the wards appropriate for stores thus rise in value, but diminish in population. The suburbs extend, and the commercial community grows in a widening semi-circle. (*HJ*, 15 March 1851, p. 2)

Not only were the suburbs more cost-effective than urban environments, according to Willis, but they enabled men to completely devote themselves to domestic cares each evening, with no loss of productivity during the commute. Country life within city reach would improve not only the quality of men's experiences of leisure and amusement after work, but also would positively influence the mental and physical states of their wives and children.

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Throughout the 1850s, Willis chose not to dwell on discrepancies between his own privilege and the aspirations of *Home Journal* readers, despite the fact that his property on the western side of the Hudson occupied some of the most desirable land outside the city. However, he did not ignore class altogether. Willis hoped that his magazine would support the creation of a new class of Americans whose distinction rested on the understanding and utilization of the domestic design principles that he and other experts promulgated through the medium of print. Willis spoke frequently of his desire to “strike a new level in American Home Life – (bringing some homes *up* to the mark, and some *down* to it) – which shall strengthen the right of our paper to its name, and secure to us the thanks of the home-loving and moderate-minded” (*HJ*, 1 March 1851, p. 2). While he warned against the excesses of wealthy Americans, he also assumed that middle-class homeowners knew that upward mobility was possible – they just needed to locate themselves in the right neighborhood.

For that reason, he did not bemoan the fact that middle-class Americans were abandoning New York's urban center to the poorer immigrant classes and increased demand for residences in suburban communities was pushing farmers

further away from the city. In an early essay from *Out-doors at Idlewild*, he spoke of a neighbor who was moving his farm “twenty miles farther back, where a man could afford to farm, at the price of the land.” According to Willis, the move was advantageous to both parties: “His corn-fields on the banks of the Hudson had risen in value, as probable sites for ornamental residences, and with the difference (between two hundred dollars the fancy acre, and sixty dollars the farming acre) in his pocket, he was transferring his labor and his associations to a new soil and a new neighborhood” (*OI*, p. 45; *HJ*, 23 April 1853, p. 2). He continued, praising the fact that “A class who can afford to let the trees grow is getting possession of the Hudson; and it is at least safe to rejoice in this, whatever one may preach as to the displacement of the laboring tiller of the soil by the luxurious idler” (*OI*, p. 47; *HJ*, 23 April 1853, p. 2). Grouping himself with the class of “luxurious idler[s]” who were making life more difficult for farmers, he nonetheless insisted that individuals who *appreciated* the land for its inherent beauty deserved to own the most advantageous spots—in his case, along the Hudson River. The *Home Journal*’s goal was to teach that sort of appreciation. By claiming that the suburban landscape was most well-suited to Americans who cared about “the art of living well,” Willis offered his middle-class readers access to a program of domestic self-expression that simultaneously satisfied a xenophobic impulse to flee the masses of immigrants arriving in New York in the 1850s.

In *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*, John Nerone explains how a growing number of periodicals “invited readers into alternative and subaltern spaces segmented from the great public” in the mid-nineteenth century, and in doing so,

“turn[ed] the transmission of information into a ritual of social continuity.”<sup>35</sup>

From the position of his home on the Hudson, N. P. Willis became a powerful domestic reformer toward the end of his literary career. As the famed editor of the *Home Journal*, Willis turned personal necessity to his advantage by casting his magazine as a textual suburb in an era of burgeoning print culture. In the process of inviting readers to visit him at Idlewild through his weekly columns in the early 1850s, he created a meeting place for Americans who had begun to demand more from their home lives. An 1858 article in the *Circular* praised his efforts:

“No other popular writer has been so free to give his reader the incidents and experiences of his private home, taking them to his fireside and showing them the ways of family life at Idlewild.” Acknowledging that people wanted life advice from the authors and editors they had come to view as friends, the writer commended Willis for welcoming readers “at the opened door” at Idlewild and showing them the benefits of separating themselves from the urban business world in order to fashion a domestic environment that embodied their personalities.<sup>36</sup>

By the time of Willis’s death in 1867, Idlewild had become one of the most famous homes in nineteenth-century America. In what was, paradoxically, the greatest measure of the success of his writings, the name “Idlewild” took on a life of its own as the nineteenth century wore on, ultimately outliving the public’s memory of the author. Willis claimed to have chosen it as a prospective homeowner, when the seller declared the land to be of little value, ““*only an idle*

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<sup>35</sup> John Nerone, “Newspapers and the Public Sphere,” in *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880* (Chapel Hill: Published in association with the American Antiquarian Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Vol. III of *A History of the Book in America*, pp. 231-232.

<sup>36</sup> “The Relation of an Author to the Public,” *Circular* 7:6 (1851-1870), March 4, 1858; p. 24.

*wild* of which nothing could ever be made,” a proclamation that “stuck captivatingly” in the author’s memory (*OI*, p. 48; *HJ*, 23 April 1853, p. 2). It did not matter to him that the land was not workable as farmland; in fact, a place expressly identified as *unsuited* for labor and production in a traditional sense was actually desirable. Through his appellation for and characterization of Idlewild in the pages of the *Home Journal* and eventually in *Out-doors at Idlewild*, Willis intimated that suburban domestic spaces were desirable precisely because they enabled homeowners to dissociate their professional and private lives. By the mid-1850s, the word had entered the English lexicon as a general designation for homes whose architecture and layout celebrated nature for nature’s sake, serving as retreats from the dust and grime of the city. Willis himself became fond of quoting periodicals that used “Idlewild” to describe houses other than his own. Over the course of the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the name was associated with numerous homes and parks, most significantly with a town in rural Michigan, an amusement park in Pennsylvania, and what is now known as New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport. As for the *Home Journal*, it was renamed *Town and Country* in 1901, and the magazine is still published under that name today. It is the oldest continually-published magazine in the history of the United States.

To his credit, Willis acknowledged that the road to the upward mobility via aesthetics was not without its pitfalls. He occasionally wrote in the *Home Journal* about drawbacks of certain suburban communities and proposed remedies to less-than-ideal domestic situations, as when he called for either an underwater tunnel (like the Thames tunnel) or an “airy structure” (like the Menai Bridge) to decrease commuting times between Brooklyn and Manhattan across

the East River in the January 31, 1852 issue. He proclaimed that “the large amount of dwelling-house property that lies, by airline, so close to the business heart of New-York, is object enough, and the 50,000 semiwives of Brooklyn who wish to be ‘made whole’ and dine, and tea with their husbands, are impulse enough” to remedy the unsatisfactory state of the “Long Island suburb” (*HJ*, 31 Jan. 1852, p. 2).<sup>37</sup> Likewise, he sometimes printed letters from readers who regretted following his advice. In the “Correspondence” section from November 1853, for instance, a reader titled his letter “Country-Life Beyond City Reach” in order to emphasize the difficulties involved in following Willis’s advice. As a young man with a wife and baby, he decided to leave behind his business in the city (even though he was “in a fair way of becoming ultimately one of the ‘merchant princes’” of New York) after “read[ing] so much in your columns of Idlewild.” He chose “a spot where my taste could be best displayed” but which was far from railroads. Despite following advice from pattern books and periodicals, he and his wife had trouble getting plants to grow, lacked society, and felt overwhelmed with home improvement projects. Wanting to persuade readers against the “rural mania, now so common,” he argued that “your Idlewilds are all very well for your wild, idle chaps who have plenty of money and nothing to do; but a man who can’t afford to support two houses, one in the country for summer, and one in the city for winter, had better stay at home and attend to his business” (*HJ*, 26 Nov. 1853, p. 2). Although Willis and his contributors recommended that prospective suburban homeowners who would need to commute to work each weekday choose land nearby frequent and

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<sup>37</sup> By “airline,” Willis refers to the distance as the crow flies. Given the small geographical distance between Brooklyn and New York, he is calling for better transportation between the two communities.



efficient transportation, it seemed that some readers could not afford even that real estate. The column would ultimately be reprinted in other magazines, such as *The Spirit of the Times*, as a humorous warning about discrepancies between artistic visions and daily realities.<sup>38</sup>

Even in Willis's own life, economic and practical considerations sometimes could not be helped, and the original vision of the gate might not be the one that materialized in front of one's house. As he recalled in *Out-doors at Idlewild*, he had originally attempted to design his gate himself, insisting that its form reflect his personality, but relinquished his plan after "a laboring man by whose opinions I usually take the measure of my own" noted that it was not "pig-tight" (*OI*, p. 66; *HJ*, 14 May 1853, p. 2). As a result of its impracticality, he asked his architect, Calvert Vaux, to redesign it. Vaux's version admirably integrated form and function, but Willis complained in the essay that "it does not look at all as if it led to *me*." Apologizing for a disconnect between the gate's personality and his own, he nonetheless accepted the final design: "There it stands, however, leading to Idlewild. Friends will understand where it promises too much."

One hundred years after its founding, *Town and Country* magazine recalled its first editor as someone who "led a generation of Americans through a gate where weeds gave way to horticulture."<sup>39</sup> Willis's reputation has not fared well in critical circles; only recently has his work begun to be considered as something more than elitist, escapist, egotistical dribble. Despite, or perhaps

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<sup>38</sup> See *The Spirit of the Times*, December 3, 1853, p. 497.

<sup>39</sup> Rauch, Basil, "The First Hundred Years," Special Centennial Issue of *Town and Country* 100 (Dec. 1946): p. 62.

because of his contradictions and idiosyncrasies, though, it is worth returning to this writer who committed himself to improving the lives of his many readers even as his name became permanently linked with New York's "Upper Ten" in the mid-nineteenth century. Looking out his study window at the tourists on his lawn and the steamboats along the Hudson River, he sought to share his "aristocratic" experience with middle-class Americans. Recognizing himself as part of a larger economic and cultural phenomenon that would alter the shape of northeastern cities and towns, he embraced early suburbanization in the pages of his magazine, even going so far as to suggest that "country life within city reach" could actualize the "close remotenesses" that were commonly understood to be a novel facet of the reading experience. His enlistment of print culture in the project of preparing and welcoming a new class of individuals into a new type of space, as well as his radical effort to cast the suburb itself as text, set the stage for future lifestyle-based publications such as *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Martha Stewart Living*, and *Architectural Digest*, magazines that successfully banked on their ability to serve as aesthetic counselors to the masses. Willis's gate might have promised too much, but it represents a promise that continues to build communities of readers, uniting them in the belief that the smallest material details, decisions, and practices contribute to ongoing personal narratives of economy and elegance, accomplishment and ascent.

### Chapter Three

#### **“A Man’s Sense of Domesticity”: Donald Grant Mitchell’s Suburban Vision<sup>1</sup>**

Throughout *Rural Studies, with Hints for Country Places*, a collection of essays compiled in 1867 as a meditative guide for individuals wishing to relocate beyond America’s urban centers, Donald Grant Mitchell personified the domestic landscape by characterizing it as a woman whose attentions and trust needed to be won by artistic vision and persistence.<sup>2</sup> Comparing the effort involved in making one’s ideal home a reality to the experience of winning the affections of a desirable woman, he argued that

a country home will not yield its largest enjoyments to any who adopt it in virtue of a mere whim; there must be love; and with love, patience; and with patience, trust. The mistress who wears the golden daffodils in her hair, and the sweet violets at her girdle, and heaps her lap every autumn time with fruit, must be conciliated, and humored, and rewarded, and flattered, and caressed. She resents capricious and fitful attentions—like a woman; receiving them smilingly, and sulking when they are done.<sup>3</sup>

Later, he suggested that a house should “court” its visitors, appearing to be mysterious and witty as it revealed its charms by degree. The approaching drive,

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay is forthcoming in a 2010 issue of *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*.

<sup>2</sup> The essays were reprinted from articles previously published in the *Horticulturalist* and *Hours at Home* between 1866 and 1867.

<sup>3</sup> *Rural Studies, with Hints for Country Places* (New York: C. Scribner & Co., 1867), pp. 293-294. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text, abbreviated RS.

the placement of the house on the lot, and the positions of trees and shrubs, according to Mitchell, contributed to a sense of excitement and allure in the domestic environment, for resident and visitor alike. Referring to a “partial concealment of the beauties that confront the eye” in the design of home and landscape as “art management,” he asked readers to consider possibilities for desire, suspension, and ultimate gratification in the experience of the domestic life, arguing that such qualities “quicken the zest with which the natural beauties, as successively unfolded, are enjoyed,” effectively “wed[ding] the home to the view; ...drap[ing] the bride, and teach[ing] us the piquant value of a ‘coy, reluctant, amorous delay’” (RS, pp. 178-179).

In an effort to delineate possibilities for what he called “a man’s sense of domesticity” (RS, p. 273) in suburban spaces, Mitchell classified home design and even the act of living as a form of art. Criticizing housewives for a brand of utilitarianism that left no room for “true home relish” in its unceasing commitment to organization, cleanliness, temperance, and morality, he designated “livab[ility]” as the ultimate goal of men’s domestic efforts, associating it with attitudes and decorative elements “that suggest easy comfort, ample room, odd loitering nooks, indefinite play of fire-light and lamp-light, wide and unpretentious hospitality” (RS, p. 273). Mitchell formulated and refined these ideas over the course of his literary career within the context of larger trends in community formation, both geographically and in print, locating in suburbanization a solution to the frustrations with feminine domesticity that he had voiced early in his literary career. In *Rural Studies* and other writings about the experience of “country life within city reach,” Mitchell urged American men to cultivate a masculine domesticity of self-nurture as an antidote to the

malaise of urban life and the strictures of feminine self-sacrifice. Replacing fears of subjugation and stasis with the pleasures of an elaborate courtship, his suburban vision enlisted the domestic in an ongoing defense of the bounds of personhood and the fulfillment of individual dreams and aspirations.

Dreams of a Different Sort of Domestic Life:  
Immobilizing Visions in *Reveries of a Bachelor*

The few critics who discuss Donald Grant Mitchell in the context of nineteenth-century print culture have focused on the popular success of *Reveries of a Bachelor, or, A Book of the Heart*, which sold 14,000 copies in its first year of print and was reprinted almost one hundred times between its appearance in book form in 1850 and Mitchell's death in 1907.<sup>4</sup> Organized as a four-part, first-person contemplation of bachelorhood, marriage, family and home narrated by Paul, a single man in his mid twenties, it is also a meditation on life and death. Relaxing in a comfortable chair in his Connecticut cottage with a dog at his side, Paul stares into the fire and dreams about past, present, and future. Readers are invited to follow his flights of fancy and to sympathize with him as he voices various hopes and fears through imaginative rehearsals of married domestic life, weighing possible pros and cons of settling down with wife and children versus remaining a bachelor indefinitely.

Mitchell was already a relatively successful periodical writer when *Reveries* was published, contributing frequently to *The American Review*, *The Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*, *The Knickerbocker*, and *Graham's Magazine*.

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<sup>4</sup> For statistics, see Waldo H. Dunn, *The Life of Donald G. Mitchell* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 225, and Paul Gutjahr's anthology, *Popular American Literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 473, in addition to Lisa Spiro's "Historical Commentary," "Smoke, Flame, and Ashes": A "Reverie" from Ik Marvel's (*Donald Grant Mitchell*) *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1850) (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/users/spiro/MiTxFis.html>).

He had authored two collections of essays, *Fresh Gleanings* (1847) and *The Battle Summer* (1850), in addition to a popular series of pamphlets criticizing New York society that were originally published anonymously, called *The Lorgnette* (1849-1850). When *Reveries* hit bookstores under the pen name Ik Marvel, however, Mitchell became a literary celebrity almost overnight.<sup>5</sup> *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* called it "one of the most remarkable and delightful books of the present season," praising especially the "truthfulness and freshness of feeling" contained in the volume.<sup>6</sup> Claiming that "the author stamps his heart on these living pages," the *Harper's* review suggested that Mitchell "risked more than authors can usually afford, by dealing with the most exquisite elements of feeling, but he always forces you to acknowledge his empire, and yield your sympathies to his bidding."<sup>7</sup> Although the *New York Tribune* did not neglect to mention a calculated quality to the pathos elicited in readers, its reviewer similarly argued that the book's achievement lay in its ability to propel and channel emotion without sacrificing sincerity.

As Mitchell scholar Lisa Spiro has demonstrated, *Reveries* fit into an established tradition of bachelor fiction that had been written in America since the early 1820s. Magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book*, *The Knickerbocker*, and *The Southern Literary Messenger* regularly published short stories and essays about bachelor life, and numerous books treated the same subject. Titles such as

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<sup>5</sup> Mitchell had approached James T. Fields about publishing the book but was refused, so Charles Scribner reaped the benefits of this surprise bestseller. The Ik Marvel pseudonym had first appeared in a "Letter from Washington" that was published in the *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer* on December 17, 1846 (later retitled as the first of his "Capitol Sketches"), but after 1850 readers associated it exclusively with the narrator of *Reveries of a Bachelor*.

<sup>6</sup> "Literary Notices," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (January 1851), p. 281.

<sup>7</sup> "Literary Notices," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (January 1851), p. 281.

*Adventures of a Bachelor; or, Stolen Vigils*, "The Bachelor Beset; or, The Rival Candidates," "The Bachelor Reclaimed: A Sketch from Real Life," *Castle Dismal: or The Bachelor's Christmas*, and *The Bachelor's Escape from the Snare of the Fowler* positioned bachelorhood within a sentimental framework to American readers during the first half of the nineteenth century by characterizing the single male as a troubled, confused individual with a good heart, someone who feared marital commitment even as he harbored secret hopes of eventually finding his soulmate. True to the popular representation of bachelorhood in these texts, Paul of *Reveries* dreams about women—a lot. He exhibits a hesitancy to commit to marriage and maintains strong allegiance to his male friends. He includes an extended meditation on the pleasures of fireplaces and cigar-smoking, and he reflects almost unceasingly on the passage of time as he tries to envision his ideal wife and family. In important ways, however, *Reveries of a Bachelor* moved beyond the form and plot of earlier bachelor fictions. As Vincent Bertolini pointed out in an article that was largely responsible for the text's critical rehabilitation, Mitchell employed the language of sentiment to protest domesticity rather than to reassert its power.<sup>8</sup> The narrator's reveries characterize him as an earnest young man who is committed to a future domestic life at the same time that they enable him to escape the necessity of actually settling down.

Even so, Paul does not enact a thorough rejection of the domestic in this text; instead, he reflects a masculine unease with elements of female-centered domesticity which he seeks to mitigate or correct through imaginative play. He relishes his cottage in the Connecticut countryside, commenting in the opening

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<sup>8</sup> "Fireside Chastity: The Erotics of Sentimental Bachelorhood in the 1850s" *American Literature*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (Dec 1996), pp. 707-737.

pages, “I take a vast deal of comfort in treating it just as I choose” (*RB*, p. 16).<sup>9</sup> Whether he decides to spend the day dreaming or planning home improvement projects for the next year, he controls his domestic environment. As he relaxes into the chair near the fire, he wonders how many of his fellow men have the “good fortune” to enjoy such evenings of “sober and thoughtful quietude” (p. 17). The publication success of *Reveries* did not constitute a masterful case of literary trickery, an attempt by Donald Grant Mitchell to con readers and reviewers into believing that a bachelor narrator wanted something that in reality he did not. Rather, it reflected an attempt to grapple with men’s anxieties about their current and future home lives while also documenting their investment in the domestic sphere in a way that would resonate with real concerns of many mid-century readers, both male and female.

*Reveries* does not successfully resolve the tensions it identifies, but it does voice specific frustrations that men might have with female-centered theories of domesticity. Even as Paul vows that he will not remain a bachelor forever, he obviously enjoys being single, describing his solo existence as carefree, respectable, idle, and comfortable at various points throughout the narrative. He fears that marriage, on the other hand, will be “absorbing, unchanging, [and] relentless” (*RB*, p. 19), that he will lose his dignity and freedom in a house where his wife will make all the decisions. He worries about becoming a “captive” (p. 22) to the woman he marries or that his home life will be so unbearable that he

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<sup>9</sup> Ik Marvel (Donald Grant Mitchell), *Reveries of a Bachelor: or A Book of the Heart* (New York: Baker & Scribner, 1850). This reference refers to the first Scribner edition. The text did not undergo any significant changes from its first edition of 1850 (other than a new preface in 1863) until an 1877 Scribner’s New Edition. A third preface was added to the 1884 Scribner’s New and Revised Edition. Further references are to this edition and hereafter will be cited parenthetically in the text as *RB*.



will make excuses to stay late at work in an effort to escape its imprisoning clutches. In his dreams, he returns again and again to anxieties about losing respect and control, of finding himself stuck in a domestic routine that he had no part in creating.

His reveries beg for alternatives to the sort of domesticity promulgated in the housekeeping handbooks that had become so popular during the first half of the nineteenth century, such as Catharine Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, which identified women as keepers of the home and sought to awaken them to their wide sphere of influence. These texts viewed leisure with suspicion, allowing it only in the service of a greater good such as healthful exercise or community building. In place of recreation and free time, books like Lydia Maria Child's *Frugal Housewife* and Eliza Leslie's *Lady's House Book* valued women's commitment to labor, economy, and benevolence in service of God and family. Domestic fiction written by women celebrated many of the same ideals, from Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Home*, which detailed the positive effects of feminine virtues of temperance, cleanliness, kindness, and hospitality on the family as a whole, to Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, both of which appeared shortly after *Reveries of a Bachelor* and posited the quiet power of women to correct men's misjudgments and model Christian behavior through their extraordinary capacity for sympathy. Paul's hesitation to commit to a wife in *Reveries* stems from just these sorts of characterizations of women's rule over the home space—he fears that he will be constrained within a regime that leaves no time for self-definition, no space for artistic play.

Mitchell outlined Paul's nightmarish visions of married life most dramatically in the First Reverie, which appeared as "A Bachelor's Reverie, In Three Parts" for the *Southern Literary Journal* in September 1849 and again in January 1850 for the inaugural issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Retitled "Smoke, Flame, and Ashes" for the expanded book edition, the section introduces readers to the narrator, whom they find seated in front of his fireplace in a cottage located on a country estate that he had inherited from his mother after her death. Staring into the fire and listening to his tenant and wife putting their children to bed in the next room, he ponders his own domestic future, bravely resolving to "pursue the thought wherever it leads" (RS, p. 18). As it soon becomes clear, though, the seemingly-comical resolve is warranted: Paul's imagination conjures vivid incarnations of domestic possibilities that would complicate his ability to conceive of his home as a welcome refuge from business in the city. He envisions life with a wife whose family is rich, and the ways in which a seeming boon could become a major annoyance if she controlled the purse strings and preached economy to him, or if she were to manifest an interest in stocks and began to question his investment decisions. He also considers problems that might occur when "plaguey wife's-relations" (p. 22) drop by unexpectedly, aunts and uncles providing unwanted advice and nephews making noise and eating up all the good food. He dreams of a bookish wife who relegates her domestic duties to hired help in order to free up time for her own pursuits, resulting in a nightly routine that is anything but relaxing: "The nurse is getting dinner; you are holding the baby; Peggy is reading Bruyère" (p. 28). If a wife were to grow ugly or lax in her appearance in the midst of taking care of other duties, that could become problematic, as well – what if he

were no longer attracted to her, or worse, if she were attracted to someone else? Or perhaps she would be a terrible cook who is unsympathetic to protestations or suggestions for improvement:

I think I see myself—ruminated I—sitting meekly at table, scarce daring to lift up my eyes, utterly fagged out with some quarrel of yesterday, choking down detestably sour muffins, that my wife thinks are "delicious"—slipping in dried mouthfuls of burnt ham off the side of my fork tines,—slipping off my chair side-ways at the end, and slipping out with my hat between my knees, to business, and never feeling myself a competent, sound-minded man, till the oak door is between me and Peggy! (*RB*, pp. 25-26)

Indeed, what if circumstances were so bad that he could not stand to be in the house with her? The more negative scenarios Paul generates in *Reveries*, the more entrenched he becomes in front of the fire, preserving his hearth from the game of chance that is marriage.

After all, even if he were to choose a good wife, one who was attractive and sympathetic, who took care of all the necessary domestic offices without either overzealousness or dissatisfaction, his life would become much more complicated, especially in terms of emotional attachment. In Paul's words, "There is a heart-bond that absorbs all others; there is a community that monopolizes your feeling" (*RB*, pp. 44) once married, that would decimate any hope for a carefree existence. It also would mark an end to male friendships, as the "hundred connections" he had forged with other men would "now seem colder than ice" (p. 44). There were definitely positives to consider in that regard; Paul imagines that the right woman would cause him to be more selfless, guileless, and benevolent, in addition to returning him to a state of boyish enthusiasm and vivacity. He likewise predicts that his imagination would

become stronger and purer as a result of having “the playful fancies of dawning womanhood to delight it” (p. 32). Certainly, he would be less lonely, and he would have someone with whom to share sorrows as well as joys. He muses that he would enjoy playing with children, and that he would relish the opportunity to witness a mother’s care for them. Paul welcomes the idea that someone could act as nurse to him if he became sick or cry inconsolably if he died unexpectedly. He theorizes that the presence of family would enliven the domestic environment, that love, like a flame, would “brighten up a man’s habitation” (p. 29). However, if his wife or children, on the other hand, were to die, the pain associated with loss of that magnitude would impact him permanently. He also realizes that success in business would become increasingly important—if he were to lose his job or not earn enough money, the whole family would become poor. Responsibility for their welfare would be his province, and he couldn’t stand to watch them beg or waste away from lack of food.

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Despite the distressing reveries of married life, Paul’s depictions of his home in the country demonstrate commitment to a satisfying domestic existence. In fact, he claims that ruminations about the possibility of making the ancestral property a permanent home, considerations of whether “the little rickety house would not be after all a snug enough box, to live and to die in” (*RB*, p. 17), were what gave rise to *Reveries* in the first place. Perhaps out of a sense of nostalgia for childhood, his country cottage acts as a central focal point in the narrative, with happy memories of the land and architecture serving as the standard against which he judges any visions of the future. Paul does not prefer urban life—he

readily admits that his rented “garret of the city” (p. 58) offers little besides proximity to work. Sitting in an “office chair” in front of a “snug grate” (p. 59), his thoughts reside in the country—with its wide chimney, rattling window panes, cozy nooks, and opportunities for quiet.

Depictions of Paul’s “quiet farmhouse in the country, ...the only house in the world, of which I am *bona-fide* owner” (RB, pp. 15-16), offer a glimpse into a lifestyle that he believes to be threatened by marriage. He has fashioned a domestic environment that is self-consciously masculine, from the “saucy colored, lithographic print of some fancy ‘Bessy’” that hangs at the foot of his bed to the “brown table with carved lions’ feet,” the “heavy oak floor,” the “cosy looking fire-place” and the small sleeping cabinet that is just the size for a feather-filled “broad bachelor bedstead.” While he spends the weekdays in his city apartment because of its proximity to work, he is master of his domain in the country cottage on weekends. Having voluntarily whittled his responsibilities and necessities down to a bare minimum, he can spend his days however he wants. Every piece of furniture and knick-knack exists for him alone: his quest for comfort is not stifled by propriety, and there are no rules that cannot be broken. He brashly proclaims,

I manage to break some article of furniture, almost every time I pay it a visit; and if I cannot open the window readily of a morning, to breathe the fresh air, I knock out a pane or two of glass with my boot. I lean against the walls in a very old arm-chair there is on the premises, and scarce ever fail to worry such a hole in the plastering, as would set me down for a round charge for damages in town, or make a prim housewife fret herself into a raging fever. I laugh out loud with myself, in my big arm-chair, when I think that I am neither afraid of one, nor the other. (RB, p. 16)

His cottage provides him with the very freedoms that are under attack in his dreamscapes. Even as he longs on some level for companionship, his material surroundings remind him that certain elements of his current existence are worth preserving.

From Paul's perspective, there is no need to orient home life around the service of family, nation, or religion; a domestic sphere that invites reverie and welcomes aesthetic pleasure at the end of the work week would have its own restorative effects on the spirit. With that notion at the forefront of his mind, he does not worry about being immoderate as he heats his house, but relishes its warmth. He emphasizes his lack of obligation by bragging that he never takes a watch with him into the country, preferring to judge time by the progress of his fire. Even sleep is described in terms of pleasure rather than as a necessity, as he sketches the process of "slip[ping] by the light of the embers into my bed, where I luxuriate in such sound, and healthful slumber, as only such rattling window frames, and country air, can supply" (p. 17). Beecher and Child had it wrong: the home, in Paul's eyes, is ideally suited for cultivation that leads inward rather than outward. If imagination, desire, and pleasure became integrated into the domestic ethos, work there would not seem like work at all. Aided by a cigar, Paul enjoys letting his mind wander along "all the ordinary rural topics of thought" (p. 17) as he considers various home improvement projects and changes that should be made to the landscape.

When Paul admits to selling his property in the book's final section, then, it comes as unexpectedly to readers as it does to the narrator himself:

I had sold the old farm-house, and the groves, and the cool springs, where I had bathed my head in the heats of summer; and with the first warm days of May, they were to pass from me

forever. Seventy years they had been in the possession of my mother's family; for seventy years, they had borne the same name of proprietorship; for seventy years, the Lares of our country home, often neglected, almost forgotten,—yet brightened from time to time, by gleams of heart-worship, had held their place in the sweet valley of Elmgrove.

And in this changeful, bustling, American life of ours, seventy years is no child's holiday. The hurry of action, and progress, may pass over it with quick step; but the foot-prints are many and deep. You surely will not wonder that it made me sad and thoughtful, to break the chain of years, that bound to my heart, the oaks, the hills, the springs, the valley—and such a valley! (*RB*, pp. 149-150)

Returning to the property one last time, he leads the reader along the path to his former cottage, pointing out landmarks and recalling moments from his childhood. He characterizes the activities involved in supervising and maintaining the land where his grandfather is buried both as a duty and a pleasure, a lesson in integrating the past and present with future hopes.

Indicating the influence of the country property on his personal identity, he muses: “Away from that cottage home, I seem away from life. Within it, that broad, and shadowy future, which lay before me in boyhood and in youth, is garnered,—like a fine mist, gathered into drops of crystal” (*RB*, pp. 289-290).

Although he never explains why he sells the land, the admission marks a refusal to move from a world of reverie to one of actuality. In a sense, then, it should come as no surprise to readers that even his description of married life with his soulmate, Carry, is only a dream, as he admits in the book's final line. Through the loss of the country cottage in *Reveries*, Mitchell signals an narrative inability to resolve the tensions that the text set out to explore. Paul feels safest in his dreams because his domestic needs have not yet been met. Even though his urban clerkship does not satisfy his creative and emotional needs, he will be unwilling to permanently relinquish his rented garret until he believes that he

can live affordably and conveniently outside the city with a wife who will respect his priorities.

### A Solution in the Suburbs: Masculine Domesticity Revisited

Mitchell himself was a bachelor when *Reveries* was published, a fact that was not lost on readers who followed the movements of “Ik Marvel” as closely as the rambling dreams of his narrator. Their impulse was not off-base: Mitchell’s personal history bore more than a passing resemblance to that of the fictional character he had created. According to his primary biographer, Waldo Dunn, who published his account of Mitchell’s life (which he drafted in the deceased author’s library at Edgewood with the permission of the Mitchell family) fourteen years after Mitchell’s death, there were many correspondences between Mitchell and Paul. Dunn claimed that *Reveries of a Bachelor* constitutes “the very best kind of autobiography” of the author’s life prior to 1850.<sup>10</sup> After his mother’s death in 1839, when he was still in college at Yale, Mitchell inherited a farmhouse and 400 acres of adjoining land in New London County, Connecticut, where he settled after graduation, traveling twelve miles to Norwich for its market and paying for books and magazines to be delivered to him. His dog, like Paul’s, was named Carlo, and various scenes and buildings described in Paul’s boyhood reminiscences correspond almost directly to Mitchell’s biography.<sup>11</sup> In letters written to his cousin Mary Goddard in 1848, he sounded much like the bachelor narrator of his book, admitting that he harbored hopes of regaining the land that he had sold prior to going to Europe, that he “sometimes dream[ed] of having a

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<sup>10</sup> *The Life of Donald G. Mitchell* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> For a full list of correspondences, see Dunn, *The Life of Donald G. Mitchell*, p. 29.



great fortune, and going back there, and reinstating everything in the old way, and so dream on again a life of happy idleness.”<sup>12</sup>

At first, he welcomed the publicity he received from *Reveries of a Bachelor*, attempting to capitalize on its success by issuing a sequel in 1851 entitled *Dream Life: A Fable of the Seasons*, which continued in a similar vein, celebrating the power of the imagination and reflecting on the past. Soon afterward, though, he began to gravitate toward different sorts of writing, mainly nonfiction for periodicals. His newfound celebrity-author status helped him in that regard: in 1851 he was invited by *Harper's* to write a monthly essay of one-to-two pages on topics of his choosing, which he decided to title “The Editor’s Easy Chair.”<sup>13</sup> He also agreed to author a regular column for *The Knickerbocker* in 1852, and fan mail poured in as both authorized and unauthorized editions of *Reveries* continued to be published each year. Around this time, he began a public lecture tour, as well, and although listeners doubtless attended to see and hear the author of *Reveries of a Bachelor*, he chose to speak on topics related to aesthetics, travel, and the domestic environment.<sup>14</sup>

However, his romantic relationship with Mary Pringle of Charleston eventually provided the impetus for a shift in priorities. Their courtship was followed closely by the press, who hailed their marriage in 1853 as the unwritten

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<sup>12</sup> Letter from DGM to Mary Goddard, December 8, 1848, quoted in Dunn, *Life of Donald G. Mitchell*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>13</sup> He authored the columns until 1855 and was succeeded by George William Curtis and William Dean Howells.

<sup>14</sup> He spoke from prepared texts, and the topics were Venice, “A Plea for Beauty,” “Spending Money,” “Home and Its Equipments,” and “How to Look at Paintings.” See Wayne R. Kime, *Donald G. Mitchell* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985). He continued to lecture for extra money over the next decade. Kime mentions record of a talk on “The Aesthetics of Every-Day Life” in Utica, NY, presumably from around 1865, the text of which resides in the Mitchell Scrapbook at Yale’s Beinecke Library.

conclusion to *Reveries*. Although Mitchell increasingly sought to distance himself from the best-selling text in public, appearing somewhat embarrassed and referring to it as a youthful book intended for young audiences, he occasionally channelled his fictional alter-ego in his private life. He presented an inscribed 1852 edition of the book to Mary early in their relationship, and his letters to her during their engagement could easily have been penned by Paul.<sup>15</sup> In a letter dated March 1-2, 1853, for instance, he mentioned a desire to escape from his bachelor's den in New York City: "I *do* look longingly forward to the day when in place of this solitary bachelor-room in a dim and dreary hotel, you will lighten my hearth and home with that cheery face, and give me such joys as have truly lived only in 'reverie.'"<sup>16</sup> A few weeks later, he complained that his publisher, who was constantly pressuring him with writing deadlines, "would like me to take a room in his store 12 ft. x 8, one desk, one chair, one stone pitcher, six pens, and two reams of paper ... [and] would advise me to keep there the rest of the summer, running up in the country to see you once a week; and in the winter, once a month."<sup>17</sup> Judging from the tone of these letters, the promise of domestic life with Mary had come to represent a refuge from publicity and reprieve from a demanding writing schedule. Invoking their future together, Mitchell mused that

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<sup>15</sup> For details on Mitchell's changing feelings about *Reveries*, see Lisa Spiro, "Historical Commentary," *"Smoke, Flame, and Ashes": A "Reverie" from Ik Marvel's (Donald Grant Mitchell) Reveries of a Bachelor (1850)* (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/users/spiro/MiTxHis.html>).

<sup>16</sup> Letter from DGM to Mary Pringle, qtd. in Dunn, *Life of Donald Grant Mitchell*, p. 252.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from DGM to MP written from Norwich, CT, March 28, 1853, qtd. in Dunn, *Life of Donald Grant Mitchell*, p. 254.

“some *very* strong necessity would be required to draw me away from a country cottage home, lit up with your cheerful face.”<sup>18</sup>

Mitchell was not the only person looking longingly at the slower pace outside American cities at this time. New York, Boston, and Philadelphia had become increasingly congested as businesses expanded, immigrants poured in, and rents skyrocketed. The combination of cholera outbreaks and increased awareness of health issues prompted individuals to seek out information on the benefits of fresh air and natural scenery on the body and mind. Popular print culture contributed to the trend towards suburbanization as editors invited guest architects, reformers, and celebrities to detail the benefits of suburban life to middle-class readers. The promise of a quiet, private environment in which to relax after a long day’s work prompted many Americans to trade their urban apartments for homes of their own in such rapidly expanding communities as Brooklyn, Staten Island, Harlem, Hoboken, and Concord. With access to railroad and ferry stations, the amenities of the city remained in reach, even in the surrounding countryside.

As the most celebrated proponent of mid-century suburbanization, A. J. Downing helped popularize the notion that the environment in which the practice of domesticity occurred was just as important as the tasks and ideals themselves.<sup>19</sup> Arguing that one’s house should be a reflection of the self,

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<sup>18</sup> Letter from DGM to MP written from Norwich, CT, March 28, 1853, qtd. in Dunn, *Life of Donald Grant Mitchell*, p. 253.

<sup>19</sup> For more information on Downing’s impact on nineteenth-century culture, see *Prophet With Honor: The Career of Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), edited by George B. Tatum and Elisabeth Blair MacDougal, as well as David Schuyler’s *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

Downing claimed that suburban spaces, with their unique combination of nature and civilization, offered unparalleled canvases for middle-class Americans who sought to transmit their personalities to their surroundings. It was his hope that “smiling lawns and tasteful cottages” would soon dot the countryside as testimonies to American culture and democracy.<sup>20</sup> When Downing published

DESIGN I.  
A SUBURBAN COTTAGE.

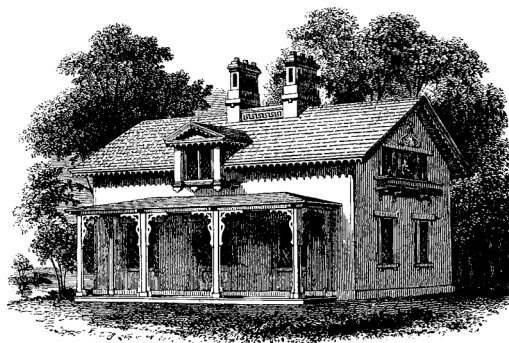


Fig. 3.

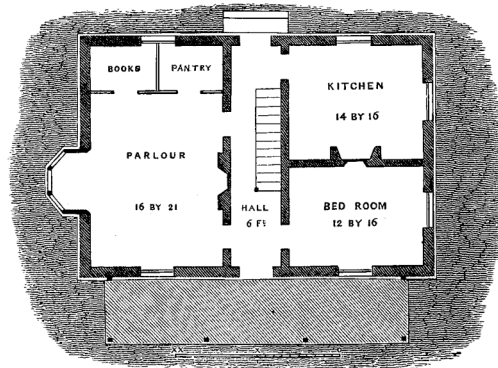


Fig. 4.

Image 17. “A Suburban Cottage for a Small Family,”  
A. J. Downing, *Cottage Residences* (1842)

<sup>20</sup> Downing, A. J. “Preface.” *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1850). p. xix.

*Cottage Residences* in 1842, though, his plans were not viable for the vast majority of Americans. The description that accompanied the first design, a “Suburban Cottage for a Small Family” [Image 17], assumed that it was possible for “a family of small means” to live “a comparatively retired life” in a modestly sized cottage, but his cost assessments contained inaccuracies and transportation networks could not yet support individuals who needed to commute to work on a daily basis.<sup>21</sup>

Chastising the reformer for misreading the needs of the American public, Donald Grant Mitchell recognized the discrepancy in a review of *Cottage Residences* that he wrote for the *New Englander*. He would mute his complaints only a few years later, but in 1843, perhaps chafing under the heavy responsibility of managing a 400-acre farm, he argued that few could afford to put the handbook’s suggestions into practice, although he also expressed regret that “[b]eauty with many among us has become nearly a synonym for worthlessness.”<sup>22</sup> In an 1847 review of a revised edition of the *Treatise*, he slightly muted his earlier complaints, recognizing the beginnings of a shift in Americans’ relationship to their domiciles. Even as he considered how to sell his farmland after the loss of his tenant caretaker, Mitchell praised Downing’s efforts to *American Review* readers, arguing that he was a man ahead of his time whose recommendations were only just beginning to be appreciated.<sup>23</sup> With the publication of *The Architecture of Country Houses* in 1850, Downing attempted to allay criticisms such as those voiced by Mitchell by explaining that his cottages

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<sup>21</sup> Downing, A. J. *Cottage Residences*. New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842. p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> “Landscape Gardening and Rural Architecture,” p. 205.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell, Donald Grant. “Landscape Gardening.” *American Review* 5 (March 1847), pp. 295-306.

were designed not with the farmer or aristocrat in mind, men who had “very different wants,” but rather for “[a]n industrious man, who earns his bread by daily exertions, and lives in a snug and economical little home in the suburbs of town.”<sup>24</sup> By the time of Downing’s death in 1852, his hopes had begun to be realized in towns throughout the northeast as a result of transportation improvements, and a new generation of architects was eager to assume his mantle. While Paul of *Reveries* had to sell his property in the country, over the course of the 1850s and 1860s it became considerably easier to gratify an impulse to live in nature and commute to work each morning.

Mitchell himself purchased a suburban residence just outside the city of New Haven in 1855. As he recalled in *Pictures of Edgewood*, a small gift book he printed privately for friends and relatives in 1869 that included lithographs of the homestead, “A friend called upon me shortly after my arrival, and learning the errand upon which I had been scouring no inconsiderable tract of country, proposed to me to linger a day more, and take a drive about the suburbs.”<sup>25</sup> As they toured the area outside New Haven, he found himself at the edge of a wood, looking down on “all the spires of the city we had left, two miles away as a bird flies.”<sup>26</sup> Reminding his wife that New York City was only four hours away, he named the property Edgewood and spent the next five years landscaping and renovating it. During that time, he disappeared from the public eye.

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<sup>24</sup> Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 1850. p. 40.

<sup>25</sup> Mitchell, Donald Grant. *Pictures of Edgewood* (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1869). p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> p. 17.

When he did reappear on the publishing scene in the early 1860s, Mitchell must have seemed like a different writer altogether to many of his readers. The pose of the sentimental bachelor anxious about marriage and career had been replaced by that of a family man consumed by home improvement projects. After settling at Edgewood, almost everything he wrote for the rest of his life centered around life there: the experience of shaping a landscape, designing and building a home, establishing a garden, and enjoying the pleasures of domestic life in the suburban countryside. *My Farm of Edgewood: A Country Book* grew out of a piece called "Agriculture as a Profession; or, Hints About Farming," which appeared in the *New Englander* in November 1860. His next book, *Wet Days at Edgewood*, was a compilation of essays about rural writers that he had contributed to the *Atlantic Monthly* between April 1863 and Sept 1864 under title "Wet Weather Work." In 1867, he gathered together articles written for *Hours at Home* and *The Horticulturalist* in a book entitled *Rural Studies*, which was eventually republished with illustrations as *Out-of-Town Places* in 1884.<sup>27</sup> All of this later work shared two important characteristics: a concern for domestic life outside of American cities and a focus on the integration of aesthetics into everyday lived experience. While it would be easy to dismiss Mitchell's books from the 1860s as the fruit of a middle-aged man's complacency, which on one level they certainly were, these writings are more than material records of the quiet extinguishment of a celebrated bachelorhood. In the course of outlining

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<sup>27</sup> *My Farm of Edgewood: A Country Book* (New York: C. Scribner, 1863), hereafter abbreviated MFE; *Wet Days at Edgewood: With Old Farmers, Old Gardeners, and Old Pastorals* (New York: C. Scribner, 1865); *Rural Studies, With Hints for Country Places* (New York: C. Scribner & Co., 1867), hereafter abbreviated RS; and *Out-of-Town Places: With Hints for their Improvement* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1884).

what he referred to as “a man’s sense of domesticity,” Mitchell demonstrated that the thrill of the chase and a passion for cigar-induced reverie need not oppose a desire for companionship and visions of home. Outside the city, he and other American men could experience the freeing sensation of a bird’s-eye view of the pressures and demands of the business world. In leafy-bowered homes just beyond the urban periphery, they could begin the process of turning a physical space into an embodiment of selfhood.

These late-life writings can be classified as country books, a now-forgotten genre that flourished in the 1860s in response to changing patterns in population and land use. Other famous practitioners included Frederic Cozzens, Barry Gray, Henry Ward Beecher, Nathaniel Parker Willis, and Lewis William Mansfield. Part autobiographical essay, part architectural pattern book, and part domestic treatise, the genre celebrated the new availability of “country life within city reach” and modelled an urbanite’s relocation experience for an audience that might be considering a similar transitions. In country books, however, there was always a gap between the class position occupied by the author and that of the reader. Even as writers preached economy and simplicity, arguing that it was possible for middle-class Americans to move to the suburbs and enjoy lives similar to their own, the images and descriptions of their homes made it clear that celebrity afforded them unique privileges and opportunities. Their popularity depended in large part upon the fame of the writer, as country books offered opportunities for voyeurism alongside information about the suburban experience.

In line with other books of this genre, Mitchell’s stated purpose was to provide guidance to individuals who wanted to move to the suburbs, even



though he also dwelt extensively on the particular details of acquiring and maintaining Edgewood. Although he acknowledged that the impulse to dream about the perfect home was natural to both sexes, Mitchell suggested that suburban life was particularly well-suited to men's needs. Addressing himself to men from urban areas who harbored a "very determined wish to reap what pleasures they can out of a country life, by such moderate degree of attention and of labor as shall not overtax their time, or plunge them into the anxieties of a new and engrossing pursuit" (*RS*, p. 26), he hoped that his accounts of finding and renovating his property would help someone determine what to plant and how "to establish a cozy home, where his children can romp to their hearts' content, and he—take a serene pleasure in plucking his own fruit, pulling his own vegetables, smelling at his own rose-tree and smoking under his own vine" (p. 31). He invited his readers to use his writings as inspiration in the design and care of their own suburban houses, promising that they, too, could find solace and happiness in the suburbs.

In addition to detailed discussions of fences, ornamentation, and vegetation outside the house, Mitchell's county books included recommendations for furniture, fireplaces, paint color, and wall décor. He paid particular attention to distributing "the aesthetic element" (*MFE*, p. 167) throughout the interior, explaining how architectural and decorative details could impact mood and communicate a life philosophy. His masculine domesticity did not have precise rules; he claimed that even the methodological approach was intended to resemble a man's way of thinking. Rather than closing down opportunity and eliminating pleasure through detailed, step-by-step instruction, Mitchell linked his guidance with words like "suggestion" and

“stimulation,” as if hoping to inaugurate a new understanding of what sorts of experience the home could encompass when men took the initiative to actively participate in shaping the domestic environment. The lack of explicit instruction was meant to foster a sense of possibility rather than restriction, to suggest that the home was a canvas for personal artistic expression rather than a pre-fabricated kit. Channeling his *Reveries of a Bachelor* days, he suggested that the home should reflect the individual needs and personalities of its occupants. He urged readers to cultivate “homeliness,” insisting, “I like hugely that good old English word – homeliness. It ought to have again its first meaning. Pretty-faced women have corrupted it. It describes all that is best about a country house” (RS, p. 274). For Mitchell, a slight disarray was desirable; it signaled mental and physical activity and encouraged inhabitants and visitors to value stimulating inquiry and open exploration over concerns about manners or morality.

Even though Mitchell made it a point to detail the practicalities involved in any move to the country, warning that it was a mistake “to make an easy thing of it” (RS, p. 26) and recommending that newcomers from the city hire help to assist with various domestic tasks, he conspicuously avoided standard activities such as food preparation, childrearing, and housekeeping in his country books. His wife and children rarely appear in accounts of life at Edgewood: although he occasionally mentions their presence by the fireside or at play in the yard, for the most part they remain silent appendages to the landscape, almost like decorative elements. While *Reveries* voiced fears about the capacity of family to intrude upon private moments and claim valuable time and space, Mitchell’s country books suggest that the suburbs would enable husbands, wives, and children to pursue their separate interests alongside one another. Ultimately, after all,

suburban life was designed to meet the needs of men. As they left every morning and returned in the evening, the change in landscape cued different mental states and modes of behavior. To Mitchell and his readers, there was no reason to believe that “the man who plants a garden, and builds a cottage” could not entertain a realistic hope “of shaking off the dust of the city under green trees upon his own sward-land, where some – nameless party – in white lawn, with blue ribbon of a sash (as in Mr. Irving’s pretty picture of a wife), stands ready to greet him, after an hour of torture at the hands of our humane railroad directors” (*RS*, pp. 62-63), so long as he knew that he would have a large part in maintaining the suburban vision himself.

Mitchell’s guidance insinuated that a suburban house could come to embody the most alluring characteristics of women from a man’s perspective. It would not matter if a woman became consumed in her children or in housekeeping activities after marriage; men could continue to experience sensations of flirtation and enchantment at home. Always offering up new challenges and rewards, the domestic environment could function as a stand-in that was simultaneously more cunning and more attentive than a wife. In *Reveries*, Mitchell had suggested that courtship, an activity that appeared to be a harmless game, a sport for young bachelors, could turn out to be something much more serious. A seemingly straightforward hunt for a wife could go horribly wrong if a young man entered the situation naively. Paul complains:

I have trouted, when the brook was so low, and the sky so hot, that I might as well have thrown my fly upon the turnpike; and I have hunted hare at noon, and wood-cock in snow-time,—never despairing, scarce doubting; but for a poor hunter of his kind, without traps or snares, or any aid of police or constabulary, to traverse the world, where are swarming, on a moderate

computation, some three hundred and odd millions of unmarried women, for a single capture—irremediable, unchangeable—and yet a capture which by strange metonymy, not laid down in the books, is very apt to turn captor into captive, and make a game of hunter—all this, surely, surely may make a man shrug with doubt! (*RB*, p. 22)

In the suburbs, however, the fear of entrapment in married domestic life evaporates; the game extends indefinitely. Mitchell's country books urged readers to approach their homes as an unfinished picture, not dissimilar to a reverie that materialized, bit by bit, over the years. By the 1860s, Mitchell's gaming analogies were directed toward a new target, and concerns about capture had been replaced by anticipations of seduction:

No troutfisher, who is worthy the name, wants his creel loaded in the beginning; he wants the pursuit—the alternations of hope and fear; the coy rest of his fly upon this pool—the whisk of its brown hackle down yonder rapid—its play upon the eddies where possibly some swift strike may be made—the sway of his rod, and the whiz of his reel under the dash of some struggling victim.

It is a mistake, therefore, I think, to aim at the completion of a country home in a season, or in two, or some half a dozen. Its attractiveness lies, or should lie, in its prospective growth of charms. (p. 114)

Just as an intelligent man appreciated the art of delay in romance, the home should not give away all its secrets upon first glance. He urged readers to factor elements of unexpected pleasure in the architecture and landscaping of houses. Taking Downing's attention to the picturesque in a new direction, Mitchell emphasized that the layout of one's entire property should incite curiosity and reward exploration. Where Downing had asked property-owners to take their cue from nature, Mitchell hinted that men might do well to think about the qualities that made a woman desirable as they decided where to place shrubs

and trees and how to appoint their entryways and piazzas. As he coyly remarked in *Rural Studies*, “Nature is a mistress that must be wooed with a will; and there is no mistress worth the having, that must not be wooed in the same way” (p. 27).

Asking his male readers to rethink their notions of what a home could be, Mitchell described his domestic program as “the fruit from a graft of the fanciful, set upon the practical” (*MFE*, p. 221). So was suburban America. In an era of war, industrial expansion, massive waves of immigration, urban overcrowding, and technological innovation, “country life within city reach” provided a necessary distance to process change or enjoy a temporary reprieve. It had the benefit of being both nostalgic and forward-looking, allowing individuals to feel connected to a simpler, less hurried or complicated past at the same time that it took full advantage of the newest developments in transportation and the most popular trends in home design. At his home on a hill overlooking New Haven, Connecticut, Donald Grant Mitchell discovered that the fears of his youth, which he fictionalized in *Reveries*, were unwarranted. While it had seemed impossible that his bachelor reveries could coexist peacefully with the realities of married home life, he eventually discovered that they need not be mutually exclusive in the suburbs. In his books about Edgewood, he sought to share that discovery: it was not necessary for a man to cede control of the domestic sphere to his wife. While women might have their own ideas about how to run a household, husbands had opinions, too. If readers followed his advice, their homes would grow with them, as living incarnations of their beliefs, motivations, desires, and joys. Even the reveries of a bachelor could positively impact the shape and feel of the American home. “[T]his is a style of grafting,” Mitchell assured his would-be

detractors, “which is of more general adoption in the world than we are apt to imagine” (*RS* p. 221).

## Chapter Four

### **Thoreau's Unreal Estate: Playing House at Walden Pond<sup>1</sup>**

On 4 January 1855, under the heading "Counting-House and Country Life," the *Country Gentleman: A Journal for the Farm, the Garden, and the Fireside* carried the following letter:

New-York, Dec. 12, 1854.

Dear Eds.—It may perhaps surprise you to receive a letter for a farm journal from this modern Babel, but you little know how many clerks, who are penned up between four brick walls from one week's end to another, eagerly seize upon any book or paper that treats of green trees and blue skies.

Posted upon my stool sometimes at nine and ten o'clock at night,—a time when all decent country folks are in their beds, I take from my pocket some treatise on agriculture or its branches, and stealing still another hour from my wished-for bed, study away at plows and plowing, spades and spading,—indeed anything that will say there is a life in the open air away from ledger and ink, stores and "m c'h'dise."

The unnamed clerk goes on to explain that he has acquired "quite a little library," "trusting that *Book Farming* will answer all purposes until I can get the practice, which will, united with the aforesaid theory, make a true farmer of me." His purpose in writing, he declares, is both to ask the editors' opinion as to where he should spend his \$1,500 to \$1,800 and to encourage farmers to keep

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay appeared in the March 2009 issue of *New England Quarterly*.

their prices low if they decide to sell. In return, he promises to use his experience and rhetorical skills to dissuade country boys from “clerking it.”<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of the next year, the periodical published letters from a number of readers who had left the city to take up farming in the countryside. Recommending that the clerk abandon his plans to farm, most insisted that books could not prepare him for the labor he would face; others suggested that he limit his ambitions by purchasing one or two acres rather than twenty. Still others advised that he keep his job and buy property just a mile beyond city limits on a well-traveled street near a railroad. A kitchen garden would satisfy his rural impulses, they maintained; any larger enterprise should be overseen by a hired man, not by the clerk himself. As letters continued to stream into the office of the *Country Gentleman*, the editors began appending their own comments to those they chose to publish. Recognizing that the clerk’s letter had ignited the enthusiasms of a significant portion of their readership, they invited more responses, expressing their hope that the paper’s content would speak to citified young men as well as rural farmers.

The market revolution that commenced in the early decades of the nineteenth century drew young men away from their agrarian communities and into the cities, a trend that has been well documented by scholars.<sup>3</sup> Pioneering a

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<sup>2</sup>*Country Gentleman*, 4 January 1855, pp. 61–62. Published out of Albany, New York, by Luther Tucker, the sixteen-page quarto agricultural weekly ran from 1853 through 1865. According to Frank Mott’s *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 2, 1850–1865 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), the periodical was divided into five departments, devoted to the farm, the garden and orchard, the fireside, current events, and produce markets. By 1858, it claimed a circulation of 250,000, probably because it did not restrict its coverage to New York (pp. 432–433).

<sup>3</sup>Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Charles Sellers, *Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic



new life about which their families could offer little advice, the young men came to depend on print culture—in forms as wide-ranging as conduct books, underground city guides, fiction, and sporting newspapers—to negotiate their new environment.<sup>4</sup> In addition to easing their adaptation to city life, books and periodicals helped young men cultivate their imagined escapes—a phenomenon that scholars have yet to investigate. During the 1840s and 1850s, the suburbs of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia swelled as railroads became more efficient, city rents soared, and cholera outbreaks prompted campaigns for clean air. Agricultural periodicals like the *Country Gentleman* began to shift their focus from the rural farmer to the city worker who sought out the countryside for the relaxation, health, and pleasure it might afford him without requiring that he sacrifice urban amenities. At the same time, extolling the benefits of country life within city reach to middle-class Americans, architectural handbooks generated home designs for suburban locations. Fiction writers increasingly idealized cottage life just beyond the urban threshold, and newspapers urged young men to purchase land in the suburbs and commute instead of renting or boarding in the city.

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Books, 1993); Thomas Augst, *A Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Brian P. Luskey, "Jumping Counters in White Collars: Manliness, Respectability, and Work in the Antebellum City," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Summer 2006): 173–219.

<sup>4</sup>See, especially, G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: Norton, 1992); Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002); and Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, in association with the American Antiquarian Society, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Sitting at their work tables, the consumers of such literature dreamt of leaving the city for green fields and clean air, mentally surveying lots, building houses, choosing furniture, and planting trees. As readers took pleasure in imaginatively inhabiting the spaces the texts described, their lessons in “book farming” helped them contemplate daily lives that would be more meaningful and fulfilling. Constructing “castles in the air” out of the literature about suburban domestic life, many bachelor clerks believed that literary experiences of ownership, freedom, and responsibility would prepare them to assume control of their lives in both the public and private spheres. Within this context, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* can be read as an attempt to demonstrate the feasibility of amalgamating “castles in the air” with the “foundations” to which young clerks like the *Country Gentleman* writer were compelled to cling for survival.<sup>5</sup>

Thoreau understood that for many young men, dreams about future homes outside of the city were dreams of escape from meaningless and unending work, low social status, lack of capital, and bachelorhood. In *Walden*, he insists that suburban spaces, even literary ones, promise more than escape; they offer opportunities to theorize and practice a new form of domesticity grounded in self-nurture and inner cultivation rather than in the Christian benevolence and moral inculcation of children that dominated women’s understandings of nineteenth-century home life. Thoreau invites his readers—whom he identifies as poor students, New Englanders, and “the mass of men who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of the times, when they might improve them” (p. 16)—to play house outside of town, regardless of

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<sup>5</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 324. Subsequent page citations will refer to this edition, unless otherwise noted, and will appear in the text.

whether they ever decide to purchase land or build homes there, much less marry or become managers or merchants. Cultivating unreal estate in *Walden*, Thoreau draws on imaginative capital to reconcile the fact of the city with a desire for the rural. Throughout his narrative, he insists that aesthetic stimulation and appreciation matter and that printed records of such experiences can transform understandings of basic concepts such as home, work, family, and self, thus clearing space for living and dreaming within even the tiniest urban garret or office.

Contextualizing “Walden”:  
Print Culture and Suburbanization in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America

During the last few decades, critics have connected American authors, publishers, and readers with their lived environments, but they have largely confined their studies to the city or the frontier. Although historians have located the roots of American suburbanization in the 1820s,<sup>6</sup> literary scholars have tended to date the trend a full half-century later, with the advent of the streetcar in the 1870s. Erroneously labeling all small communities on the 1840s and 1850s urban periphery “villages,” literary critics have identified those residents as either farmers or wealthy elites who played at farming and viewed authors who wrote about such communities as possessing an anti-technological, anti-urban

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<sup>6</sup>See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Henry C. Binford, *The First Suburbs: Residential Communities on the Boston Periphery, 1815–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); W. Barksdale Maynard, *Architecture in the United States, 1800–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003); and John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). On urban sprawl and the exodus from cities as places of residence, see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Urban Threshold: Growth and Change in a Nineteenth-Century American Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

nostalgia for a pre-industrial pastoral landscape.<sup>7</sup> While those assumptions are true in some cases, many of the newspapers and periodicals, maps, guidebooks, building manuals, sketchbooks, and fiction of the period view that landscape in drastically different terms, terms that support the designation of Concord, Somerville, Jamaica Plain, Brooklyn, Harlem, Roxbury, Trenton, Hoboken, and many other mid-century communities on the urban periphery as suburbs. According to John Stilgoe, Thoreau and many other antebellum writers

did not simply juxtapose city and country, religion and nature, wilderness and landscape, nor did they fix their hearts on some rural middle landscape mediating between city and wilderness. They knew the sordidness, the quiet desperation, the meanness of farm life, and they recognized in farmyards and farmhouses, fields and barns a failing dream. . . . [O]nly a new sort of space offered a new hope.<sup>8</sup>

That new space was suburbia, and writers conceived of it as a geography ripe for experimentation, open to new constellations of family, work, leisure, and religious life.

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<sup>7</sup>In many ways, literary scholars are still working from the arguments set forth by Leo Marx in *The Machine and the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964; reprinted New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), in which he claims that the pastoral ideal has governed changing definitions of America since the Puritan era. Updating his claims in "Pastoralism in America" (in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986]), pp. 36–69), Marx maintains that Thoreau and other "classic" American authors were exceptional dissidents. Labeling all texts that praise a space outside American cities as "pastoral," however, fails to account for the ways in which many writers were looking to that landscape for new purposes, with new notions of who should reside there and why. Revising Marx's view, Lawrence Buell suggests that American masculinist pastoral in general, and Thoreau's in particular, may be a radical departure from, rather than a reflexive regression to, earlier forms of the American pastoral ("American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised," in the Norton Critical Edition of *Walden*, ed. William Rossi, 2nd ed. [New York: W. W. Norton, 1992]), but the implications of his argument have not received adequate attention. In her effort to link his project at Walden to a larger genealogy of nineteenth-century masculine retreat into a negative privacy of passive silence, even Milette Shamir, who characterizes Thoreau as a suburban writer in *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), fails to assess the ways in which he celebrated a radical sense of relationality.

<sup>8</sup>Stilgoe, *Borderland*, p. 24.

To classify a landscape as suburban rather than agricultural necessarily influences interpretations of writings about that space. As Robert Gross reminds us, Concord was not a country town when Thoreau decided to retire to Walden Pond in 1845. The transformation from village to suburb that had occurred there and in many other towns during the first half of the nineteenth century, in Gross's words, "enabled middle-class Americans to enjoy all the exciting advantages of the city without ever having to live there."<sup>9</sup> The railroad reached Concord in 1844, bringing Boston within an hour's travel.<sup>10</sup> Arguing that the railroad had "destroyed the old scale of distances," Thoreau appealed for access to the Harvard College library in 1849, convincing the president to extend borrowing privileges to alumni living beyond the ten-mile radius from Cambridge that had earlier been established.<sup>11</sup> Given new perceptions of scale, Thoreau demanded new classifications and opportunities, marveling in his journal that, even though he lived in the midst of nature, "five times a day I can be whirled to Boston within an hour."<sup>12</sup> To ignore the evolving relationship

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<sup>9</sup>Robert A. Gross, "Transcendentalism and Urbanism: Concord, Boston, and the Wider World," *Journal of American Studies* 18 (1984): 363. Gross makes similar arguments about the importance of conceiving of 1840s and 1850s Concord as suburban in "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord," *Journal of American History* 69 (June 1982): 42–61 and, more recently, in "'That Terrible Thoreau': Concord and Its Hermit," in *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. William E. Cain (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 181–241. It should be noted that there is some difference of opinion among scholars about Concord's status as a Boston suburb in Thoreau's day. For an alternate perspective on the town's history, see Leslie Perrin Wilson, in association with the Concord Free Public Library, *In History's Embrace: Past and Present in Concord, Massachusetts* (Hollis, N.H.: Hollis Publishing, 2007).

<sup>10</sup>For an account of the impact of the Boston-to-Fitchburg railroad on land and community, especially in terms of the influx of one thousand Irish workers and their families needed to build it, see W. Barksdale Maynard, *Walden Pond: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 52–55.

<sup>11</sup>Thoreau quoted in Gross, "Transcendentalism and Urbanism," p. 378.

<sup>12</sup>*Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, 14 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 4:478–79.

between the community of Concord and the city of Boston is to neglect a development that Thoreau himself recognized and felt compelled to write about in *Walden*. Positioning his project in relation to a growing body of literature on the benefits of suburban living, Thoreau muses in “Economy” that “[i]t would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them” (p. 11).

By the 1840s and 1850s, newspapers and periodicals were saturated with editorials about the amenities of suburban life, sample home designs, and discussions of landscape architecture, building materials, furniture choices, and decorating decisions. Architects like A. J. Downing, Calvert Vaux, Gervase Wheeler, and Lewis F. Allen quickly became famous with treatises and guidebooks such as *Cottage Residences* (1842), *The Working-Man’s Cottage Architecture* (1848), *The Builder’s Pocket Companion* (1850), *The American Cottage Builder* (1854), *Homes for the People, in Suburb and Country* (1855), *The Cottage Builder’s Manual* (1856), *The Economic Cottage Builder* (1856), and *City and Suburban Architecture* (1859), works that, in offering patterns for houses that could be efficiently and economically constructed, met demand from individuals who could not afford to hire their own architects but who lacked the skills and community support to build homes as their forebears had done.<sup>13</sup> The only

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<sup>13</sup>A. J. Downing, *Cottage Residences; or, A Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottage-Villas, and Their Gardens and Grounds: Adapted to North America* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842); T. Thomas, *The Working-Man’s Cottage Architecture, containing Plans, Elevations, and Details, for the erection of Cheap, Comfortable, and Neat Cottages* (New York: R. Martin, 1848); A. C. Smeaton, *The Builder’s Pocket Companion; Containing the Elements of Building, Surveying, and Architecture. With Practical Rules and Instructions, Connected With the Subject* (Philadelphia: Henry Carey Baird, 1850); John Bullock, *The American Cottage Builder: A Series of Designs Plans, and Specifications From \$200 to \$20,000. For Homes for the People* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1854); Gervase Wheeler, *Homes for the People, in Suburb and Country; The Villa, The Mansion, and The Cottage, Adapted to*

architectural pattern book the author of *Walden* is known to have owned is Asher Benjamin's *The American Builder's Companion*, but the shape of Thoreau's narrative—from the manner in which he accounts for materials, cost, and time to his detailed descriptions of the cabin's construction and opportunities for cultivation (both of self and nature)—suggests that he intended his text to be in conversation with the pattern-book literature of the day.<sup>14</sup> As Dolores Hayden explains in her history of American suburbanization, "The old advice manuals created an imaginary place where houses existed as drawings that each reader could enter and inhabit, images of family togetherness enjoyed in a leafy pastoral setting."<sup>15</sup> Individual house patterns were typically comprised not only of floor plans but of idealized renderings showing couples and small children conversing or walking around the grounds [Images 18-22]. The focus of the *Economic Cottage Builder*, for instance, was cost, but images supported its secondary emphasis on the necessity of aesthetic considerations, even for the middle and lower-middle

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*American Climate and Wants. With Examples Showing How to Alter and Remodel Old Buildings* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1855); Z. Baker, *The Cottage Builder's Manual* (Worcester: Z. Baker & Co., 1856); Charles P. Dwyer, *The Economic Cottage Builder: or, Cottages for Men of Small Means. Adapted to Every Locality, With Instructions for Choosing the Most Economical Materials Afforded By the Neighborhood. To Which Are Added Many Valuable Hints and Most Useful Observations* (Buffalo: Wanzer, McKim & Co., 1856); and Samuel Sloan, *City and Suburban Architecture; containing Numerous Designs and Details for Public Edifices, Private Residences, and Mercantile Buildings* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1859).

<sup>14</sup>See W. Barksdale Maynard, "Thoreau's House at Walden," *Art Bulletin* 81 (June 1999): 303–25, as well as his *Walden Pond: A History*, p. 69. See also Jean Carwile Masteller and Richard N. Masteller, "Rural Architecture in Andrew Jackson Downing and Henry David Thoreau: Pattern Book Parody in *Walden*," *New England Quarterly* 57 (December 1984): 483–510.

<sup>15</sup>Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, p. 44. For an extended treatment of Andrew Jackson Downing's role in popularizing suburban middle-class domestic life, see Hayden's third chapter, "Borderlands." Also useful are Adam Sweeting's *Reading Houses and Building Books: Andrew Jackson Downing and the Architecture of Popular Antebellum Literature, 1835–1855* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), and David Schuyler's *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815–1852* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Clifford E. Clark writes on the pattern book more generally, and includes information on mid-century suburbanization, in "Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History: The Romantic Revival and the Cult of Domesticity in America, 1840–1870," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7 (Summer 1976): 33–56.



Images 18-22. Plates from *The Economic Cottage Builder* (1856)



classes. Although the houses were small, they were pictorially set against a natural paradise of rolling hills, streams, and trees with paths gently curving toward viewers, inviting them to imagine themselves in the role of the people depicted in the scene.

In addition to renderings, plans, and building instructions, architectural advice books often included guidance on how to select and purchase property as well as essays on suburban life. Resembling the era's fictional accounts of the vine-covered cottage, the descriptions were generally romanticized. The *Economic Cottage Builder*, for example, recommended that readers build houses that face east, "so that the rising sun may throw its first rays upon your cottage porch, to enliven you to your daily toil, and may leave his golden blessing with you as he sinks at evening into his purple cushion in the west."<sup>16</sup> Occasionally the manuals quoted notable contemporary fiction to back up their claims, as when the *American Cottage Builder* invoked Washington Irving to argue that even bachelors should add plantings to their yards. Future pleasures were always promised; books offered trellises, blooming flowers, spreading grapevines, and happy hummingbirds and bees as rewards for planting and caring for the recommended vegetation. While certainly appealing to readers' nostalgia for a lost era of Jeffersonian agrarianism, in romancing the land encounter, mid-century print culture also promised to refashion earlier desires. Depictions of life in the suburbs downplayed the labor involved in shaping the domestic environment. Focusing instead on completed visions, texts characterized the home as a retreat, situated in a community of like-minded individuals. Although home pattern books were forthright about the materials and funds required to

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<sup>16</sup>Dwyer, *Economic Cottage Builder*, p. 11.

live comfortably in the suburbs, the emphasis was always on the home as a record of success rather than a site of production.

Architectural handbooks and periodical literature presented an idealized suburban landscape to young clerks and mechanics on the lookout for inexpensive, aesthetically pleasing domiciles where they might relax after long days in the city. In *Homes for the People in Suburb and Country*, for example, Gervase Wheeler bemoaned the fact that “many a respectable mechanic, or young beginner in business, is forced to live with his family in a boarding or lodging-house, when he might, at an equal, possibly at a less expenditure, have a home of his own.”<sup>17</sup> During the antebellum anti-rent wars, books and periodicals promoted home ownership as the first step to financial freedom and social advancement. “Married mechanics, clerks, or others whose income is small, and who have families to shelter and support, should of all things avoid the ruinous rents of large cities,” the *Economic Cottage Builder* advised. “Nor should they be induced, under the blinding influence of ‘long credit,’ to undertake paying for miserable little unproductive ‘city lots,’—thus enriching the wealthy land owners at a sacrifice of every little comfort which their days of labor should be entitled to.”<sup>18</sup> But there was no need to despair. In the countryside, economic downturns and rising land costs were driving farmers further away from population centers, and “the suburbs [were] rapidly filling with rows of dwellings” intended for people of modest means.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Wheeler, *Homes for the People in Suburb and Country*, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup>Dwyer, *Economic Cottage Builder*, pp. 56–57.

<sup>19</sup>Wheeler, *Homes for the People in Suburb and Country*, p. 315. As I have tried to suggest, a number of important factors played into the growth of early suburbs, some economic, some political, and

Pursuing a different line toward the same end, *The Working-Man's Cottage Builder* argued that men should separate business from family life, since "[t]he facilities of ferriage, and the opportunities for healthful exercise, (if desired,) are all favorable to suburban residents; while a family residence within the city is (at best) but a poor reward to citizens in active life, who might almost as well be doomed to perpetual confinement in their place of business."<sup>20</sup> All of the texts insisted that beauty could coexist with economy and that workingmen deserved comfortable homes in desirable locations as much as, or even more than, the elite. *The Economic Cottage Builder*, which marketed itself as a democratizer, claimed to be written "for the benefit of those whose means will not allow them to procure professional assistance, and yet whose tastes are as worthy of being gratified, even in an humble manner."<sup>21</sup> To facilitate working-class relocation to the suburbs, books proffered organizational advice on matters such as forming associations to purchase large plots, which could then be subdivided among individual families but maintained collectively.<sup>22</sup>

Like the period's behavior manuals, home pattern books detailed the benefits that would accrue from correct choices, and toward the end of creating a

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some cultural. In addition to the books on suburban history mentioned in a previous note, see Reeve Huston, *Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Charles W. McCurdy, *The Anti-Rent Era in New York Law and Politics, 1839–1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Thomas Summerhill, *Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>20</sup>Thomas, *Working-Man's Cottage Architecture*, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup>Dwyer, *Economic Cottage Builder*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup>The *Economic Cottage Builder* explains the process, as did many newspapers of the day: "Let a small club or association of such men put into one common fund sufficient to make the first payment on a piece of land a few miles from the city. Let them keep a conveyance for their special use, if they do not locate near a railroad or canal, or public conveyance of some description, and they will derive ten fold benefit" (pp. 56–57).

home space that would shelter and protect the aspiring young businessman and his current or future family, they provided step-by-step instructions on how to fashion a well-designed and appointed home. The authors of such texts were in the business of selling dreams, and they understood that detailed directions, calculations, and architectural renderings made it possible for readers to indulge their visions of a better life. Thoreau conducts a rigorous investigation of these domestic dreams in *Walden*, urging readers in the midst of a changing economic and cultural landscape to reconsider and recenter the relationship between self and home. Drawing from and commenting on popular pattern-book literature, engaging with new developments in land appropriation and use, he seeks to address in a new way the well-published desires and concerns of the nation's city-trapped young men. In the process of staking out a literary terrain that corresponds (even in name) to a physical one, Thoreau launches an inquiry into the art of living, an aesthetic and ethical program of study devoted to identifying the characteristics of the good life, a domestic meditation on what it means to live well.

"There Was Pasture Enough for My Imagination":  
A New Type of Ownership for a New Type of Space

Even though *Walden* is subtitled "Life in the Woods," Thoreau's house was not located in the wilderness; it stood about a mile and a half south of Concord center on land, recently cleared by loggers, that was owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. Despite his claim that the nearest neighbor was a mile distant, Irishmen who worked on the Fitchburg Railroad, which crossed the pond on its southern edge, lived in small shanties nearby. Thoreau started building his cabin in March 1845 with boards he bought from one of those

laborers, and some of his friends assisted with the framing. “[O]ccasion[s] for neighborliness” could be had following a brief walk along the tracks into town, and he mentions performing some surveying and carpentry there as well. Even at his cabin, as he remarks from time to time in *Walden*, he entertained visitors, conversing with friends and accepting gifts of food and clean laundry from his mother and sisters (p. 45).<sup>23</sup> The community knew about his experiment; sometimes when he returned to his cabin, he found calling cards, flowers, or other evidence of their visits. Understanding that he was a local curiosity, Thoreau notes that visitors of both sexes and all walks of life came “to see me and the inside of my house,” asking for a glass of water as an excuse for calling (p. 150).

Although Thoreau fashions Walden Pond as a private, natural environment, then, the form and content of his narrative simultaneously register the fact that he is not the only one looking for new experiences and opportunities on the urban periphery. He invokes popular literature associated with suburban domestic life as he considers his personal relationship to the community of Concord and the town’s relationship to Boston. With the distance between his house and Concord center mirroring the suburbanite’s remove from the city, he claims that he selected Walden Pond because of its unique combination of opportunities for both privacy from—an ideal place “to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles” (pp. 19–20) —and proximity to—“a good port and a good foundation” (p. 21)—others. Although Thoreau’s “business” is

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<sup>23</sup>For details on Thoreau’s reliance on friends and family during his time at *Walden*, as well as assessments of his self-sufficiency from acquaintances and readers of the book, see William E. Cain, “Henry David Thoreau, 1817–1862: A Brief Biography,” in *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, pp. 11–57.

nontraditional—he is a surveyor of daily life as commonly as of geographical distances—he acknowledges that business is a prominent factor when people are deciding where to live.

Listening to the sound of the train passing nearby his cabin as it “convey[s] travellers from Boston to the country,” he reflects on the changing landscape (p. 114). The availability of regular and efficient transportation had transformed the meaning and implications of the word “business.” A new class of men were sitting in offices, scheduling meetings, making deals, settling transactions—working mentally rather than physically on problems and opportunities that had not existed twenty years earlier.<sup>24</sup> Even farmers’ lives had been transformed as they recalibrated production to the demands of unseen markets in the wider world.<sup>25</sup> “With such huge and lumbering civility the country hands a chair to the city” (pp. 115–16), Thoreau remarks, as country and city became inextricably linked in success and failure. The impact of that new relationship was felt at the micro level as well. Surveying the future of what would soon be identified, due to its proximity to the railroad and its picturesque qualities, as valuable land, Thoreau conjures “[t]he ornamented grounds of villas which will one day be built” where his cabin now stands (p. 180). The pond

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<sup>24</sup>According to Augst, “The work subsumed under the title of ‘clerk’ could include anything from running errands and taking stock to keeping books and answering correspondence. To be a clerk in nineteenth-century America was to occupy an amorphous, burgeoning category of white-collar work that became one of the urban vocations common among men of the middling ranks; indeed, after ‘farmer,’ ‘clerk’ was the occupation most commonly listed on the rolls of passenger ships leaving for California from New York in the late 1840s. In their free time, they became involved with widely shared leisure activities, using their skills with advanced literacy to shape norms of gender and class with which we continue to live” (*A Clerk’s Tale*, p. 14).

<sup>25</sup>The rise of the ice trade provides another example of the ways in which local communities adjusted to the needs of larger economies, as Thoreau recognizes in *Walden*. For an overview of the industry in nineteenth-century New England, see Gavin Weightman, *The Frozen Water Trade: How Ice from New England Lakes Kept the World Cool* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).

environment had already begun to reflect the changing relationship between country and city: trees were being cut for lumber at an alarming rate and transported by rail to other locations, making it increasingly difficult to describe the area as forested at all.<sup>26</sup>

Characterizing the longing for a home as universal, Thoreau claims kinship with his readers from the opening line of "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For": "At a certain season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house" (p. 81). Allying himself with folks like the *Country Gentleman's* clerk, he comments that "the student, though in the house, is still at work in *his* field, and chopping in *his* woods, as the farmer in his"; the student (as well as the clerk) "in turn seeks the same recreation and society that the latter does, though it may be a more condensed form of it" (p. 136). If the student is not careful, however, the domestic environment that lures the farmer and the clerk will become, for him, a trap that ensnares rather than liberates, "a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clew, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum" (p. 28). Before purchasing land or building materials, Thoreau instructs, individuals should pare down their desires to the essentials. Whereas A. J. Downing maintained that "[f]or that species of suburban cottage or villa residence which is most frequently within the reach of persons of moderate fortunes, the environs of Boston afford the finest examples in the Union,"<sup>27</sup>

Thoreau claims that it would take a laborer ten to fifteen years to earn enough

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<sup>26</sup>For more detailed accounts of the changes taking place in Concord and around Walden Pond in the mid-nineteenth century, see Robert Fanuzzi, "Thoreau's Urban Imagination," *American Literature* 68 (June 1996): 321–46; Robert Sattelmeyer, "Depopulation, Deforestation, and the Actual Walden Pond," in *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, ed. Richard J. Schneider (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), pp. 235–53; and Wilson, *In History's Embrace*, pp. 19–36.

<sup>27</sup>A. J. Downing, "Hints to Rural Improvers," *Horticulturalist*, July 1848, pp. 11–12.

money to buy an eight-hundred-dollar house near Walden Pond. His point, that a prospective home-owner could easily “have spent more than half his life commonly before *his* wigwam will be earned” (p. 31), provided concrete evidence that property was not always a boon. Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau alludes to the fact that debt was common in the mid-nineteenth century and that it prevented men from living in their homes as they had originally envisioned.

The task of locating property and constructing a domicile, Thoreau warns, is more easily imagined than executed. And so, young men from the city are well advised to avoid rash decisions and to act with deliberation and intelligence, for the solution to urban malaise does not necessarily reside in the suburbs, as appealing as that prospect might be. As Thoreau famously states in “Economy,” “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats” (p. 8). “[Q]uiet desperation,” in Thoreau’s formulation, characterizes the day-to-day lives of thousands of young men who, in search of opportunities and advancement, had abandoned their family homes for the city, only to find themselves bereft of both. A space outside the city would not allay their despair, a new house would not guarantee a fresh lease on life, “for our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them; and the bad neighborhood to be avoided is our own scurvy selves” (p. 34). Men should look within, Thoreau cautioned, before turning to the outside world, for a thorough inquiry into the landscape of inner desire would help them attune their dreams to the realities of their lives.



Over the course of *Walden*, Thoreau crafts a domestic environment from words and phrases. His pond house is, to be sure, material, but his cabin in the woods is a product of his mind as much as of his hands. Referring to the rest cures that sent many nineteenth-century Americans in search of greener spaces, he remarks in his "Conclusion" that "[t]o the sick the doctors wisely recommend a change in air and scenery." But, he maintains, "we should oftener look over the taffarel of our craft, like curious passengers, and not make the voyage like stupid sailors picking oakum" (p. 320). The "craft" for Thoreau is, first, the self and, second, the house. His fundamental question of "what a house is" (p. 35)—the purpose it serves as well as its relationship to its inhabitant—seeks to collapse the ideal and the real, to eliminate the gap between an imaginative and a physical existence. The mind, Thoreau insists, houses the body, not the other way around, and it is the best home a person could desire. Playing house on Walden Pond, in an urban garret, or "even in a poor-house" (p. 328) is serious work—more serious and worthwhile, and certainly more economical, than relocating to the suburbs.

Approximating the poet's project of creating a literary incarnation of a physical landscape, Thoreau promises yet more: his unreal estate, he claims, is more valuable than property in possession. Land, he comes to understand in "Former Inhabitants," resists ownership. Even though only a squatter, he declares, he "owns" more of Walden Pond than those individuals who may, in the future, build ostentatious villas on the site. Much like the *Country Gentleman's* clerk, Thoreau admits to having mentally surveyed the landscape that surrounds him, claiming in the opening of "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," "In imagination I have bought all the farms in succession" (p. 81). At the same time,

though, he recognizes that since his motivations differ from those of the farmer, so should his methods. Like the clerk, Thoreau works with his head rather than his hands, and he hopes to benefit from an aesthetic appreciation of the landscape, not from its economic appreciation.<sup>28</sup> The ideal fruit of his labors is essentially intangible—he seeks happiness, contentment, and spiritual gratification—a different sort of fruit altogether. While the farmer toils for weeks and months preparing the earth, sowing seeds, and tending the vine, Thoreau spends “[a]n afternoon” fashioning a landscape that suits his mind’s eye, leaving the fields “fallow . . . for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” Reworking the Jeffersonian myth of the yeoman farmer, he argues that the student who loves the farm from afar asserts ownership more palpably and powerfully than does the farmer: “[W]hen a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, [he leaves] the farmer only the skimmed milk” (pp. 81–83).

While new suburban residents were pushing rural farmers further and further away from the city as they attempted to purchase their dreams, Thoreau proposes an imaginative ownership not bound by time, space, or money. Recognizing that the growth of popular print’s coverage of suburbia reflects readers’ desires, he gauges its allure for himself and for men in similar situations. As a liminal space that exists in reader’s minds, the suburb is inherently literary, a locus for the satisfaction of unfulfilled needs and hopes in private and public life. In *Walden*, Thoreau exposes that disconnect between ideal and real, but more

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<sup>28</sup>Luskey gives nuance to the terms “headwork” and “handwork” in relation to the lives of white-collar clerks in the mid-nineteenth century in “Jumping Counters in White Collars,” p. 174.

importantly, he demonstrates a way out of such binaries and distinctions. Because he does not own the land he lives on, he is able to cultivate unreal estate, all the while remaining fully grounded in his material existence. His domestic arrangements and activities at Walden Pond become conduits to worlds around and within him, as a new understanding of the purposes and possibilities of domesticity takes root.

### “Beautiful Housekeeping and Beautiful Living” at Walden Pond

Thoreau’s life experiment lays the foundations for a radical form of domesticity that welcomes exchange and interplay between the world of the mind and the outside world, and in *Walden* he argues that a man will be better off with acres of unreal estate than in the most impressive suburban cottage pictured in the popular literature. Having settled into confirmed bachelorhood after Ellen Sewell refused his proposal, Thoreau sought to prove that even a less-than-desirable lot by society’s standards could be transformed into something singularly valuable: an opportunity to focus on the self and its needs and on the pleasures of perception and imagination. The key, however, was not to rush unthinkingly down well-traveled paths or blindly follow the advice of others. Again and again applying himself to intangible concerns in a society that was increasingly fetishizing material objects, Thoreau outlines the characteristics of the good life for an audience of young men like himself, men who are searching for direction and advice.

By focusing on the personal needs of an individual occupant, Thoreau offers an alternative to the ordinary model of domesticity, which, he believes, is as damaging to men as it is to women. Arguing that a home’s primary purpose

should be to provide shelter, functioning as a means rather than an end, he questions common conceptions of domestic life that associate it with certain types of furniture, food preparation, family structure, or religious practice. In "House Warming," Thoreau insists that he understands the effort and activity involved in taking care of a house, explaining that, as a result of his experiences living alone, "I began to see where housework commences, and whence the endeavor, which costs so much, to wear a tidy and respectable appearance each day, to keep the house sweet and free from all ill odors and sights. Having been my own butcher and scullion and cook, as well as the gentleman for whom the dishes were served up, I can speak from an unusually complete experience" (p. 214). Nonetheless, he maintains, it would be better to simplify, getting rid of furniture and objects at the very least, and perhaps the house altogether, than continually to dust and take care of them. Simplifying the domestic environment not only renders it more efficient but, to Thoreau, more beautiful as well; it minimizes the work of arranging and cleaning in favor of looking and listening. His domesticity operates on the premise that it is better to dust the mind than the home, that "[b]efore we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation: now, a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper" (p. 38).

Recently interrogating Thoreau's proposed revisions to domestic practice and ideology, Sarah Ann Wider asks, "Who can afford to dispense with certain household amenities?—not the wife, not the mother, but the man without

children.”<sup>29</sup> Her question is as pertinent for *Walden*’s nineteenth-century women readers as it is for today’s. While it is tempting to approach the book as the personal musings of a literary man—that is, as social commentary not directed toward an audience and existing in a vacuum—the text’s shape and content suggest that Thoreau was not speaking to himself alone or about his condition only. In the most local sense, as Wider recognizes, Thoreau was speaking to men—and to a very specific class of white, educated men at that. But although his aesthetic model is definitely the product of a single man’s mind—he does not have to contemplate the effects of his actions on a wife or children, and many of his basic needs are met by friends and family members—his “unusually complete experience” of housekeeping should not be discounted nor his dismissal of treatises by female domestic reformers such as Catharine Beecher and Lydia Maria Child be viewed as disdain for a female perspective.<sup>30</sup> Thoreau was not focusing on the limitations of female domestic practice but, rather, on the shortcomings of traditional approaches to home life, those held by both men and women and propagated by society at large.

As he urges young clerks and managers to consider what they really want from their domestic lives, Thoreau reflects on print culture’s role in shaping

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<sup>29</sup>“‘And What Became of Your Philosophy Then?’: Women Reading *Walden*,” in *More Day to Dawn: Thoreau’s “Walden for the Twenty-First Century,”* ed. Sandra Harbert Petrucci and Laura Dassow Walls (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), p. 162. Wider develops an argument first articulated by Walls in “*Walden as Feminist Manifesto*” (*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 1 [Spring 1993]: 137–44), in which she explores the potentially liberating force of *Walden* for women readers, specifically Thoreau’s vision of housekeeping as “no longer a woman’s chore but a necessary and beautiful aspect of the economy of living” (p. 138).

<sup>30</sup>For *Walden*’s engagement with domestic treatises written by and for nineteenth-century women, see Cecilia Tichi, “Domesticity on Walden Pond,” in *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, pp. 95–121, and Etsuko Taketani, “Thoreau’s Domestic Economy: Double Accounts in *Walden*,” *Concord Saunterer* 2 (Fall 1994): 65–78.

domestic desires and transforming communities. Rather than voicing an outsider's criticism of mid-century suburbanization, *Walden* registers its author's participation in cultural trends and shifts in perception. Drawing on popular interest in the space between city and wilderness as the ideal location for the home, he suggests that precisely because young men like the letter-writing clerk are *not* settled or satisfied they are more likely than other individuals to ground experience in imagination, thought, and observation. For that reason, he believes, they are ideal stewards of an evolving suburban landscape. Thoreau argues that the domesticity he models in *Walden*, although seemingly without function, demonstrates the ultimate commitment to functionalism because it prioritizes self-rejuvenation and aesthetic gratification over service to family, God, or nation. Directing his attention to the unpretentious lower-class cottages nearby, homes of railroad workers and town outcasts, Thoreau muses that "equally interesting will be the citizen's suburban box, when his life shall be as simple and as agreeable to the imagination, and there is as little straining after effect in the style of his dwelling" (p. 47). A new type of space invites new ways of living, and the unique perspectives and needs of men like the clerk promise not only to transform houses or landscapes but to reshape the lives of their inhabitants as well.

Taking note of Thoreau's 1849 lecture tour, Horace Greeley remarked in the 2 April issue of the *New York Tribune*, "There is not a young man in the land—and very few old ones—who would not profit by an attentive hearing of that lecture [on "Life in the Woods"]." Referring to Thoreau's decision to pare down material essentials in an effort to perceive the needs of his soul more clearly, Greeley continues, "If all our young men would but hear this lecture, we

think some among them would feel less strongly impelled either to come to New-York or go to California.”<sup>31</sup> Greeley’s commentary suggests that, although Thoreau’s work was not popular in his day, it had the potential to change the way people thought about themselves in relation to their homes, thus allowing them to harness social, economic, and cultural trends and apply them to new ends. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, as the proliferation of rail and street-car lines accelerated suburbanization, distinctions between work and home, labor and leisure became more apparent for many Americans. Commuting from urban offices to leafy-bowered cottages in planned developments and bedroom communities, businessmen adjusted their rhythms to suit different environments. Even though the prescience of his predictions about the impact of industrialization and transportation on people’s conceptions of place and scale would not be fully appreciated until decades after his death, Thoreau’s recommendations did resonate with contemporaries who struggled for direction in lives that often seemed dominated by endless shuttlings from one set of obligations to another. Contemplating the path he had worn between his front door and Walden Pond, Thoreau remarked “how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves” (p. 371). At the same time, however, he celebrated the imagination’s capacity to forge new paths and to fashion edifices that would suit new needs and desires. Thoreau understood that even in its earliest incarnations, suburban America was built on the promise of a better life through bigger houses, greener lawns, more capable homemakers, and heartier children. Though the material landscape might provide a foundation for a new way of living, his account of his life at Walden

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<sup>31</sup>Greeley quoted in Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Knopf, 1965), p. 239.

served to remind readers that the refuge they were seeking was in truth within themselves.



## Chapter Five

### **Hawthorne and the Suburban Romance**

Suburbia, according to Lewis Mumford in *The Culture of Cities* (1938), is “a collective effort to live a private life.”<sup>1</sup>

Between March 1842 and September 1843, Horace Greeley, publisher of the *New York Tribune*, allocated a daily front-page column to Fourierist social reformer Albert Brisbane. The *Tribune* was the most widely read American newspaper of its day, and Brisbane used the medium to outline the benefits of Associationism, a communitarian reform plan that was based on the writings of the French theorist Charles Fourier.<sup>2</sup> In the paper’s series “Association; or, Principals of a True Organization of Society,” Brisbane expanded upon the ideas he had espoused in *Social Destiny of Man* (1840) by suggesting that America’s problems, which included class struggles, labor disputes, gender inequalities, and slavery, could not be remedied politically – rather, they required social

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<sup>1</sup> *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and company, 1938), p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> According to Carl J. Guarneri, the column was purchased by Brisbane for \$500 as a space to popularize Fourier’s viewpoints. The paper maintained its editorial separation from the column, which was entitled “Association; or, Principals of a True Organization of Society.” Nonetheless, Greeley provided Brisbane with an invaluable platform to promote his ideas; in addition to the penny daily and the *Weekly Tribune* that reprinted columns for distant readers, the columns were reprinted by more than forty other papers. See *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 33. For more on Fourier, see Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World* (Berkeley: U California P, 1986).

action.<sup>3</sup> Opposing Transcendentalists like Emerson and other reformers who promoted individual regeneracy in thought and action as the indispensable seed for large-scale change, Brisbane argued that reorganization of society must come first. Specifically, he suggested that men should collectively purchase land outside but within reach of major cities in order to live according to a community system, sharing in the mental and physical labor required to reform the world and bring happiness to all classes and individuals. Collective investment, thought, and action, he claimed, would reward members in ways that individual effort could never match, facilitating increased production that would lead to cheaper and better living. He promised readers that Association would “dignify Industry,” which he identified as all branches of Agriculture, Manufactures and Mechanics, “and render it *Attractive*,” which would be “the first practical step to be taken to emancipate and elevate the Laboring Classes.”<sup>4</sup>

Brisbane used his columns to educate the *Tribune*’s readership about Fourier’s philosophy and to lay out a practical plan for a community based on Associationist principles. He hoped the medium would correct misconceptions about Associationists, clarifying their stance on private property and voicing their appreciation for individual skills and talents. In his March 21, 1842 column, for example, he assured readers that “the privacy of domestic life will be fully maintained, while the advantage and pleasure of wide-spread and friendly social relations will be open to all.”<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he enumerated the concrete

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<sup>3</sup> Brisbane, Albert. *Social Destiny of Man: or, Association and Reorganization of Industry* (Philadelphia: C. F. Stollmeyer, 1840; Rpt. NY 1969, Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers).

<sup>4</sup> *New York Tribune*, March 2, 1842, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Tribune*, March 21, 1842, p. 1.

benefits of communal living, such as universal education and health care. Soon, he began advertising his books (and writings for other newspapers) and providing notice of Fourierist and Associationist meetings that were open to the public. Most significantly, however, in late March 1842 he began to outline the “Means of Making a Practical Trial” of Fourier’s theory in the United States. By October of the same year, he had announced the need for money to fund an experimental Associationist community. Within five months of his first column, Brisbane was able to accomplish in the United States what Fourier could not in France: the establishment of a model community on Associationist principles. By June 1843, the North American Phalanx, in Red Bank, New Jersey, was in the process of organization. It would become one of the largest and longest-lasting utopian reform communities in the nineteenth century, but it was only one of many Associationist communes, unions, and periodicals whose formation was greatly influenced by Brisbane’s writings.

The success of Brisbane’s vision was attributable in large part to his medium: the *Tribune* column enabled him to connect with readers from a wide range of classes, professions, and backgrounds, from urban businessmen to rural farmers.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, his influence was not restricted to the *Tribune*; in an age of reprinting, the columns were republished in many other papers. Brisbane understood the power of the newspaper; he explicitly placed his reform scheme

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<sup>6</sup> For details on the *Tribune*’s circulation and readership, see Mott, *A History of American Magazines* (2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), as well as “Newspapers and the Public Sphere” by John Nerone, in *The Industrial Book in America* (pp. 230-248). Greeley was famously open to the theories of social reformers. He regularly published the writings of Karl Marx and Margaret Fuller, among many others, in the *Tribune*.

in the hands of Horace Greeley in an effort to reach the most people.<sup>7</sup> He utilized the popular press to galvanize readers' hopes for a better life, his descriptions and promises encouraging them to imaginatively inhabit suburban reform communities. The weekly edition of the *Tribune*, after all, circulated nationally, and Brisbane knew that Greeley's paper would be the key to effecting change on a mass scale.

The example of Brisbane demonstrates the relationship between print culture and community formation in mid-nineteenth-century America. During an era of industrialization and technological change, many Americans turned to books and periodicals in their quest for improved forms of social organization and individual happiness. As Emerson remarked in an 1840 letter to Thomas Carlyle, "We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket."<sup>8</sup> Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* has long been held up as a model literary representation of this mid-century reform craze. I would like to return to *Blithedale* in the context of Brisbane's *Tribune* columns and early suburbanization in the United States to examine it as a suburban romance. I will claim that Hawthorne uses the character of Miles Coverdale to link a new physical space in America—that of the suburb—to the literary genre of the romance. While many writers were using print culture to suggest shapes for suburban growth,

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<sup>7</sup> In the first issue, he claimed that he "intend[ed] to lay before the Public the practical means which that great Mind has proposed for alleviating the vast amount of misery which exists in Society, and for elevating the Social Condition of Man, and securing ultimately his happiness" (*Tribune*, March 1, 1842, p. 1). On March 19 of the same year, noting that the daily *Tribune* sold 13,000 copies and the weekly 10,000, he spoke of the extent of publicity the article provided for the associationist cause (p. 1).

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson to Thomas Carlyle, 1840. Quoted in *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Ralph L. Rusk, Ed. 5 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), Vol. 2, p. 353.

Hawthorne plays with the notion of a physical landscape as nothing more than an imagined community.<sup>9</sup> While that claim in itself is not necessarily new or noteworthy, my reading of *Blithedale* suggests that Hawthorne did not regard an imagined community as failure. The text certainly satirizes the development of Brook Farm and its eventual downfall, but it also celebrates the initial impulse that led to its formation. Hawthorne depicts the suburban environment as an outpost slightly removed from the ordinary course of travel where people and objects can play with pre-determined identities and roles, a space that invites forgetfulness of other places and obligations and encourages arcadian idealism. At the same time that it presages hope and embodies newness, though, the suburb, like the romance, is inherently a lament for a moment that has already passed, a requiem for a way of living, interacting, and perceiving the world that is no longer a possibility.

#### Suburban America and Mid-Century Associationist Reform

As city rents soared in response to increased industrialization and population expansion and cholera outbreaks spread through urban neighborhoods in the 1840s and 1850s, towns outside but within reach of northeastern cities became increasingly alluring to middle-class Americans. Property could be purchased relatively cheaply, rail and steamship offered efficient transportation to and from work, and natural settings promised fresh air, opportunities for leisure, and aesthetic gratification. In search of privacy to experiment with new forms of community organization, Brisbane was especially

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<sup>9</sup> The phrase “imagined community” is, famously, Benedict Anderson’s; see *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

drawn to the possibilities for communal organization and activity in the suburbs. In their desire to correct labor exploitation and individual corruption, Fourierists sought to reshape the landscape between urban and rural America in a more formal way than traditional land prospectors and commuting businessmen did. According to historian Carl Guarneri, American Associationists frequently followed Fourier's recommendation to establish phalanxes in agricultural areas that were in close proximity to large cities (ideally no more than fifty miles away): "[T]he Fourierists' suburban 'new industrial world' was meant to reconcile the machine and the garden (to use Leo Marx's terms). Like good utopians – and many other nineteenth-century Americans – Associationists felt they could blend old ideals and new techniques."<sup>10</sup> In that sense, they did not seek to escape industrialization altogether; rather, they hoped to improve upon the status quo by outlining a way of living that would address and mitigate the challenges inaugurated by new technologies and population shifts. Brisbane and his followers envisioned the suburban landscape as a space where classes could intermingle and necessary work could be shared among its members. The hope was that by attracting a broad range of people with different talents and backgrounds, they could fashion a self-sufficient community that combined, in the words of suburban historian Dolores Hayden, "industry and agriculture, offering the advantages of both city and country."<sup>11</sup> Through their model suburban communities, they sought to provide Americans with an alternate ways to organize their work and home lives.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Utopian Alternative*, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), p. 15.

As the son of a successful land speculator from Batavia, New York, a small town between Buffalo and Rochester, Brisbane had witnessed firsthand the process by which transportation developments could transform sleepy villages into bustling urban satellites. He first met Fourier in 1832 while studying abroad in France and immediately was drawn to the philosopher's theory of improving people's experiences with labor by restructuring society into settlements of 1620 people in the pastoral countryside (two each of the 810 basic personality types identified in Fourier's theory of the passions). Brisbane also appreciated his mentor's business sense. While working as a traveling salesman, Fourier had experienced both the numbing ennui of white-collar labor and the power of marketing to cultivate an aesthetic and sell a product. His theories of attractive labor and passionate attraction promised to reform society by integrating a shared sense of beauty and responsibility from an earlier era into revitalized constellations of commerce and industry. When Brisbane returned to the United States in 1834, he vowed to popularize Fourier's ideas among American readers. Marital problems and economic setbacks delayed his plans, though, as the Panic of 1837 demolished the savings he had hoped to invest in land speculation for a model Fourieristic community.

Fourier died in 1837, but it was not until 1839 that Brisbane was able to regroup from financial losses and earnestly contemplate the practical adaptation of the philosopher's theories to American audiences. In *The Social Destiny of Man* (1840), he outlined the tenets of a new Fourieristic reform movement, which he designated "Associationism." Half of this 480-page tract consisted of a translation of Fourier's writings, while the other half showcased Brisbane's own theories and reflections. Central to his message, as he explained in the March 16,

1842 of the *Tribune*, was the belief that “[t]he interest of the Individual would be the interest of the Mass, and the interest of the Mass that of the Individual.”<sup>12</sup>

Associationist principles insisted that if an individual’s desires for health, beauty, and financial stability were met, he or she would become a more efficient worker, and society as a whole would benefit.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, by taking a communal approach to the organization of domestic life, individuals could pool their resources when it came to home-keeping, childcare, and meal preparation, leaving more time and energy for leisure activities and aesthetic pleasures.<sup>14</sup> It was a delicate balancing act: even as he claimed that society operated best when individuals worked together toward a common goal, he maintained that personal needs and interests would not be sacrificed to the larger system or group. As he elaborated in his 1843 pamphlet *Association*, each member would own shares of the community’s stock (comprised of “[t]he lands, edifices, flocks, implements, machinery and other property of an Association – that is, its

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<sup>12</sup> p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> In his introduction Brisbane asks, “What does man require to be happy?”. The answer, which he provides himself, is “Riches, and an ennobling and pleasing activity” [*The Social Destiny of Man: or, Association and Reorganization of Industry* (1840. Reprint, New York: Augustus M Kelley, Publishers, 1969), p. vi]. Significantly, religion does not feature prominently in his reform trajectory. Although he does not reject it altogether, he does suggest that people have been manipulated to curtail necessities and desires through the belief that they will obtain a heavenly reward for their struggles. Subsequent in-text citations for *The Social Destiny of Man* will be abbreviated SCM and will refer to this edition.

<sup>14</sup> In that sense, his reformist principles were extremely forward-thinking for the time period. In *The Social Destiny of Man*, he argued against traditional domestic organizations by insisting that women were equal to men and deserved equal opportunities: “Let not the system be excused by saying that the character of woman is particularly adapted to it. It is not so: her destiny is not to waste her life in a kitchen, or in the petty cares of a household. Nature made her the equal of man, and equally capable of shining with him in industry and in the cultivation of the arts and sciences; - not to be his inferior, to cook and sew for him, and live dependently at his board” (p. 6).



personal and real Estate”), similar to “the capital of a bank or railroad.”<sup>15</sup> All individuals would operate as “joint proprietors,” and as such, would feel more invested in the community’s fate than they would in a society comprised of isolated households (*A*, p. 31). Therefore, although an individual member could sell or buy shares, the property itself could not be divided or sold without the agreement of the entire community. He frequently claimed that Associationist ideology would enable even individuals from the poorer classes to enjoy satisfying food and shelter as they contributed to the wellbeing of themselves and others.<sup>16</sup>

In all of his writings, Brisbane suggested that new developments in suburban architecture such as those being popularized by A. J. Downing and A. J. Davis could be utilized to facilitate Associationist goals. Indeed, he intimated that recent innovations in home, industrial, and commercial design could attain an unparalleled pinnacle of achievement in reformist communities. Through an “architecture of combination and unity,” which he designated “the architecture of the future,” the material landscape would speak to “all the sentiments and wants” of man’s nature by “combin[ing] in the highest degree the useful and the beautiful” (*SDM*, p. 362). A central building, the phalanstery, would function as the center of domestic and social activities:

In the centre will be erected a large and elegant Edifice, composed of a centre, two wings and two sub-wings. The Edifice will be

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<sup>15</sup> *Association; or, A Concise Exposition of the Practical Part of Fourier’s Social Science*. 1843. Reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1975, p. 31. Subsequent in-text citations of this text will be abbreviated *A* and will refer to this edition.

<sup>16</sup> In the March 26, 1842 issue of the *Tribune*, Brisbane suggested that members contribute \$1000 to the Association in return for a lifetime of housing, food, education, and health care (p. 1).

constructed in every way so as to promote the health and comfort of the members of the Association. ... The Domain would be laid out and cultivated with as much beauty and care as the parks and gardens of some of the rich Nobles of England; it would be diversified by gardens, fields, lawns, woodlands, glades, fruit orchards, and vineyards, and would be as magnificent as the combined efforts of the Association, the Genius of Man and his Sentiment of the beautiful, could make it.<sup>17</sup>

Private rooms and apartments, which could be rented, would be separated by partition walls with doors opening onto a large gallery which would serve as an indoor street for the community, thus combining “[t]he charm of domestic privacy and the pleasures of social life” (A, pp. 23-4).<sup>18</sup> Brisbane likened the design of the phalanx to “a town under one roof” with “an avenue or public way, corresponding to a street, which will form a means of communication with all quarters of the building” (A, p. 20). The central hall would be approximately twenty-four feet wide in a large Association, so that, “by means of it, the inhabitants could, in the depths of winter, visit each other, go to parties, public assemblies, concerts, lectures, etc. without knowing whether it snowed or rained, or whether it was cold or blustering” (p. 20). He characterized such accommodations as a great improvement both for the urban poor, who were confined to unhealthy tenements, cellars, and garrets, and to families who felt isolated in the countryside.<sup>19</sup> Residents would benefit from shared spaces such

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<sup>17</sup> *Tribune*, March 15, 1842, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> In the March 29, 1842 issue of the *Tribune*, Brisbane claimed that these private rooms would “vary in price from \$30 to \$500 per annum” and would be selected based on individual “tastes and pecuniary means” (p. 1).

<sup>19</sup> Brisbane made similar arguments, albeit less frequently, about the need to abolish slavery. In the March 5, 1842 issue of the *Tribune*, he insinuated that Associationism would necessarily end slavery: “Slavery, and the abuses of our system of Hired Labor or Labor for Wages, are results of the Repugnant Industry which characterize the productive Element of the false Societies now and hitherto existing on the earth. Slavery, Oppression and Injustice will continue until Industry is rendered Attractive” (p. 1).

as the libraries, reading rooms, galleries, and indoor gardens. To that end, varieties of plants and trees would be chosen for their beauty as much as for their production. Since a plum tree was less attractive than a pear tree, for example, fewer plum trees would be planted on the grounds than pear trees (*SDM*, p. 352).

Before any construction began, however, an advantageous location needed to be located, which he identified in *A Social Destiny of Man* as “adjoining a forest, and situated in the vicinity of a large city, which would afford a convenient market for its products” (p. 350).<sup>20</sup> While the suburbs offered privacy, space, and accessibility, Brisbane also insisted that such locales were key to the reformation of society on a much larger scale. Calling attention to the ways in which recent economic depressions, population shifts, and housing trends had perpetuated already disconcerting class tensions and lifestyle discrepancies, he identified the landscape between rural and urban America as indicative of the negative effects of a society that valued individual prosperity above all else. He criticized the “rural scenes” that were celebrated by many of his contemporaries by pointing out that such fields were “cultivated ... by poor laborers, whose condition excited pity” (*SCM*, p. 390). The pleasures afforded by the natural environment in its current state, according to Brisbane, stood in “constant contradiction of civilization, in which the *beautiful* exists only at the expense of the *useful*” (*SCM*, p. 390). When aesthetic pleasure aligned itself with leisure and stood in opposition to labor and productivity, everyone suffered. The rapidly

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<sup>20</sup> He expanded his reasoning in *Associationism*, designating the ideal spot as within twenty to thirty miles of a major urban area (p. 16).

expanding northeastern suburbs showcased the unfortunate results of such practices, as

destitute workmen whose primary wants are hardly satisfied [are] exposed in the fields to a hot sun without refreshments, or an awning to shade them, or confined in close and unhealthy manufactories; while in some neighboring town or city the idle rich and loungers in gardens and places of amusement, are supplied with ice-creams, wines, and every delicacy. (SCM, p. 391)

Associationism promised to reunite use and beauty, and it would undertake their reacquaintance in suburban landscape. In addition to proximity to markets and necessary facilities, the transitional status of suburbs in the middle decades of the nineteenth century made them uniquely malleable. By establishing communities nearby major cities, their plan would gain adherents more quickly at the same time that they maintained a necessary privacy to experiment with traditional organizations of domestic life. As Brisbane phrased it in *Associationism*, “The Association should also be near a large city to be at once more generally known, and lead to a more rapid imitation” (p. 16), for “[if] we can substitute peaceably and gradually Associations ... in the place of present falsely and defectively organized townships, we can effect quietly and easily ... a social transformation and a mighty reform” (pp. 73-74).

Gaining exposure through articles, books, and lectures, Brisbane’s vision began to be tested in earnest in the 1840s. According to Dolores Hayden, “[t]hose most receptive to the communitarian call tended to be without education or substantial funds, small business owners and urban working people like Fourier himself, who chafed at the inequities of daily life enough to commit themselves

to drastic changes.”<sup>21</sup> Although the North American Phalanx, located forty miles outside of New York City near Red Bank, New Jersey, was the largest and most successful results of his plans, many other reformers established communities in suburban landscape following his recommendations.<sup>22</sup> Between 1842 and 1852, almost thirty phalanxes formed in the United States.<sup>23</sup> Guarneri notes that “[t]he depression’s impact on trades helps account for the many urban craftsmen – especially carpenters – from Albany, Boston, Providence, and New York City who joined Brook Farm and the North American Phalanx.”<sup>24</sup> By 1846, the American Union of Associationists had set up headquarters in New York City. Horace Greeley became a sponsoring member of the “Industrial Home Association Number I,” a community formed in Mount Vernon, New York, which was fifteen miles from the center of Manhattan and boasted 300 families in residence by 1852. Headed by John Stevens, a tailor, the association’s three hundred seventy acres were divided into quarter-acre lots, with no member allowed to have more than one share. The plan included four half-acre school lots and a half-acre set aside for a railroad station that would service the New

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<sup>21</sup> *Seven American Utopias*, p. 156.

<sup>22</sup> The original “Articles of Confederation of the North American Phalanx” stipulated in Article 1, Section 2 that “[i]ts location shall be as near to the city of New York or Philadelphia as may be practicable” (A, p. 79).

<sup>23</sup> Guarneri, *Utopian Alternative*, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Utopian Alternative*, p. 66. He is referring to the depression of 1840-43: “Hard times drove many northerners to Association as a practical way to pool their resources and find employment and security. Especially in the early 1840s, workers rushed to join phalanxes or in some cases to organize them. Hard-pressed urban mechanics, mainly from New York City, Brooklyn and Albany, predominated at the Sylvania, Morehouse Union, and Social Reform Communities” (p. 66).

York, New Haven, and Harlem lines.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Raritan Bay Union phalanx of Eagleswood, New Jersey, further south along the coast from the North American Phalanx, was formed in 1853 by Marcus Spring, a wealthy merchant from New York who converted to Brisbane's philosophy and invited the famous architect A. J. Davis to design the central collective dwelling. While almost all Associationist colonies were relatively short-lived, their success did seem to correlate with relative size and proximity to major metropolitan areas. Although it was founded by New York City mechanics, for instance, the Sylvania Association selected 2300 acres of land in the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania, one hundred miles from the city and forty miles from the nearest railroad. The group's rapid dissolution illustrated the prudence of starting with a small property as close as possible to a large city.

The most famous "practical trial" of Brisbane's Associationist plans took place at Brook Farm. Eight miles west of Boston's center in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, the 170-acre former farm was bounded on one side by the Charles River and on the other by Baker Street, a thoroughfare that connected the towns of Roxbury and Dedham to Newton, Massachusetts. An early advertisement for the community marketed its location as an amenity, describing it as a "'place of great natural beauty, combining a convenient nearness to the city with a degree of retirement and freedom from unfavorable influences unusual even in the country.'" <sup>26</sup> Although the reformers did not formally adopt Fourier's theories

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<sup>25</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, p. 52. Hayden reports that by 1852, approximately three-hundred families were in residence. By the 1860s, though, many members had sold their lots to outsiders, creating a secularized community that nonetheless had been planned along Associationist principles.

<sup>26</sup> Guarneri states that Ripley "had praised Brisbane's plan to remove 'the practical evils of society' through a model community." While it may not have shaped Brook Farm's initial plans, he

until the winter of 1843-44, Brisbane's ideas were certainly on the mind of founder George Ripley when he first discussed his idea for Brook Farm with the Transcendental Club a few weeks after reviewing *The Social Destiny of Man* for *The Dial* magazine.<sup>27</sup> Writing to his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson about his plans to join with friends in purchasing the farm where he and his wife had boarded in the summer of 1840, he explained that he wanted to "combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing them the fruits of their industry; to do away with the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all."<sup>28</sup>

As Guarneri notes, from the beginning, individuals were drawn to Brook Farm after becoming dissatisfied with certain elements of their work and home lives: "Unsuccessful in business or unable to live with the pressures and compromises of the outside world, fledgling ministers, lawyers, clerks, and artisans found congenial places in Fourier's New Industrial World as teachers, farmers, and administrators."<sup>29</sup> Single young men, especially, turned to Brook Farm and other Associationist communities for direction and definition at home

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claims that "Brisbane's book, appearing at a critical moment, crystallized Ripley's vague reform aspirations around the idea that a small community could be 'a house, which would ere long become the desire of nations'" (*Utopian Alternative*, p. 83).

<sup>27</sup> For more information on Brook Farm's decision to adopt Fourierism, and the latter incarnation's relationship to original Transcendentalist philosophies, see Guarneri, *Utopian Alternative*, p. 30. Guarneri provides an excellent bibliography that outlines the contours of the critical debate.

<sup>28</sup> Ripley to Emerson, 9 November 1840, quoted in Frothingham, *George Ripley*, pp. 307-308.

<sup>29</sup> *Utopian Alternative*, p. 77.

and work. Struggling to remain afloat in urban areas, they looked outside the city for new opportunities and approaches to everyday living. While Ripley's initial vision attracted a large number of artists and intellectuals, as he drifted towards Fourierism and decided to place a greater emphasis on communal living and industrial labor, lower-class blue- and white-collar workers began to join the group. Although the recently-formed Brook Farm Phalanx never recovered from the fire of March 1846 that demolished the phalanstery (it was under construction at the time, and members could not recoup the financial loss), Ripley achieved the most success in the effort to counteract lifestyle discrepancies based on education and class after the conversion to Fourierism in 1844. For a relatively short period in mid-century America, he and other reformers envisioned the suburbs surrounding major cities as ideal places to experiment with new theories for societal reformation and economic and cultural rejuvenation. While the Brook Farm property was sold at public auction for \$19,000 in 1849, the plans and layouts of it and many other failed Associationist groups influenced the shape of suburban community formation in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

### The Suburb as Romance

In the Preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne says that he wants to write a type of fiction that "is allowed a license with regard to every-day Probability, in view of the improved effects which he is bound to produce



thereby.”<sup>30</sup> It was a notion he had toyed with in various earlier writings, from *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). In his 1852 book about a group of reformers who locate themselves a little beyond the city and attempt to fashion a community that promises to reform the world, though, his statements about the romance take on peculiar intimations. He speaks of his desire to fashion a “theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives” (*BR*, p. 1). On the one hand, his comments attempt to frustrate anyone who might be inclined to read the story as a thinly veiled account of his experiences as one of the original sixteen members who arrived at Brook Farm in April 1841; he warns readers not to look for exact one-to-one correspondences of events, persons, or places. At the same time, his claim that “[a]mong ourselves ... there is as yet no Faery Land, so like the real world, that, in a suitable remoteness, one cannot well tell the difference, but with an atmosphere of strange enchantment, beheld through which the inhabitants have a propriety of their own” (p. 2) appears somewhat hollow—especially as he references his “old, and affectionately remembered home, at Brook Farm, as being, certainly, the most romantic episode of his own life—essentially a day-dream, and yet a fact—and thus offering an available foothold between fiction and reality” (*BR*, p. 2). Even as he denies doing so, Hawthorne equates Brook Farm with his notion of a “Faery Land,” separated just slightly from urban and rural ways of life, that attempts to erase

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<sup>30</sup> *The Blithedale Romance* (1852; rpt. New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 2. Hereafter references to this text will be abbreviated *BR* and cited within the text. All page numbers refer to this edition.

all historical traces of previous occupants and their labor in an effort to start fresh in the creation of a new and better order.

Over the course of his narrative, Hawthorne exposes the inherently romantic nature of the suburban vision by exploring gaps between artistic outlines and material incarnations. In depicting Blithedale as a “Modern Arcadia” and its inhabitants as “A Knot of Dreamers” (the titles of Chapters Eight and Three, respectively), he certainly criticizes the mismanagement that ultimately led to the dissolution of Brook Farm, but he also praises the impulses that led to such projects. Early on, Hawthorne admits that the story that follows will end with a disintegration of ideals; nevertheless, he asserts that something valuable comes into existence (even if only momentarily) in the space between dreams and reality:

Yet, after all, let us acknowledge it wiser, if not more sagacious, to follow out one’s day-dream to its natural consummation, although, if the vision have been worth the having, it is certain never to be consummated otherwise than by a failure. And what of that! Its airiest fragments, impalpable as they may be, will possess a value that lurks not in the most ponderous realities of any practicable scheme. (BR, pp. 10-11)

Hawthorne’s refusal to cast Blithedale in a completely negative light, combined with his complex characterization of Coverdale, suggests that he did not regret his own youthful idealism. Echoing the sentiments described above, he takes the opposite position that Thoreau does in *Walden*:

Therefore, if we built splendid castles (phalansteries, perhaps, they might be more fitly called,) and pictured beautiful scenes, among the fervid coals of the hearth around which we were clustering—and if all went to rack with the crumbling embers, and have never since arisen out of the ashes—let us take to ourselves no shame. In my own behalf, I rejoice that I could once think better of the world’s improvability than it deserved. It is a mistake into which

men seldom fall twice, in a lifetime; or, if so, the rarer and higher is the nature that can thus magnanimously persist in error. (BR, p. 20)

While he might agree with his character Zenobia when she protests the efficacy of any project that insists upon the ability to “remove ourselves, at pleasure, into an imaginary sphere” (BR, p. 107), in *The Blithedale Romance* Hawthorne makes it clear that he also recognizes a beauty in reformist philosophies and plans.

Through the figure of Coverdale specifically, Hawthorne considers the centrality of aesthetics in shaping life at Blithedale. As the community grows, Coverdale muses on the extent to which members are playing at labor and leisure, and at reform more generally. Before Hollingsworth gives his sermon at Eliot’s Pulpit one Sunday, he remarks that the “modern cottage[s]” that dot the property appear “so like ... plaything[s] that [they] seemed as if real joy or sorrow could have no scope within” (BR, pp. 117-18); Zenobia’s flower, the masquerade, the legend of the Veiled Lady, and the woodland festival corroborate Coverdale’s assessments. When he visits the lyceum, he notes that the young men in the audience “all looking rather suburban than rural” and insists that “[i]n these days, there is absolutely no rusticity, except when the actual labor of the soil leaves its earth-mould on the person” (BR, p. 197). Like George Ripley, the founder of Brook Farm who prepped himself for his experiment by borrowing books on farming from the Boston Athenaeum, Coverdale insinuates that members of the Blithedale community entertain a naïve faith in the power of beauty to reform the world.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For more on Ripley’s literary preparation for his social experiment, see Delano, Sterling F., *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 33.

Even as Coverdale claims to distrust Blithedale's "spick-and-span novelty" (*BR*, pp. 129-30), though, his narrative also claims sympathy with the suburban utopian vision. Reflecting on the snow as he transitions from city to country, he remarks that even it cannot help but look "inexpressibly dreary" and almost "dingy" as it falls "through an atmosphere of city-smoke, and alighting on the sidewalk, only to be moulded into the impress of somebody's patched boot or over-shoe" (p. 11). When the caravan abandons pavement for country road, he happily exclaims to himself that "there was better air to breathe. Air, that had not been breathed, once and again! Air, that had not been spoken into words of falsehood, formality, and error, like all the air of the city!" (p. 11). Like N. P. Willis, who in 1853 would favor the sense of ownership conferred upon him by the suburban environment (referring to a "delicious consciousness of being the first to be waited on, the one it was all made and meant for" over an April day in the city that seems "potted and pickled, and retailed to other customers as well"<sup>32</sup>), Coverdale associates the extra-urban environment with a much-coveted and increasingly rare sense of newness and possibility, one that affords a healthy, original relationship of self to world. Upon arrival at Blithedale, he marvels at the change in outlook produced by his new surroundings, a difference that is manifest even in the superior satisfaction of a country fire over the coal-grate's wan glow: "I felt, so much the more, that we had transported ourselves a world-wide distance from the system of society that shackled us at breakfast-time" (*BR*, p.13). A simple removal from the everyday

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<sup>32</sup> *The Home Journal*, May 14, 1853, p. 3.

urban environment promised to reshape perception and reinvigorate human interaction.

*The Blithedale Romance* was the first book that Hawthorne wrote in first person, and conversations with friends about his writing plans corroborate ostensible parallels between fictional characters and real individuals involved in the Brook Farm project and Transcendentalist philosophy. In an 1851 letter to William B. Pike, he mentioned that his next romance would revolve around notions of community and include reminiscences from his time at Brook Farm.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, Coverdale's coded references to Fourierist ideas reflect Hawthorne's engagement with questions of an individual's relationship to the community of which he is a part; he had borrowed a few volumes of the philosopher's works from an old Brook Farm associate while writing *The Blithedale Romance*. When Coverdale debates the merits of Fourier's plan with Hollingsworth after being struck by "the analogy which I could not but recognize between his system and our own" (*BR*, pp. 52-3), despite the fact that the commune's structure was not organized according to Fourieristic principles, Hawthorne invites readers to consider the fictionalized society he presents within the context of mid-century reform movements. Moreover, the fact that Coverdale admits to having read the volumes in their original French suggests that he was contemplating the unexpurgated vision of Fourier's writings, which included a system of short-term sexual matching based on personality type. Through the narrator's stated

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<sup>33</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne to William B. Pike, Lenox, July 24, 1851. *The Letters, 1843-1853*. Edited by Thomas Woodsen, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson (Vol. XVI in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), pp. 464-467.

wish to introduce the “beautiful peculiarities” (p. 53) of the project into life at Blithedale, Hawthorne begins to call his characters’ motivations into question.

Not coincidentally, Hawthorne’s own motives in joining Brook Farm had more to do with personal domestic desires than the promise of communitarian reform: while secretly engaged to Sophia Peabody, he had traveled to Roxbury with no property or income in hopes of obtaining an economical cottage suitable for a young couple. As Brenda Wineapple suggests in her recent biography, “In need of a home, an income, and a place to write, Hawthorne gladly gambled on Ripley’s arcadia”<sup>34</sup> by purchasing two shares in the community and paying an additional \$500 for a detached house. The letters he wrote to Sophia soon after his arrival focus almost exclusively on Brook Farm’s potential to satisfy their plan for a picturesque, comfortable, affordable, and convenient home life. On April 28, 1841, mentioning his longing “for thee to stray with me, in reality, among the hills, and dales, and woods, of our home,” he marveled at the sense of “seclusion” he had discovered “so short a distance from a great city ... If we were to travel a thousand miles, we could not escape the world more completely than we can here.”<sup>35</sup> The original layouts of both Brook Farm (which was at that time a private cooperative organized as a joint stock company) and Blithedale reflected Brisbane’s Associationist notions that in a reformed world, private and public need not be in conflict. Coverdale describes the relationship in the following way:

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<sup>34</sup> Hawthorne: *A Life* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2003), p. 147.

<sup>35</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne to Sophia Ripley, Brook Farm, April 28, 1841. *The Letters, 1813-1843*. Edited by Thomas Woodsen, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson (Vol. XV in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), p. 535.

The bond of our Community was such, that the members had the privilege of building cottages for their own residence, within our precincts, thus laying a hearthstone and fencing in a home, private and peculiar, to all desirable extent; while yet the inhabitants should continue to share the advantages of an associated life. (*BR*, p. 80)

Ideally, individuals could join the movement in the hopes of establishing a better life for themselves and their families while simultaneously advancing a new organizational model for American society.

Ultimately, Hawthorne only remained at Brook Farm through October 1841. Despite his initial enthusiasm, he began to tire of physical labor (members supported themselves by means of the school and farm they ran) as the months wore on and complained to Sophia that he did not have the energy to write after spending hours working in the fields. As early as May he had begun to reflect on the gap between a dreamscape and one's day-to-day material existence, or as he bemoaned in a letter written on May-day, "Alas, what a difference between the ideal and the real!"<sup>36</sup> In the same note, he contemplated the process by which language enacted a similar discrepancy:

Every day of my life makes me feel more and more how seldom a fact is accurately stated; how, almost invariably, when a story has passed through the mind of a third person, it becomes, so far as regards the impression that it makes in further repetitions, little better than a falsehood, and thus, too, though the narrator be the most truth-seeking person in existence. How marvelous the tendency is! . . . Is truth a fantasy which we are to pursue forever and never grasp?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne to Sophia Peabody, Brook Farm, May 1, 1841. *The Letters, 1813-1843*, p. 538.

<sup>37</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne to Sophia Peabody, Brook Farm, May 1, 1841. *The Letters, 1813-1843*, p. 538.

It was not that the vision itself was flawed, nor that the act of living and breathing compromised the integrity of the unsullied dream. Somewhere in the translation, though, a loss occurred. The location of that loss, whether on a page, in conversation, in mind, or in action, had geographic coordinates: it traced a path, left records, and invoked its own unfulfilled resolutions at each step of the way.

The notion that such a gap could operate as both an asset and a liability was something that Hawthorne carried beyond his experiences at Brook Farm and into his writing career. After leaving the community and starting a family with Sophia, he turned to the genre of the romance in order to explore the liminal space that he had identified in the early 1840s. By choosing to mediate his representation of Blithedale through the perspective and voice of Coverdale, Hawthorne problematizes the reformist project at the same time that he recognizes his own complicity in it.<sup>38</sup> As readers assess the narrator's interest in and engagement with the reformist community, they must grapple with any individual's relationship to the society of which he or she is a part. Upon arrival, Coverdale seeks communion with others in a natural environment, secure in the belief that he is more likely to find it, and thus to live consciously and happily, outside the city rather than within the urban environment. Although he manifests interest in Hollingsworth's ideas, he craves "the long-sought intimacy of a mysterious heart" (*BR*, p. 90) more than anything else. In highlighting the

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<sup>38</sup> As Nina Baym and many others have pointed out, all that we know about Blithedale comes through Coverdale: "What Blithedale 'is' is inseparable from what it is to Coverdale, for nothing is known in the book but what is known by him" [*"The Blithedale Romance: A Radical Reading," Journal of English and Germanic Philosophy* 67 (1968), p. 547].



tension between communal vision and individual prerogative, Hawthorne insinuates that suburban space is defined by a shared sense of lack.<sup>39</sup> Despite its best efforts, the suburb evoked phantom hopes of intimacy, even in the mid-nineteenth century. United in a homogeneous desire to locate selfhood in nature without having to sacrifice the convenience and amenities of industrialized America, neighbors led parallel lives that could not help but be literary, grounded in imaginative visions. As Benedict Anderson describes the phenomenon in *Imagined Communities*, "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>40</sup>

Coverdale struggles to reconcile his need for solitude with a bitter awareness of his own loneliness throughout his time at Blithedale. He worries about losing his individuality in a society that expects much from him in return for the benefits it provides. Although he likens his role both at Blithedale and in his literary account that he constructs to the Chorus in a play, as a commentator who is linked in sympathy while remaining nonetheless isolated from the others, he readily acknowledges that his status as spectator is what prompted him to leave his city apartment for open fields in the first place. He certainly enjoys

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<sup>39</sup> In her article "Fantasies of Utopia in *The Blithedale Romance*" [*American Literary History* 1:1 (Spring 1989), pp. 30-62], Lauren Berlant argues that "*Blithedale* stages the relationship between collective and subjective desire not simply as a similitude – where love and community become simultaneous ends of utopian practice and projection – but also as a site of tension. ...the narrative poses the double articulation of individual and collective identity as a *problem* in history and for the narratives and persons that operate within its sphere" (p. 30). Although Berlant goes on to focus on the romantic and sexual implications of tension as they play out in the text, her insight applies to my argument, as well.

<sup>40</sup> *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 15. Similarly to Hawthorne, Anderson does not aim to demarcate a distinct line between success and failure in this regard. Instead, he argues that "[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (p. 15).

aspects of his urban surroundings and the trappings of bachelorhood, and reminisces about lighting a fire in his grate, smoking a cigar, drinking sherry with friends, “and spen[ding] an hour in musings of every hue, from the brightest to the most somber” (p. 8). He even admits to “being, in truth, not so very confident as at some former periods, that this final step, which would mix me up irrevocably with the Blithedale affair, was the wisest that could possibly be taken” (p. 8). His in-town lodging offers a sort of community of its own; even his rooms benefit from the proximity to those occupied by others as they “partake of the warmth of all the rest” (p. 10). But in the book’s opening chapter, reluctantly facing the fact that he is “really getting to be a frosty bachelor, with another white hair, every week or so, in my mustache” (*BR*, p. 9), he (in his own words) heroically takes one last puff from his cigar and

quitted my cosey [sic] pair of bachelor-rooms – with a good fire burning in the grate, and a closet right at hand, where there was still a bottle or two in the champagne-basket, and a residuum of claret in a box, and somewhat of proof in the concavity of a big demijohn – quitted, I say, these comfortable quarters, and plunged into the heart of the pitiless snow-storm, in quest of a better life. (p. 10)

What constitutes “a better life,” of course, remains in question throughout the *Blithedale Romance*, not only for Coverdale, but for the book’s other characters, and for the reader, as well.

Although he is immediately struck by the ways in which the change in scenery signals an improved mental and physical state, Coverdale manifests an awareness of his position in a liminal landscape almost immediately. Even as he navigates a new type of space at Blithedale, he constantly references his old way of life. As if in response to the stress of adjusting to a new locale, he becomes sick

soon after his arrival, which compromises his ability to do work. In the chapter entitled "Coverdale's Sick-Chamber," he reminisces about his urban existence and second-guesses the rationale that led him to his current spot, asking, "What, in the name of common-sense, had I to do with any better society than I had always lived in! It had satisfied me well enough" (*BR*, p. 40). From his "pleasant bachelor-parlor, sunny and shadowy, curtained and carpeted, with the bed-chamber adjoining; my centre-table, strewn with books and periodicals, my writing-desk" to his leisurely walks to libraries and galleries amidst "the suggestive succession of human faces, and the brisk throb of human life, in which I shared" (p. 40) and evening dinners out, followed by concerts, clubs, theatres, and parties, he wonders what sort of paradise he had envisioned outside the city. Convincing himself that his illness is a sign that his body is not ready for the new environment that he has found himself in, he mocks the experiment and his fellow travelers as deluded dreamers. Even as he claims not to regret "that I once had faith and force enough to form generous hopes of the world's destiny – yes! – and to do what in me lay for their accomplishment" (p. 11), he is forced to grapple with his own self-delusions and fantasies over the course of his sojourn at Blithedale in unanticipated ways.

Much of his disillusionment stems from interactions with other individuals in the community. As someone who prides himself in his ability to read other characters without revealing his own stake in the activity of observation, Coverdale takes pains to conceal himself from Hollingsworth, Zenobia, Priscilla, and Moody at the same time that he seeks communion with them. Claiming a need for periodic seclusion in order to regroup and rejuvenate, his desire for space also operates as a need for critical distance. Whenever he has

the opportunity, he retires to the treetop of a white pine, which he designates his hermitage. Surrounded by leaves and grapevine, he prizes this “hollow chamber, of rare seclusion” and catalogues his minor domestic improvements to the space “to enlarge the interior, and open loop-holes through the verdant walls” (p. 98). He claims that it serves as an artist’s retreat – a good place to write poems and essays, and to smoke cigars – and as such, exists as “my one exclusive possession, while I counted myself a brother of the socialists” (p. 99). As a self-described symbol of his individuality, he seeks to keep it “inviolable.” From his hidden perspective, though, he spends most of his time watching over the group through “several of its small windows” (p. 99). The ability to escape at will enables Coverdale to remain in and outside of the social reform project at Blithedale. His height and distance diminish the scale and significance of Hollingsworth’s visions and Zenobia’s theatricality; privately, he can mock the plan and its adherents even as he continues to enjoy group privileges and cast himself as a sympathetic listener upon his return.

Little by little, both his fellow travelers and the reader come to suspect Coverdale’s motives. His sexual attraction to Zenobia becomes more palpable as the story continues, and he has a major disagreement with Hollingsworth about the direction that the community should take. As the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that his accounts of events and individuals cannot be trusted, that he modifies accounts and conversations to portray himself in a better light. It also becomes apparent that while Coverdale doubts the project’s ability to reform the world, he continues to see the potential for experimental forms of intimacy at Blithedale even after the initial sheen has worn off. His off-handed references to Fourier, continual invocation of his bachelorhood, and

fraught admissions of attraction to all three of the other major characters (Zenobia, Hollingsworth, and Priscilla) at various points in *The Blithedale Romance* gesture towards a desire for romantic communion more than anything else. However, he finds himself unable to reconcile his own ideal vision with the needs of others, and he describes himself as standing “on other terms than before, not only with Hollingsworth, but with Zenobia and Priscilla” (p. 138). He tries to articulate the change that has taken place, describing his environment as “suddenly faded... that it was this [some principal circumstance] which gave the bright color and vivid reality to the whole affair” (p. 138). When Coverdale’s hope for intimacy’s realization disappears, he feels a strange sort of loss:

...it was the dreamlike and miserable sort of change that denies you the privilege to complain, because you can assert no positive injury, nor lay your finger on anything tangible. It is a matter which you do not see, but feel, and which, when you try to analyze it, seems to lose its very existence, and resolve itself into a sickly humor of your own. Your understanding, possibly, may put faith in this denial. But your heart will not so easily rest satisfied. it incessantly remonstrates, though, most of the time, in a bass-note, which you do not separately distinguish; but, now-and-then, with a sharp cry, importunate to be heard, and resolute to claim belief. ‘Things are not as they were!’—It keeps saying... (pp. 138-139)

Invoking the description of the romance in Hawthorne’s Preface, this passage insinuates that romance, like the suburban experience, involves loss—in other words, that the book’s ending should not be seen as an authorial failure, but rather as fidelity to the truth of the human heart.

Coverdale reacts by retreating further away from other people, and by becoming more cynical in his views. As holes and exaggerations in his narration call his pronouncements and insights into question, he criticizes the project more openly and voyeurism becomes his only means of experiencing a sense of

closeness to other individuals. Eventually, he decides to temporarily remove himself from Blithedale in order to “take an exterior view of what we had all been about” (p. 140). In the chapter entitled “Leave-Takings,” he returns to Boston and stays at a hotel for a few days. Sitting in his rented room, this time he welcomes the reprieve provided by the urban environment and suggests that the reformist project is shaped by unrealistic expectations :

... as matters now were, I felt myself (and having a decided tendency towards the actual, I never liked to feel it) getting quite out of my reckoning, with regard to the existing state of the world. I was beginning to lose the sense of what kind of a world it was, among innumerable schemes of what it might or ought to be. ...No sagacious man will long retain his sagacity, if he live exclusively among reformers and progressive people, without periodically returning into the settled system of things, to correct himself by a new observation from that old stand-point. (pp. 140-141)

Post-crisis, it is not that Coverdale objects to the type of reform that Blithedale seeks to popularize (although he certainly objects to Hollingsworth’s single-minded pursuit of his cause above all else), but rather that he worries about the capacity of such schemes to warp one’s understanding of his surroundings on a more general level. He convinces himself that it is necessary to maintain a sense of contrast, lest a baseline for comparisons and changes disappear altogether.

Try as he might, though, he cannot deny Blithedale’s impact on his perception of himself and his surroundings. Sitting in the hotel, he reflects upon the odd predicament he has found himself in—recent thoughts, conversations, and experiences have fundamentally shifted his worldview, so much so that at the hotel he remarks that “the very circumstances now surrounding me—my coal-fire, and the dingy room in the bustling hotel—appeared far off and intangible” (p. 146). At the same time, he feels removed from the life that had so

recently consumed him: “Blithedale looked vague, as if it were at a distance both in time and space, and so shadowy, that a question might be raised whether the whole affair had been anything more than the thoughts of a speculative man. I had never before experienced a mood that so robbed the actual world of its solidity” (p. 146). While he attempts to brush off the experiment’s importance to his sense of identity by insisting that he had “staked no valuable amount of hope or fear” (p. 195) on the enterprise and that he had never taken it seriously (“it had enabled me to pass the summer in a novel and agreeable way, had afforded me some grotesque specimens of artificial simplicity, and could not, therefore, so far as I was concerned, be reckoned a failure”), it is clear that his interactions with others at Blithedale have profoundly affected him. So even as he returns to his previous state at the end of his narrative, a bachelor who, even thirteen years later, cannot find a cause worth dying for, he acknowledges that “[m]ore and more, I feel that we had stuck upon what ought to be a truth” (pp. 245-246), regardless of the fact that “[t]he experiment, so far as its original projectors were concerned, proved long ago a failure, first lapsing into Fourierism, and dying, as it well deserved, for this infidelity to its own higher spirit” (p. 246).

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Ultimately, both Coverdale and Hawthorne conclude that narrative alone can assess what transpired at Blithedale.<sup>41</sup> Recognizing that language itself is

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<sup>41</sup> As Benjamin Scott Grossberg notes in “‘The Tender Passion Was Very Rife Among Us’: Coverdale’s Queer Utopia and *The Blithedale Romance*,” “[Coverdale’s] writing is like our rereading: heavily self-conscious, aware of the process of constructing a narrative from fragmented events. The result is that we become sensitive to the narrative as a surface distinct from events, an interpretation. And this sense of dissonance forces us to distinguish Coverdale’s vision of Blithedale from the community itself, his ambition for the thing as opposed to what it actually seems to be” [*Studies in American Fiction* 28:1 (Spring 2000), p. 6].

inadequate to the task, they simultaneously affirm the written word's power to do justice to the gap between dreams and realities, idealistic visions and daily routines. While writing cannot help but embody the distance (however slight) between feeling and thought, experience and reflection, that it endlessly seeks to overcome, that doubleness testifies to loss and gain at once, to the inevitable failure of reformist schemes and to the recognition of truth seen and sought. The hope for a better life, author and character insist, is not misplaced; the impulse to reshape and start over is not "a foolish dream" (p. 227), however much Zenobia and the other characters at Blithedale would insist in moments of disillusioned frustration. Certainly, in clearing space and constructing "castles," a new host of transactions, associations, exclusions, and erasures ensures the impossibility of ever achieving desired goals, but the urge to improve self and community reflects a hopefulness that is fundamentally human.

Towards the end of *The Blithedale Romance*, a defeated Zenobia confesses to Coverdale that she is "weary of this place, and sick to death of playing at philanthropy and progress" (p. 227). Referring to existence at Blithedale as "mock-life," she reflects a loss of faith in person and plan that foreshadows her suicide soon afterward. To readers today, the utopian craze that swept nineteenth century America in the 1840s looks a lot like escapist fantasy. By the mid-1850s, all but one of the almost thirty phalanxes formed in the previous decade had failed, and their properties were relinquished to outsiders. Nonetheless, they left their imprint on the landscape, as well as in public structures, activist movements, and domestic desires and discontents. In their identification of the suburban environment as a location for reform and in their

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efforts to remedy social, political, and economic problems by mitigating the tension between public and private, self and other, individual and community by appealing to a shared aesthetic, they set the stage for later suburban development. Even in the twentieth century, we can see traces of utopian idealism, attempts at associationist reclamation, in gated subdivisions and community bylaws. If it is “mock-life,” which on some level it certainly is, the suburb encourages a form of play that has been enormously seductive and long-lived.

Comparing the allure of suburban America for mid-century reformers to the possibilities of the romance genre for a writer like himself, Hawthorne grappled with the notion of physical landscape as imagined community, of a space, whether material or textual, where, as Brisbane insisted, the interest of the individual would be the interest of the mass and vice-versa. Even in his Preface, he invoked the words of George Ripley, who hoped that Brook Farm would offer “a model of life which shall combine the enchantment of poetry with the facts of daily experience.”<sup>42</sup> For a man whose house troubles followed him throughout adulthood, who struggled to provide for his family and demarcate lines between his work and home life, *The Blithedale Romance* stands as a hopeful, if nostalgic meditation. He sought domestic contentment on his own terms and even constructed a tower at the Wayside where he could write, as biographer Brenda Wineapple phrases it, “high above the fray, entering his sanctum through a trapdoor, he told Longfellow, on which he’d plant his chair,”<sup>43</sup> although late in

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<sup>42</sup> George Ripley quoted in Spann, Edward K., *Brotherly Tomorrows: Movements for a Cooperative Society in America, 1820-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> *Hawthorne: A Life* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2003), p. 333.

life he voiced sensations of perpetual unsettlement and feared that he had “lost the capacity of living contentedly in any one place.”<sup>44</sup> In the romance genre, he found a space where he could channel personal dreams and demons into larger explorations. Regardless of the end result, whether that be a decision to leave Brook Farm or a return to snug urban bachelorhood, “some principal circumstance” (p. 138) had taken hold of the heart and propelled the body into action, and the mark it left on the earth would stubbornly remain, despite later efforts to raze over and begin again. Standing at Zenobia’s grave at the end of the book, the character who claimed that a death would be necessary to christen the enterprise witnesses that “the grass grew all the better, on that little parallelogram of pasture-land” where Zenobia lay buried. Coverdale revels in the capacity of nature to accept and absorb human activity: “She adopts the calamity at once into her system, and is just as well pleased, for aught we can see, with the tuft of ranker vegetation that grew out of Zenobia’s heart, as with all the beauty which has bequeathed to us no earthly representative, except in this crop of weeds” (p. 244).

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<sup>44</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne to Charles Ticknor, quoted in Wineapple, *Hawthorne: A Life*, p. 333.

## Chapter Six

### **Suburban Men at the Table: Culinary Aesthetics in the Mid-Century Country Book<sup>1</sup>**

In an episode from *Out of Town* (1866), American humorist Robert Barry Coffin's mid-century account of suburban domestic life outside New York City, Barry Gray (Coffin's pseudonym and the book's narrator) persuades his wife to have a group of his "artist friends" over for dinner. The prospect throws his wife into a state of nervous excitement as she contemplates what she should serve to the group of "ten hungry men" arriving from the city, knowing that they will not be satisfied with her traditional Saturday meal of "simple salt codfish and potatoes."<sup>2</sup> At the same moment that she exclaims her unwillingness to perform the task of hostess for such an occasion, an express-wagon filled with twelve hampers of food and drink arrives at their doorstep. The arrival of these provisions, ordered ahead of time by Mr. Gray, sets the stage for a banquet orchestrated by a man for his male companions. The delivery even attracts the attention of the local paper, and a journalist is sent to observe the party through a window. The published report (which Mr. Gray shares with his readers) focuses on the meal's extravagance and wild nature, from the description of the

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay will appear in *Culinary Aesthetics and Practices in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, expected publication mid-2009), edited by Monika Elbert and Marie Drews.

<sup>2</sup> Gray, Barry (Robert Barry Coffin). *Out of Town: A Rural Episode* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), p. 50. Further references to this text will refer to this edition and will be abbreviated *OT*.

“immense game-pie, composed of ducks, woodcocks, quails, and grouse” at the center of the table to the “jugged hare,” “boned turkey,” and “boiled ham, a round of beef, broiled spring chickens, ducks stuffed with olives, boned sardines, and other appetizing relishes” that surround it (*OT*, p. 59). Both the article and Mr. Gray’s account characterize the event as a success, and the descriptions of food and drink emphasize the writer’s control over his domestic environment – his wife disappears from view as he orchestrates a bachelor feast organized around masculine aesthetic sensibilities. In suburban Fordham, Mr. Gray is able to enjoy marriage without having to relinquish the pleasures of single life, and the fruits of his table reflect the benefits of living a country life within city reach. He has room to grow mint for mint juleps, neighbors who provide fresh eggs and milk for the egg-nog with strawberries and cream that he enjoys while reading, and plenty of space to store barrels of ale for impromptu celebrations. At the same time, he doesn’t have to abandon the amenities of New York City: the oyster soup, ice cream, brandy-peaches, turkey, venison, raisins, almonds, and cakes that he loves can appear at a moment’s notice. His physical location allows him to experience the best of both culinary worlds.

This chapter considers representations of food and scenes of eating in writings by Robert Barry Coffin as a window into suburban masculine domesticity in mid-nineteenth-century American literature. Commenting on the ways in which written representations of food reflect other developments and desires, Carolyn Korsmeyer remarks in *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* that “[o]ne of the most significant roles of food is social: eating is part of the

rituals, ceremonies, and practices that knit together communities.”<sup>3</sup> Because the act of eating is by nature temporal, she continues, “the temporality of a narrative, whether written, dramatic, or cinematic, permits extended reflection upon the ways eating serves (or severs) communities.” In the 1850s and 1860s, a number of popular male authors published semi-autobiographical accounts of domestic life on the edges of American cities, popularizing the suburbs as cheaper, healthier, accessible alternatives to urban areas. Food plays an important role in the idealization of home in these texts, which critics now classify under the genre of the country book.<sup>4</sup> Even though most country books from the mid-nineteenth century depict the lives of married men, women do not figure prominently within the narratives. Instead, men are represented as the connoisseurs of the table, making decisions about the garden, the cook, the arrangement of the kitchen, guest lists at parties, acceptable drinks, and the types of food eaten. The male authors and narrators of country books used culinary aesthetics and practices to assert control over their homes and wives as well as to create a sense of community among men and between author and reader. Their accounts of the produce they grew, the ice cream they made, the meats they ordered, the spirits they brewed, and the meals they enjoyed invite new considerations of the relationship between men and the home in the nineteenth-century. As Americans imagined and planned suburban communities, print culture registered and

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<sup>3</sup> Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste: Food & Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> For supplemental information on the country book as a nineteenth-century literary genre, see John Stilgoe’s *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), especially Chapter Four, “Borderland Life and Popular Literature.” See also Adam Sweeting, *Reading Houses and Building Books: Andrew Jackson Downing and the Architecture of Popular Antebellum Literature, 1835-1855* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), and Loren C. Owings, *Quest for Walden: A Study of the “Country Book” in American Popular Literature with an Annotated Bibliography, 1863-1995* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997).

shaped a new architecture of domestic consumption. Through depictions of a masculine reclamation of food preparation, the country book genre positioned men as the bearers of aesthetics over simple sustenance and claimed the suburban landscape as a masculine domain devoted to sensory pleasure and self-cultivation beyond the workplace.

In *Food in the United States, 1820s-1890*, Susan Williams states that “[b]etween 1820 and 1890, American foodways changed in part because the country itself expanded dramatically.”<sup>5</sup> New and more reliable transportation options in the forms of railroads, steamships, roads, and canals gave Americans increased variety at the same time that it standardized expectations. That transportation also opened up new spaces for homes, areas previously designated as rural that small farmers had been forced to sell as a result of rising land costs and frequent economic depressions. Members of a rapidly expanding middle class began to search for real estate beyond the city proper in the hopes of obtaining privacy and green space while escaping steep rents and cholera fears.<sup>6</sup> As more and more Americans relocated outside cities and commuted to work each day, conceptions of what constituted an ideal home changed. For the individuals who moved to the suburban towns surrounding New York, Boston, and Philadelphia in the 1850s and 1860s, the aesthetics and practices of

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, Susan. *Food in the United States, 1820s-1890* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> For the history of American suburbanization, see Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); and Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003). On urban sprawl and the exodus from cities as place of residence, see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Urban Threshold: Growth and Change in a Nineteenth-Century American Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

consumption, especially of foodstuffs, became, in Susan Williams's words, "increasingly important as a measure of class distinction."<sup>7</sup>

Combining prescriptive advice with entertaining narrative and glimpses into the private lives of public individuals, country books like those written by Coffin participated in the creation of an imagined suburban environment that assumed a very real presence for readers. For scholars today, these texts provide glimpses of what readers might have envisioned as the perfect home, meal, relationship, or hobby in America's earliest suburbs. Because they were meant to be read as reminiscences of one man's relocation to a new type of space, they also model the possibilities and options available to middle- and upper-middle-class Americans. In the introduction to their edited collection *Eating Architecture*, Paulette Singley and Jamie Horowitz ask: "What can be learned by examining the intersections of the preparation of meals and the production of space?"<sup>8</sup> The authors of country books really lived in the locations they described, so the types of fruits and vegetables that they planted as well as the dinners, drinks, and desserts they consumed constitute clues to the ways in which changes in food production and land use, combined with technological innovations such as the railroad, had begun to avail former city dwellers with the amenities of the urban environment minus its hassles.

Although books in this genre were not always designated as "country books" at the time in which they were written, the subject, tone, and shape of the narrative were identifiable to mid-century readers, authors, and publishers.

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<sup>7</sup> *Food in the United States*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Singley, Paulette, and Jamie Horowitz, eds. *Eating Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 5.

Whether written in first or third person, the sketches that comprised a country book told a narrative of relocation to the suburbs from an urban environment. Framed as sanctioned exposés of the domestic lives of the popular writers who penned them, the incidents depicted were intended to be read as a sort of memoir. Authors talked about their real homes and neighborhoods, and conversations with their spouses, children, and friends seemed to be taken from life events. At the same time, they admitted to shaping and pruning their accounts for the sake of interest and humor. The narrators typically compared experiences of suburban life with their idealistic visions prior to relocation from the city and included detailed accounts of the architectural design of the home and grounds. Some focused on house preparation and the outdoor enjoyment almost exclusively, while others also wrote about indoor leisure activities, family time, decorations, housekeeping, and finances.

Most country-book authors were well-established periodical writers who first wrote about their domestic lives in magazine and newspaper sketches. Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806-1867), the most famous magazinist of his day, published essays about his life in the Hudson River Valley in a running column called “Country Life Within City Reach” for his magazine *The Home Journal* before gathering them into the country book *Out-doors at Idlewild; or, The Shaping of a Home on the Banks of the Hudson* (1855).<sup>9</sup> Frederic S. Cozzens (1818-1869), a wine merchant by trade, regularly published sketches in *The Knickerbocker* and *Putnam’s* in addition to founding a magazine entitled *The Wine Press* in 1854 which took wine-making and suburban living as its subject. His country book,

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<sup>9</sup> Willis, Nathaniel Parker. *Out-doors at Idlewild; or, The Shaping of a Home on the Banks of the Hudson* (New York, C. Scribner, 1855).



*The Sparrowgrass Papers; or, Living in the Country* (1856), was also originally published serially.<sup>10</sup> Sparrowgrass was Cozzens's pseudonym, and the humorous account of his family's move to "Chestnut Cottage" in Yonkers from New York City became so well known that references to the foibles of "Mr. Sparrowgrass" were not uncommon in works by other writers of the day. Donald Grant Mitchell (1822-1908), most famous for his bestselling *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1850) published under the pseudonym Ik Marvel, authored numerous country books, including *My Farm of Edgewood: A Country Book* (1863), *Wet Days at Edgewood* (1865), and *Rural Studies, with Hints for Country Places* (1867).<sup>11</sup> His articles on out-of-town living, which focused on landscape gardening and home decoration, were frequently reprinted in newspapers and magazines throughout the 1860s. Finally, George William Curtis (1824-1892), a writer who was most famous for his position as editor of the Easy Chair column for *Harper's Monthly*, published an unconventional country-book in 1856 called *Prue and I* in which he employed the conventions of the genre in an extended meditation on the role of the imagination in the lives of men like himself who worked in cities but retired to suburban areas each evening (Curtis resided in Staten Island for many years).<sup>12</sup>

Although all country books suggested that readers who cared about food should relocate to the suburban environment, I focus on those written by Robert Barry Coffin (1826-1886) in this essay for two reasons. First, perhaps with the

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<sup>10</sup> Cozzens, Frederic S., *The Sparrowgrass Papers; or, Living in the Country* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1856).

<sup>11</sup> *Farm of Edgewood: A Country Book* (New York: C. Scribner, 1863); *Out-of-Town Places: With Hints for their Improvement* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1884); *Reveries of a Bachelor: or A Book of the Heart* (New York: Baker & Scribner, 1850); *Rural Studies, with Hints for Country Places* (New York: C. Scribner & Co., 1867); *Wet Days at Edgewood: With Old Farmers, Old Gardeners, and Old Pastorals* (New York: C. Scribner, 1865).

<sup>12</sup> Curtis, George William. *Prue and I* (New York: Dix, Edwards & Co., 1856).

exception of Frederic Cozzens, he is the least well-known among literary critics of the authors listed above. Secondly, the eating habits, taste preferences, and means of obtaining food and drink (what he grows, buys in the city, eats at restaurants, or has delivered to the country) described in his books offer an unusually detailed look into the ways in which social and technological developments affected the gender politics of food preparation and consumption for many Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. Posing as Barry Gray, Coffin suggests that men are more adept than women at satisfying sensory appetites in the home space. By characterizing mealtime as an artistic event, he argues that middle-class Americans should embrace the small luxuries afforded by suburban domestic life as rewards for their labor in the city each day.

Aside from what we learn about him in his own writings, there is little known biographical information on Robert Barry Coffin. Born in the Hudson River Valley in 1826, he started writing anonymously for periodicals immediately after college. After a stint as a book-keeper for a New York importing house between 1845 and 1849, he left for health reasons and opened a bookstore with his brother in Elmira, New York, in 1852. He briefly considered a career among the Episcopal clergy but returned to the city in 1857 and began to pursue writing in earnest. In 1858, he was named assistant editor at *The Home Journal*, a magazine edited by N. P. Willis to which he had contributed anonymously since 1849. At the same time, he assumed the position of art critic for *The Evening Post*. From 1863 to 1869 and from 1875 until shortly before his death in 1886, while publishing his writing in book form and continuing to write for the periodical press, he also worked as an auditor's clerk in the New York Custom House. In his later years, he edited a monthly publication devoted to

gastronomy called *The Table* (in 1873) and contributed culinary-themed articles to a Philadelphia magazine called *The Caterer* (from 1882 to 1886).<sup>13</sup> At the height of his literary career, he was celebrated for the humorous sketches about domestic life that he wrote for various periodicals during the 1850s and 1860s and

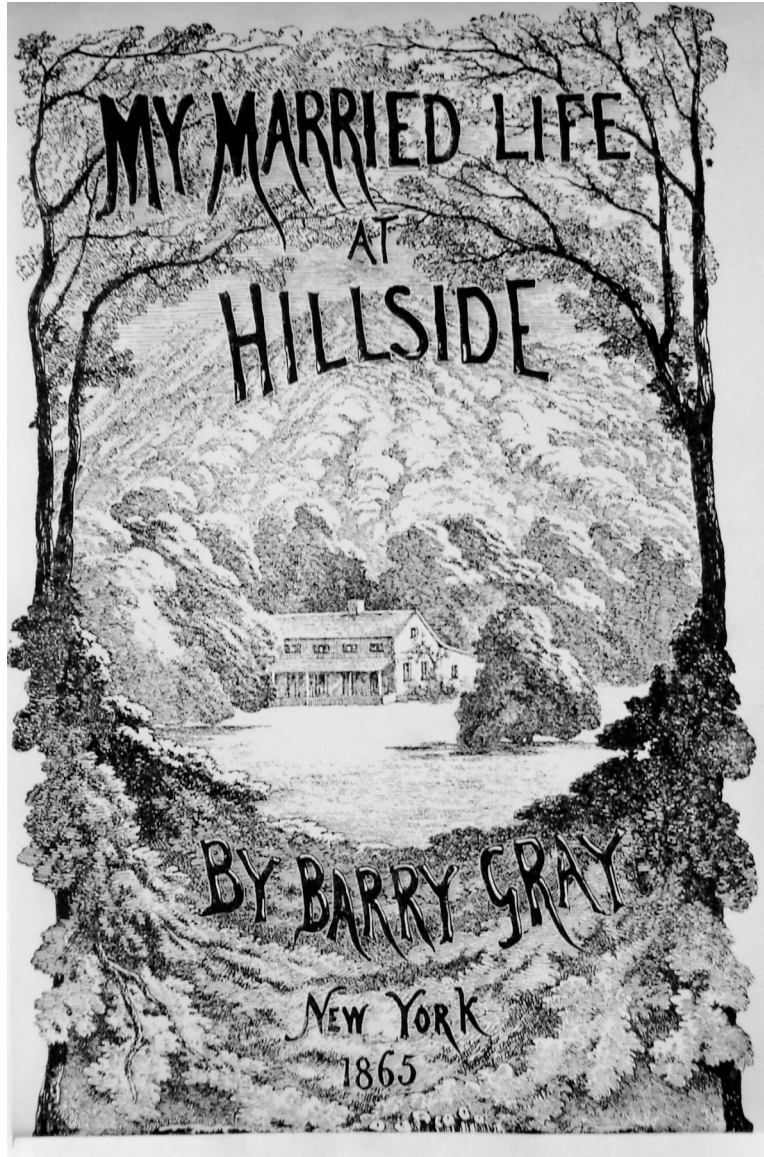


Image 23. Title page for *My Married Life at Hillside* (1865)

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<sup>13</sup> *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*. Ed. John Fiske and J. G. Wilson (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1887-1889), p. 626.

eventually published as *My Married Life at Hillside* (1865) [Image 23], *Matrimonial Infelicities* (1865), *Out of Town: A Rural Episode* (1866), *Cakes and Ale at Woodbine* (1868), and *Castles in the Air and Other Fantasies* (1871).<sup>14</sup> These writings were received by readers as the poetic sketches of a man who had approached marriage with caution, only to become consumed with the ennui of home life, especially upon the discovery that he could retain elements of his former bachelor lifestyle in the country. One advertising note for *Out of Town* suggested that both married and single men would find humor in Gray's account of his life story; another review praised its verisimilitude to the lived experience of readers as a breath of fresh air.<sup>15</sup>

Like his fictional counterpart, Coffin moved to Fordham from New York City in the mid 1860s. At the time of his relocation, the area now known as the Bronx had become a popular locale for raising a family outside the city. The completion of the New York and Harlem River Railroad in 1841, along with new road construction, was transforming a rural landscape into a suburban paradise. As Lloyd Ultan and Barbara Unger explain in *Bronx Accent*, "Stations erected in the middle of nowhere attracted businesses and people, and new villages, such as Mott Haven, Tremont, and Williamsbridge, sprouted up around them seemingly overnight. These transformed The Bronx over time to a suburb, with residents commuting by railroad to their jobs in New York City. One of these

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<sup>14</sup> *Cakes and Ale at Woodbine; From Twelfth Night to New Year's Day* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1868); *Castles in the Air, and Other Phantoms* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1871); *Matrimonial Infelicities: With an Occasional Felicity, By Way of Contrast* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1865); *My Married Life at Hillside* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1865); *Out of Town: A Rural Episode*. (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866).

<sup>15</sup> [Advertisement for *Out of Town*]. *The Round Table: A Saturday Review of Politics, Finance, Literature, Society*. 4:67 (December 15, 1866), p. 332.

new settlements was the village of Fordham.”<sup>16</sup> Edgar Allan Poe had relocated to Fordham from Manhattan in 1846 in the hopes of curing his wife’s tuberculosis, and after his death in 1849, the town became especially attractive to the literati. The Irish poet John Savage moved there during the Civil War and soon talked Robert Barry Coffin into moving there as well.

Coffin published *Out of Town: A Rural Episode* in 1866, a text that opens with a discussion between Mr. Gray and his wife about whether they should seek “cheaper,” “healthier,” and “pleasanter” (*OT*, p. iv) domestic accommodations. After visiting “a large number of ‘suburban retreats’” (p. 2) in search of the ideal place to live, the narrator singles out a particular village about an hour away from business, which he describes as a “a quiet, unpretentious little place, nestled on and among the hills, with sundry picturesque houses, and an air of thrift pervading its people that was delightful to witness” (p. v). After they move, he designates his new home “Woodbine Cottage” after the vine that grows around the front veranda, even though he later realizes that the namesake might be honeysuckle rather than woodbine.

In *Out of Town* and its sequel, *Cakes and Ale at Woodbine*, Coffin represents his alter ego settling into a new sort of domestic rhythm as he transforms into a suburban epicure. His unique location offers urban and rural amenities of the sort advertised in *Woodward’s Country Homes*, a popular architectural pattern book published in 1866 that encouraged readers to move “ten to fifteen miles away from the unceasing noise of the city, where the business of the day is

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<sup>16</sup> Ultan, Lloyd, and Barbara Unger. “Out of Town: The Suburban Bronx, 1800-1898.” *Bronx Accent: A Literary and Pictorial History of the Borough* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 25.

forgotten, and fresh air, fresh milk, butter, eggs, fruit, flowers, birds, etc. are luxuries unknown in town.”<sup>17</sup> Outside New York City, Mr. Gray can experiment with growing his own food while easily supplementing his produce with items from the urban market. In his half-acre garden, he allocates space for peas, beans, corn, potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, melons, beets, lettuce, and radishes, in addition to an orchard with apple trees and grapevine. Although he eventually hires a gardener to help him maintain it, he takes pride in the fact that he can grow his produce in the country “for much less than I could purchase them in town, - besides having the advantage of getting them fresh from the garden” (*OT*, p. 14). With their chickens’ eggs, his wife makes “custards, puddings, and cakes” and he concocts “noggs and mulls” (*OT*, p. 14). He buys milk from neighboring milkmaids, and an ice-man delivers ice for the refrigerator every other day in warm weather, which in turn preserves their meats and “fancy dishes” (p. 10). Barrels of ale are obtained in town or delivered by the brewers themselves. And all of it can be enjoyed in the company of good friends.

Eventually, Mr. Gray’s passion for food and drink begins to interfere with his business obligations on Wall Street. Even though his job in the city is within an easy commute, he finds himself “continually seeking reasonable excuses for not going into town every day” (*OT*, p. 12). Initially, the outside of the house attracts his attention; he takes pride in the planning and labor involved in the kitchen garden’s cultivation. After working in the yard, he enjoys “relieving the tedium of the time with a book, an iced punch, a saucer of strawberries and

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<sup>17</sup> Woodward, George E. and F. W. *Woodward’s Country Homes*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: George E. & F. W. Woodward, 1866), p. 38.

cream, and a cigar" (p. 13). Unlike his job as a clerk on Wall Street, domestic work seems important, especially gastronomically. The effort expended in taking care of the chickens and gathering their eggs, after all, yields the special reward of fresh egg-nog with his "savage literary friend" (p. 14). While his newfound respect for home duties suggests a novel recognition of his wife's efforts in that arena, he has no qualms about taking the reins from her, bypassing her focus on nutrition and economy in favor of beauty, taste, and conviviality.

As he grows accustomed to life in the suburbs, Mr. Gray contemplates the foundations of good food. The availability of fresh produce and dairy products increases his interest in the taste of what he consumes, and he begins to think more about ingredients. His detailed description of the process of making and presenting the egg-nog he enjoys with John Savage reflect his new awareness: he explains how he locates the "freshest-laid eggs," brings out "the ancestral punch-bowl" and "a bottle of old Jamaica," and "a quart of pure milk, with the cream beginning to rise on the surface" (*OT*, pp. 14-15), adding sugar and nutmeg to concoct "a drink worthy of being commemorated in verse ... while conviviality and good-fellowship ruled the hour" (p. 15). These sorts of moments, in which a culinary experience creates a mood that is conducive to conversation and reflection, become central to Mr. Gray's happiness in Fordham. He jokes to his wife that the taste of egg-nog made with fresh eggs and milk is reason enough to relocate away from the city. While he laughs at the extreme nature of his comment, his life at Woodbine has given him a different understanding of the ends of domestic organization and labor. For the first time, he begins to view food as a vehicle for community and sympathy as well as of meditation and relaxation.

As Mr. Gray manifests increased interest in domestic decision-making, his wife does not know whether she should invite or resist his intrusions into her domain. By criticizing her simple dinners and reluctance to host dinner parties, he calls into question her position of head of the home environment. Remarking, for instance, that although her meal preparation “provided munificently for the family proper,” she “had not laid in a sufficient store of the good things of this life to have satisfied, in a hospitable manner, the additional appetites which gathered around our mahogany” (*OT*, p. 50), he insinuates that their daily routine could benefit from a fresh male perspective. Mrs. Gray might understand that her husband’s friends who are visiting for a few days would not be satisfied with “simple salt codfish and potatoes” (p. 50), but she is too paralyzed to think of an adequate alternative. By ordering a food delivery, Mr. Gray effortlessly procures a week’s worth of food in a way that demonstrates his commitment to satisfying his friends’ culinary desires and preserving his wife’s sanity. Attentive to the smallest details of his guests’ comfort, he “pluck[s] a handful of mint” before the guests arrive, “bruise[ing] it against the gate-posts which command the entrance to [his] possessions” (p. 53) in order to welcome them. As the first two men remark upon the pleasant smell, Gray ushers them into his library, where “a dozen goblets gleaming with ice, golden with whiskey, softened with sugar, and fragrant with mint” (p. 54) await them. Even as he praises his wife’s planning and labor, his masculine sensory awareness distinguishes his domestic efforts. Because of his ingenuity and foresight, he and his friends do not have to leave the home space in order to entertain themselves.

Mr. Gray’s success at hosting prompts him to try his hand at planning Thanksgiving dinner in the hopes of making it a more satisfying celebration for



the whole family. Declaring that he would like a spread of the sort that he enjoyed at his grandmother's house as a child, he tells his wife that they have a duty to supply both quantity and quality for the table. On his menu list are "oysters, soup, fish, turkey, chicken-pie, vegetables innumerable, and pastry and dessert unlimitable" as well as "a roasted pig, ... a young, succulent, and crisply-cooked morsel, innocent of the sty, and stuffed with sweet smelling and savory herbs" (pp. 147-148). Mrs. Gray scoffs at his demands, exclaiming that meals like the ones provided by his grandmother are a thing of the past, but it soon becomes clear that her husband will not take no for an answer. Using their location as an excuse for his seeming extravagance, he argues that the country offers an opportunity to celebrate nature and family in ways that the city prevents: for men who live in the city, holidays like Thanksgiving offer little more than a day away from work, while their property in Fordham is naturally festive. After a magnificent dinner that celebrates the bounty of the earth, he can enjoy conversation with neighbors over tea and a game of whist accompanied by a pipe and mug of ale or cider. In his vision, family prayers and a hymn would end the evening, rounding out a day of rejuvenation and celebration by all. His wife relinquishes control, and although she afterwards balks at the amount of brandy in the mince-pies and wine in the pudding sauce, it is clear that both she and the children have enjoyed themselves.

After Thanksgiving, Mr. Gray is inspired to extend his repertoire from the aesthetics of consumption into the art of food preparation. He details the process of preparing a dish and serving it to others. Styling himself an expert on the subject of the country breakfast, with its "buckwheat cakes, country-made sausages, a delicate roll or two, and a cup of Mocha coffee, with cream" (*OT*, p.

206), he describes the shape and texture of a perfect pancake and lingers over the perfectly cooked sausage, which is “a little crispy, reminding one just a trifle of the cracklings of roasted pig” (p. 206). His wife and servant become captive assistants to his plans as he decides to oversee the culinary production from start to finish. He even recommends preparing the sausages at home, if at all possible, to ensure satisfactory results. The recipe he provides to his wife and the reader elevate the preparation of an everyday breakfast to the status of an art:

Pork, two thirds lean and one third fat, chopped finely, is, of course, the foundation for all sausages; but a boiled beef's tongue may, with a good result, be added. Salt, pepper, summer-savory, and sage should be the chief seasoning, though curry and spices may be effectively joined thereto. The mixing of these various ingredients—so that no one savor predominates—should be as carefully wrought as in making a salad. It is not everyone who can properly accomplish this, any more than can every one create a salad. It requires judgment in preparing the combinations, skill in putting them together, and an appreciative taste. Then it should be made into small cakes, and fried slowly and kindly in its own fat. (pp. 206-207)

While his servant does the actual frying, he supervises the entire procedure, recalling a failed attempt to fry the sausages in olive oil and a subsequent return to sausage fat. His opinions and knowledge on the subject surprise his wife, who asks him if he has been surreptitiously attending a French cooking academy in his spare time. While Gray admits that he has not, he jokingly claims to have “serious intentions of visiting it” in order to “put the professor up to one or two ideas in the preparation of certain new dishes” such as green corn pudding (p. 207). Although he takes pleasure in amusing his wife with this retort, his instructions are in earnest in the suggestion that the true cook combines discernment, talent, and patience. Aligning French theories of cooking with a

masculine approach to food preparation, he denigrates women's capacity to create a meal that feeds the soul in addition to the body. While his wife might surprise him with pies or simple meals, he communicates pride in his position as the family's resident epicure.

Coffin's next country book, *Cakes and Ale at Woodbine; From Twelfth Night to New Year's Day*, centers almost exclusively on food, and more specifically, on Mr. Gray's resolution towards the end of *Out of Town* to gastronomically celebrate as many holidays as possible. With a year's more experience of country living within city reach, the types of food described and served by Gray to his family and friends are increasingly exotic and complicated. He and his male friends, who have similar culinary interests, begin exchanging recipes, which he, in turn, shares with his wife and the reader. A conversation with his friend Tomaso, for example, convinces him that the omelet is the most delicate breakfast one could serve to a house-guest. He explains that proper preparation and presentation essential to the dish's success: the pan should be continually agitated during the frying, as "'Ships at Sea,' to and fro," and the omelet served on a warm plate, garnished with a sprig of parsley.<sup>18</sup> It is Tomaso, fresh from cooking classes with an Italian opera-singer-turned-cook, who recommends that Mr. Gray travel to the New York City market to obtain ostrich eggs for the ultimate omelet. Armed with the food options available to him in the country and an understanding and appreciation for meal preparation and taste combinations, he turns to the city for new flavors and techniques.

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<sup>18</sup> *Cakes and Ale at Woodbine; From Twelfth Night to New Year's Day* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1868), pp. 73-74. Further citations will refer to this edition and will be abbreviated CAW.

While accounts of variations on ham and eggs in La Mancha, Spain and other parts of the world fascinate Mr. Gray, his wife tries to slip out of the room whenever he starts talking about food. In the opening pages of *Cakes and Ale at Woodbine*, Mrs. Gray declares that she has lost interest in his “‘deep quaffings’ and ‘hobnobblings’” and that she fears that “[his] mind runs too much upon eating and drinking” (CAW, p. 10). She bemoans that the pleasant accounts of their domestic life made public in his earlier country books and periodical contributions have been replaced by endless recountings of “breakfasts, dinners, and suppers with your bachelor friends.” She takes particular offense at the title of *Cakes and Ale at Woodbine*, as it makes it seem as though their entire domestic existence revolves around food, laying forth their home “just for all the world as if our little cottage were a restaurant or a red-latticed ale-house, and you were going to publish the bill of fare” (CAW, p. 10). Family time, religious holidays, social gatherings with friends, and domestic labor, she implies derogatorily, have all come to revolve around culinary efforts and the pursuit of certain tastes and sensations. Although Mr. Gray does not defend himself against his wife’s charges, he endeavors to explain the title of his newest book and its subject:

“Instead of being everlastingly occupied in talking, as you surmise, about stuffing myself and the children”—I purposely left my wife’s name out of the list—“with sweet cakes, pan-cakes, plum-cakes, short-cakes, johnny-cakes, and indeed, every other kind of cakes under the sun, and pouring down their throats and my own, countless mugs of sparkling, foaming, creamy, October, imperial, pale, X, XX, XXX, old, and new ales, I intend to treat the subject aesthetically; regarding the title simply as meaning the good things of this life, the joys and blessings, the comforts and delights, the smiles and laughter, the soft answer that turneth away wrath, and the soothing word that drieth up tears, the bright glance of the eye, the gentle pressure of the hand, the kiss of love, and, in short, a reflex of the sunny hours and days which you and I, my dear, together with these little ones, and all who may dwell under this

roof-tree with us, may pass in Woodbine Cottage.” (CAW, p. 13)

Defending both his literary and domestic stance to his wife, he argues that whether she chooses to admit it or not, gustatory pleasures are central to domestic contentment. Passages about cakes and ale cannot help but illustrate larger home felicities.

After this conversation with his wife, Mr. Gray arrives at a radical understanding of the role of food in the domestic environment. When he suggests that they celebrate his sister’s birthday with a pie and his wife doesn’t have time to make one, he proclaims that the mere invocation of pie is enough, that “it is not necessary to actually have a pie on these occasions,—the spirit of the thing is all that is required” (CAW, p. 30). Memories of past pies, he insists, can provide the looked-for gratification. To illustrate his point, he tells his wife that he always thinks about delicious pies from his past when he is “participating in some unusually delightful festivity,” so much so that he conceives of a particularly memorable event or moment as an “extra slice of pie of my boyhood” (pp. 30-31). Referring to any pleasurable experience as “cutting a pie,” he claims both that a good meal can influence a person’s thoughts and emotions, and less obviously, that certain experiences and feelings can trigger memories or sensations associated with certain foods. While Barry Gray certainly appreciates the taste and appearance of dishes and drinks, he also relishes the opportunities for conversation, education, culture, relaxation, celebration, and meditation that food provides. For him, the pleasures of good eating does not come at the expense of other domestic obligations or experiences. Rather, it helps to mark important moments as well as create occasions for them. As he explains to Mrs.

Gray on a picnic with their children, the outing itself is the very best cake and ale he could ever ask for.

In her introduction to *Gusto: Essential Writings in Nineteenth Century Gastronomy*, Denise Gigante asserts that “[g]astronomy, as a cultural-material expansion of the philosophy of taste...reveals the social nature of the *sensus communis*, or the aesthetic community united through shared ideals of pleasure”<sup>19</sup> Through the country book genre, authors like Robert Barry Coffin articulated a shared ethos and identified the suburb as the location for its ideal expression. Over the course of *Out of Town* and *Cake and Ale at Woodbine*, Coffin’s narrator embraces the capacity of food to foster connections between friends and family members, and ultimately, to redefine the domestic experience. As he gradually explores a new home environment that is physically and mentally separate from business concerns, he cultivates an interest that he never would have anticipated prior to his relocation. In the process of planning gatherings for his literary friends, he discovers that the propagation, preparation, and consumption of food can provide happiness in addition to sustenance. Recognizing the capacity of domestic activities to transform daily life and create community, Gray wrests control of an arena he once considered a woman’s domain. Like other country-book authors, Coffin’s insistence that a masculine perspective and approach would elevate domesticity to an art form gave men a sense of purpose and expertise in the home space. Even if their work lives were unfulfilling, they could return home each evening safe in the knowledge that

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<sup>19</sup> Gigante, Denise. “Introduction.” *Gusto: Essential Writings in Nineteenth-Century Gastronomy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. xxxii.

they were needed, not only as financial providers, but as artistic visionaries and arbiters of taste as well.

## Afterword

### Suburban Men Take Root



Image 24. Masculine domesticity in the suburbs  
(plate from *My Married Life at Hillside*, Barry Gray, 1865)

Who frightened the fox and bulldozed the ledge?  
I ask in my kitchen at Pheasant Ridge.

(from "The Golden Years," by Billy Collins)

"Why are they here?" Joshua asked.  
"I guess it's some kind of cruel joke," I said.  
"Well, it's not funny," he said. "They're way  
too majestic. Buffalo are supposed to roam,  
that's what the song says, not be penned up  
along some strip for tourists to see," he  
said. "It beats bowling," I said. And so we  
sat there for the next hour contemplating the  
life of the postmodern buffalo, deconstructing  
their owners, and never putting them back  
together again.

(from "Suburban Buffalo," by James Tate)



Even though the suburbs of the 1840s and 1850s looked very different than the suburbs of today, their imprint can be felt even into the twenty-first century. In this project I have argued that mid-century print culture both registered and influenced new orientations and approaches to the American landscape that would manifest themselves more visibly in the 1860s, 1870s, and beyond. My dissertation set out to prove, first, that domesticity studies should include men in their analyses; second, that print culture registered suburbanization as early as the first half of the nineteenth century; third, that literature shaped expectations and experience in suburban spaces; and fourth, that men in particular were drawn to suburban communities because they believed that they could find solace and selfhood there in a way they could not in cities. Each one of my chapters grapples with those issues in a way that remains true to my disciplinary focus on American literature. In these final pages, then, I would like to meditate on the link between print culture and suburbanization in the later decades of the nineteenth century, and on the extent to which depictions of suburban men in the 1860s and early 1870s drew from representations and associations that had been established earlier in the century.

\* \* \*

In 1850, Swedish author Fredrika Bremer wrote to her sister of the astonishing difference between metropolitan New York and suburban Brooklyn:

Brooklyn is as quiet as New York is bewildering and noisy: it is built upon the heights of Long Island; has glorious views over the wide harbor, and quiet, broad streets, planted on each side with alanthus-trees [sic], a kind of Chinese-tree ... There is also another kind of tree, with a taller stem, which gives shade and a peaceful and rural character to the streets. It is said that the merchants of

New York go over to Brooklyn, where they have their house and home, to sleep. The friend with whom I am living, Marcus S., has his place of business in New York, and his proper home here in Brooklyn, one of the very prettiest rural homes, by name 'Rose Cottage,' which he himself built, and around which he has himself planted trees, covered arbors with trailing vines, has sown the fields with maize and other vegetables, so that the place has the united character of park and garden. From this place he drives every morning to New York, and hither he returns every evening, but not merely to sleep, but to rest, and enjoy himself with wife, children, and friends. Rose Cottage lies just on the out-skirts of town (you must not imagine it a little town but one which has one hundred thousand inhabitants...)<sup>1</sup>

Bremer's description emphasizes both the scale of suburbanization at mid-century and the influence of men's business concerns on community formation. Designed with the needs of a commuter in mind, Brooklyn offered merchants and businessmen a space for relaxation, hobbies and other leisure activities, family time, and inner cultivation. By demarcating the line between work and home life, suburbs asserted that regardless of what happened in the weekday business world, the domestic sphere would remain inviolate, ready to welcome men back in the evening and on weekends—like eternal mothers, ensconced in the landscape. The unstated reality, of course, was that the fate of the houses themselves as well as the little families within them were inextricably tied to success or failure in business. Moreover, Brooklyn itself was a business, with speculators buying up acres of land, subdividing it into little parcels, and selling it for large profits. In addition to his professional career as a New York merchant, Marcus Spring was a stockholder in the North American Phalanx in Red Bank,

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<sup>1</sup> Bremer, Fredrika. *Homes of the New World*, Vol. I (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1854), p. 52.

New Jersey at the time he hosted Bremer in Brooklyn,<sup>2</sup> and only a few years later he would form the Raritan Bay Union, another utopian community, in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. All around northeastern cities, men in cities were looking outward, hoping to invest in themselves at the same time that they escaped from the world of exchange.

As the above example demonstrates, literature provides an incredibly helpful index to mid-century community formation. But the world of print also shaped early suburbanization, as Washington Irving recognized in the letter to his sister about Tarrytown's expansion in the 1830s. Newspapers and pattern books initially praised the ailanthus trees mentioned in Bremer's missive, but people soon began to view them as an invasive species. A spirited debate about the trees played out in many papers in the early 1850s, with many readers writing angrily about the armies of inch worms that the "Tree of Heaven" often attracted to their yards. It was too late, though—the ailanthus had taken root throughout Brooklyn as a result of print trends, becoming an element that defined the landscape for residents and visitors alike (even into the twentieth century—the title of Betty Smith's 1943 novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* refers to this species). Advertising, in other words, shaped suburban America, even in its earliest incarnations. The first large-scale gated suburban community in the United States, Llewellyn Park, opened in 1853, twelve miles from the center of New York City by ferry and train [Image 25].<sup>3</sup> Llewellyn Haskell, a businessman

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter Five for information about mid-century suburban associationist reform projects.

<sup>3</sup> Llewellyn Park used to be considered the first suburb in the United States, though the presence of earlier communities in New Brighton, Brooklyn, Harlem, and other locales in the 1820s and 1830s have disproven this claim. By the early 1850s, advertisements for planned suburban developments were quite common in newspapers and periodicals, as I discuss in more detail below. For more information on Llewellyn Park, which still exists today, see Richard Guy Wilson,

who had made his fortune by selling wholesale pharmaceuticals, purchased a large tract of farmland in West Orange, New Jersey and marketed his “Country Homes for City People” by delineating ideal residents and their value system in newspapers. He contracted A. J. Davis to design a community that combined privately owned tracts of land with common park areas that would be

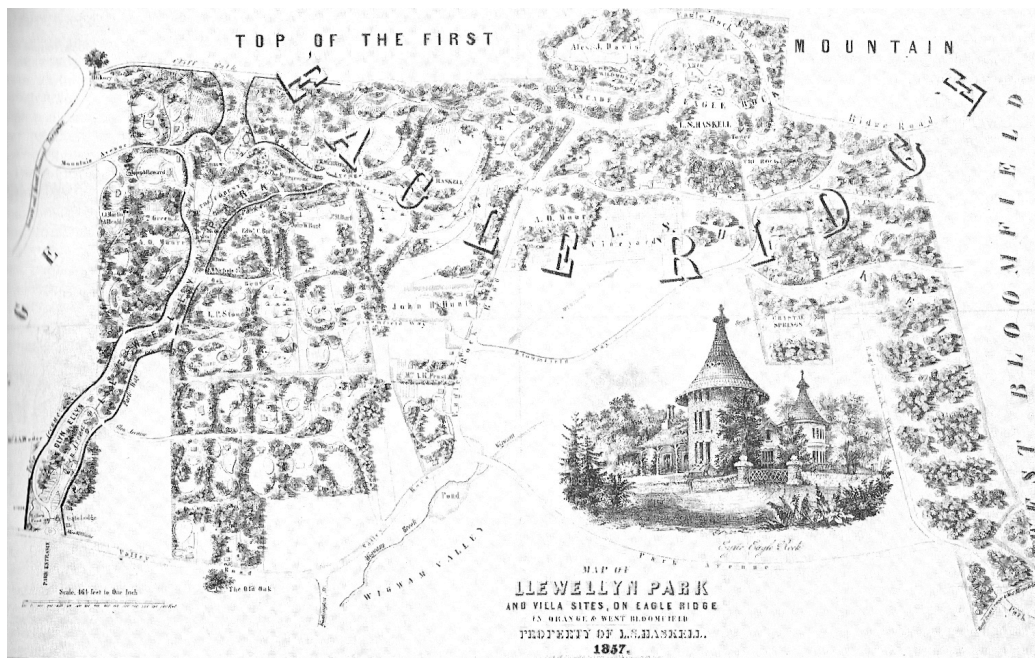


Image 25. Map of Llewellyn Park in 1857

maintained through a homeowners’ association. Residents ranged from wealthy businessmen and social reformers to religious enthusiasts, but everyone abided to a single covenant that dictated landscaping, decorating, and architectural guidelines.

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“Idealism and the Origin of the First American Suburb: Llewellyn Park, New Jersey,” *American Art Journal* 11:4 (October 1979): 79-90, and Stern, *The Anglo-American Suburb*, as well as Stilgoe, *Borderland*, pp. 52-55; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 76-79; and Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, pp. 45, 69, 207, and 236. Also helpful is the history provided by the Llewellyn Park Homeowners’ Association, which still advertises itself as the first planned community in America (<http://www.llewellynpark.com/History-of-Llewellyn-Park~101499~13266.htm>).

By the time of Irving's death in 1859, in addition to more general content about home design and suburban life, most metropolitan papers published news briefs from individual suburban towns, which typically included notices of new subdivisions and properties for sale in addition to scores from some of the first baseball games ever played, meeting locations for horticulture societies, and reports of public construction projects such as the erection of streetlights and sidewalks. Specialized papers had even begun to appear that addressed the suburban life exclusively, whether for an individual town, as in the case of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which debuted in 1855, or collectively, as illustrated by periodicals such as *The Suburban Reporter* and *The Suburban News* [Images 26 and 27], which appeared in New York suburbs during the 1860s. Distributed at the

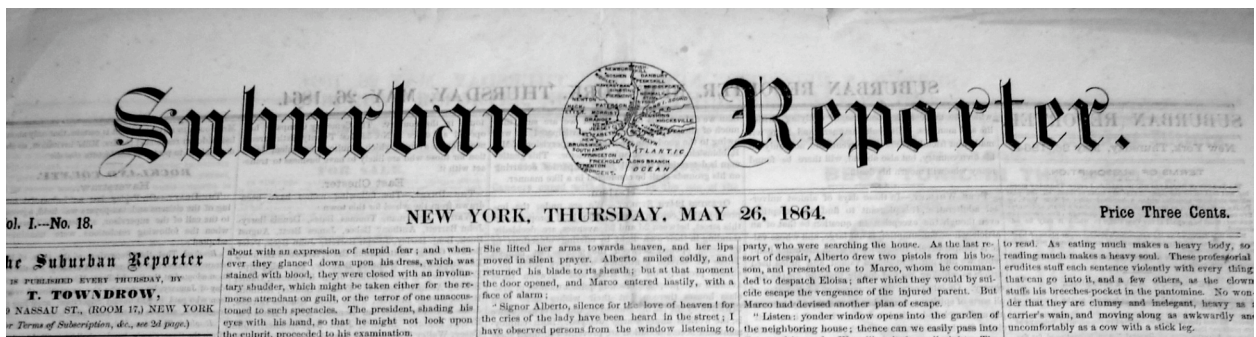


Image 26. *The Suburban Reporter*, May 1864



Image 27. *The Suburban News*, June 1865

office of the postmaster and at the railroad stations for each suburb, these papers both reflected and cultivated a suburban aesthetic that was very similar to the ethos Irving had embodied at Sunnyside. Reports on the division of country seats into smaller lots, calendars that included strawberry festivals, and reviews of new hotels and railroad facilities spoke to a growing group of Americans who wanted to integrate leisure and recreation into their domestic lives, people who believed in the restorative effects of nature and hoped to erect monuments to themselves and their accomplishments in an environment that asserted triumph over the world of business.

A closer look at typical advertisements of property for sale provides a sense of the ways in which print culture appropriated a business mentality to sell men on the benefits of suburban life. From these ads, we can see that the types of home and size of land varied, accommodating the needs and desires of individuals from a variety of class backgrounds. One loose notice [Image 28], presumably inserted into a periodical or passed out on the street, advertised an auction of “suburban lots” at the corner of New York’s Hyde Park and Fairmount in 1858 to relatively wealthy readers. The information about transportation to and from the auction also served to demonstrate the desirableness of the homes’ location in terms of accessibility to urban areas. But houses in the suburbs were not only for the wealthy; sellers and agents pitched suburban homes and building sites to middle-class readers, too, as in the following sample advertisements from *The Suburban News* and *The Suburban Reporter* [Images 29-33]. There are many houses listed as available either for sale or rent in the towns surrounding New York City, and in most cases, the



**THE PUBLIC SALE**  
Of many of the most desirable Building Sites at  
**Hyde Park & Fairmount,**  
Will take place  
**ON THE 5TH, 6TH & 7TH OF OCT'R, 1858.**  
Affording one of the best opportunities ever offered  
for the purchase of Suburban Lots.

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A Special Train will leave the Depot of the  
Boston & Providence Rail Road, foot of the Common, on the 5th, at 2  
o'clock, P. M. Also, from the Depot of the Boston & New York  
Central Rail Road, foot of Summer Street, each day, at the same hour.

Returning, leave Hyde Park and Fairmount at 5.15  
P. M. Regular Trains both by the New York Central and Boston &  
Providence R. R., are passing to and from Hyde Park and Fairmount  
almost every hour in the day, so that those who cannot go by the Special  
Train can be accommodated on the regular trains.

Should either of the fixed days be unpleasant, the Sale will be  
postponed to the next fair days.

TICKETS may be obtained at No. 9 Mercantile  
Building, 16 Summer St., at 10 Cents each.

N. A. THOMPSON & CO.,  
WM. E. LANE, and  
DANIEL WARREN,  
Are the Auctioneers engaged for the occasion.

Image 28. Auction notice for New York suburban homes, 1858

**I. P. ROBINSON,**  
**HOUSE AND LAND BROKER,**  
180 MAIN STREET,  
*New Rochelle.*

**PROPERTY FOR SALE**

20 Farms.....	from \$7,000 to 20,000
100 Building Lots.....	" 150 to 1,200
12 First-Class Houses.....	" 800 to 1,000
14 Second-Class Houses.....	" 300 to 500
15 Third-Class Houses.....	" 75 to 160

**DWELLINGS TO RENT.**

1 House at.....	\$84	1 House at.....	\$275
1 " ".....	100	1 " fine location..	300
3 " ".....	150	1 " at.....	325
1 " ".....	160	1 " ".....	350
1 " ".....	175	1 " ".....	450
1 " ".....	200	1 handsome Cottage at	350
1 " ".....	200		

A furnished House during summer months..... 450  
A furnished House, per annum..... 800  
Apply to I. P. ROBINSON, Main Street, New Rochelle,

Image 29. Advertisement  
for property in New Rochelle

**To Manufacturers, Mechanics and Others.**  
**LAND TO LEASE**  
**FOR 35 YEARS!**

THIS PROPERTY IS SITUATED AT NORTH-WEST MOUNT  
VERNON,

A short distance above the Harlem River, near Hunt's Bridge Depot.  
It is well located for Manufacturers, having a front on the Harlem  
Railroad and the Bronx River, a never-failing stream of clear spring  
water, well situated for Tanners, Hatters, &c.

The owner purposes to lease this property in plots of from 1 to 3  
acres, for 35 years. For the first 5 years at \$1 a year and taxes  
thereon, with 3 renewals of 10 years each, at a valuation of 5 per ct.  
This property is in a healthy location, and offers great facilities for  
the establishment of Manufactories.

*For sale, 100 lots, 50 by 100 feet,*  
At \$60 to \$150, payable in monthly payments of \$5 per month.  
*Also a piece of ground 400 feet long for a Rope Walk.*

Mechanics, Manufacturers and others, are particularly requested to  
examine this property before locating.

Also, for sale or lease, a first-rate Brick-Yard, near Towner's Sta-  
tion, on the Harlem Railroad, with a good run of custom.

For further particulars, inquire of  
**GEO. G. ANDREWS, 9 Chambers St., New York.**

Image 30. Advertisement  
for inexpensive suburban plots



Image 31. Advertisement for  
model town of North New York

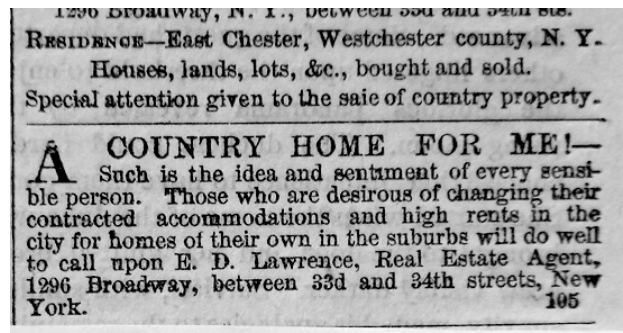
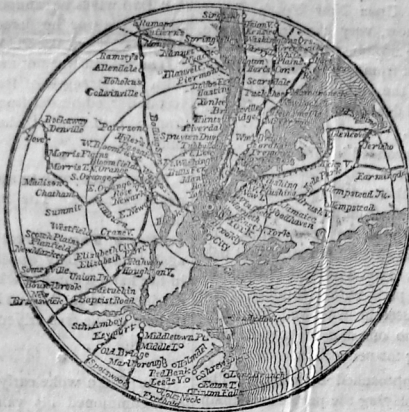


Image 32. "A Country Home for Me!"  
advertisement

advertisements include the name of the nearest railroad depot (or ferry) and distances from the city. In Image 31, the author even refers to the planned nature of the community as a "model town" in itself, comprised of over 1000 small lots, with "graded, curbed sidewalks, flagged and lighted with gas." These ads do not shy from romanticization; even as they admit that readers who dream of, in the words of the ad in Image 32, "A Country Home for Me!" are part of a much larger trend, they also reinforce the intelligence of such sentiments by invoking high city rents and the beauty and convenience of life in suburban areas. Whether they chose to rent or buy, readers were encouraged to conceive of a move beyond the confines of the city as the right decision—one that would improve the domestic life of families and make work in the city more palatable because of the ability to escape from it in the evenings and on weekends.





**WHO WOULD BELIEVE IT!!**

**TO WINFIELD BY FLUSHING RAIL-ROAD  
IN 30 MINUTES.**

**Lots \$70 to \$200 only.**

All persons wishing to escape the enormous rents of the city, can, by the payment of Five Dollars per month, purchase one or more of these lots, on which may be erected for \$500 to \$1,000 a neat and convenient cottage house, the interest on which at 6 per cent would be about \$60, thus making their rent \$60 a year; instead of paying \$100 to \$300 per year for much inferior accommodations. This property lies about half way between Williamsburgh and Newtown on the North road and Fisk Avenue, 3 miles from Williamsburgh Ferries, and a short distance above Calvary Cemetery, and for beauty of location, is unsurpassed by any property now offered.

Persons wishing to visit this property can take the ferry-boat foot of James street for Hunter's Point and then by Flushing Rail-road or by Long Island Rail-road, trains leave every hour, all trains stop at Winfield.

The property is free from all incumbrances, warrantee Deeds will be given.

For further particulars inquire of GEORGE G. ANDREWS, No. 9 Chamber St. J. F. KENDALL, No. 1264 Broadway, DR. THOMAS H. MURPHY, at Winfield near the Depot.

Lots at Nassau Heights Newtown \$50 to \$150 only, payable \$5 monthly. Also; 3200 Lots at North West Mount Vernon 50 by 100 feet near Depot, \$75 to \$200.

For further particulars Inquire of GEO. G. ANDREWS, No. 9 Chamber St.

If you wish to be posted up in reference to what transpires in the thousand and one beautiful villages and hamlets around the city subscribe for the SUBURBAN NEWS, published by T. Townsrow & Co., at 34 Liberty St., New York.

Image 33. "To Winfield by Flushing Rail-Road in 30 Minutes"

\* \* \*

By the late 1860s and early 1870s, the businessman had become a recognizable figure in American culture, due in part to literature that depicted men shuttling between their paperwork in cities and family life in the suburbs. Pattern books from this period spoke more directly to the needs and desires of commuters. In *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds of Small Extent* (1870), Frank J. Scott asserted the necessity of helping those who had little knowledge and even less time to improve the appearance of their yards:

Of the millions of America's busy men and women, a large proportion desire around their homes the greatest amount of beauty which their means will enable them to maintain; and the minimum of expense and care that will secure it. It is for these that this work has been prepared. It is not designed for the very wealthy, nor for the poor, but principally for that great class of towns-people whose daily business away from their homes is a necessity, and who appreciate more than the very rich, or poor, all the heart's cheer, the refined pleasures, and the beauty that should attach to a suburban home.<sup>4</sup>

Invoking Downing's legacy in his dedication, Scott argued that his book was the first to devote itself "entirely to the arts of *suburban-home* embellishment."<sup>5</sup> While he praised Donald Grant Mitchell's country books, he also suggested that an idea-book was needed for smaller grounds, and for people who had less time and money to spend, as "[t]he half-acre of a suburban cottage (if the house itself is what it should be) may be as perfect a work of art, and as well worth transferring to canvas as any part of the great Chatsworth of the Duke of Devonshire." Chapter Three of Scott's volume, "What Kind of Home Grounds Will Best Suit Business Men, and Their Cost" [Image 34], conceded that women would play some role in the appointment of houses but claimed that men should direct domestic embellishment, inside and out. Advising that "[a] velvety lawn, flecked with sunlight and the shadows of common trees, is a very inexpensive, and may be a very elegant refreshment for the business-wearied eye," Scott warned that wives would not have the "higher garden culture" requisite to

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<sup>4</sup> Scott, Frank J[essup], *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds of Small Extent; The Advantages of Suburban Homes Over City or Country Homes; The Comfort and Economy of Neighboring Improvements; The Choice and treatment of Building Sites; and the Best Modes of Laying Out, Planting, and Keeping Decorated Grounds* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1870), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds of Small Extent*, p. 12.

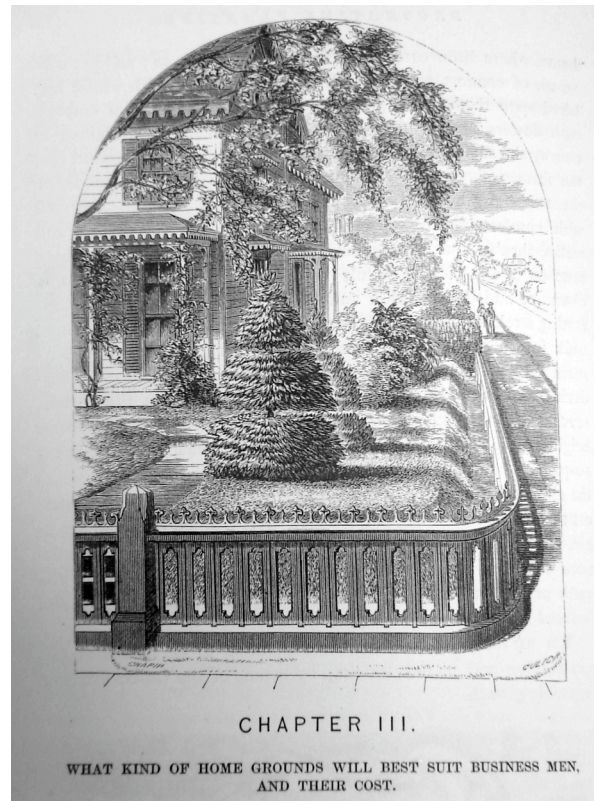


Image 34. "What Kind of Home Grounds Will Best Suit Business Men"

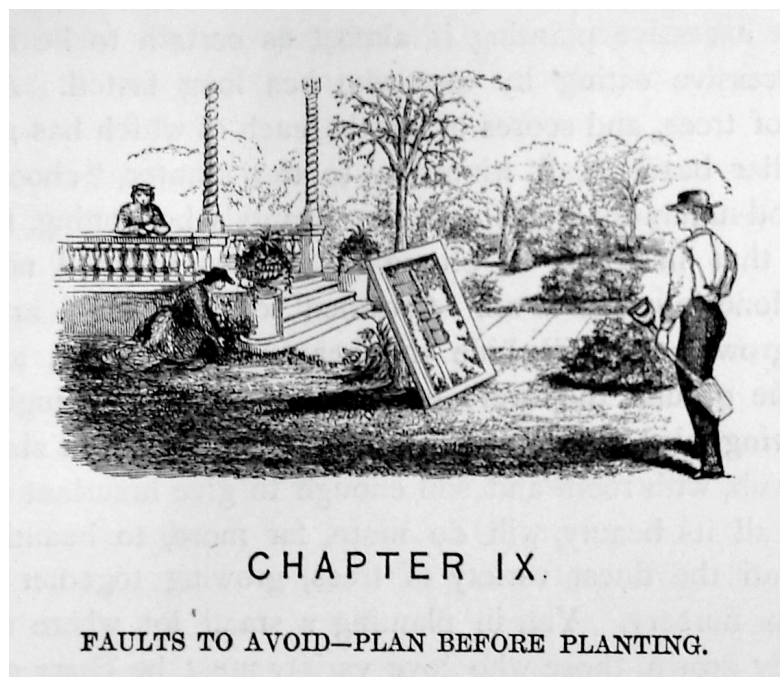


Image 35. "Plan Before Planting"

landscape design.<sup>6</sup> Just as N. P. Willis had promised to teach “the art of living” in the pages of *The Home Journal*, Scott applied himself to the art of suburban homeownership. Armed with a basic plan [Image 35], suburban male readers could combine the work world’s method and efficiency to the blank page of the home.

Even when addressing working-class readers, as Edward Everett Hale did in *Sybaris and Other Homes*<sup>7</sup>, writers reinforced the notion that a satisfying domestic life was the universal reason for labor. The author of *Atwood’s Country and Suburban Homes* (1871) dedicated the volume “[t]o the seeking millions / [w]hose faith in, and love for a home lightens / every toil and self-denial / exerted in its behalf.”<sup>8</sup> Associating the place of work with “self denial,” Atwood urged his readers to embrace customized pleasures at home. In the text accompanying his first design for a stone cottage, he maintained,

A “square box” may afford all necessary facilities to the family, but if it does not please the eye and gratify the esthetic as well as the animal wants, it lacks an indispensable part of what a fine country house ought to be. The large number of houses which have been put up during the last three or four years on the great thoroughfares of travel leading out of New York, have afforded a good opportunity for the exercise of the talents of our Architects, and the skill of our suburban Builders.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds of Small Extent*, p. 22. It is in this era that the lawn became a mainstay of domestic grounds. See especially Virginia Scott Jenkins, *Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994) and Ted Steinberg, *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> *Sybaris and Other Homes* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869).

<sup>8</sup> Atwood, Daniel, *Atwood’s Country and Suburban Homes* (New York: Orange Judd & Company, 1871).

<sup>9</sup> *Atwood’s Country and Suburban Homes*, pp. 126-127.

Proceeding from the implicit understanding that every workingman had the same goal in mind, suburban planners were able to produce cookie-cutter

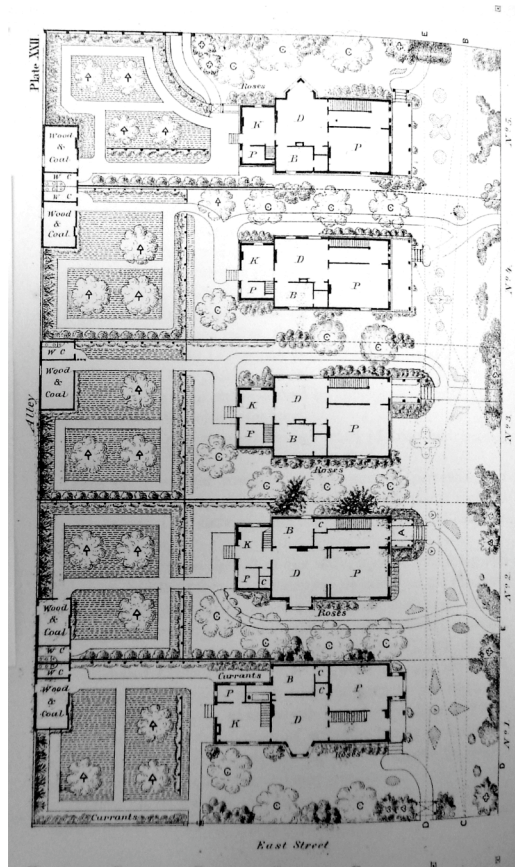


Image 36. Plate from *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Grounds of Small Extent*

designs at the same time that they reified a sense of individualism. A plate from *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Grounds of Small Extent* [Image 36] illustrates this principle. While each homeowner presumably sought to customize his plot, he did so with an awareness that the value of his house was intricately related to the overall state of the neighborhood. Scott encouraged readers to discuss major domestic decorating decisions with neighbors, since “[a]cting together, the little



community can create a local pressure for good improvements that will have its effect on the entire street and neighborhood.”<sup>10</sup>

\* \* \*

While the number of texts celebrating the amenities of “country life within city reach” increased in the nineteenth century, another group of writers began to critique the suburban ethos that had been so carefully crafted in earlier decades. As streetcars forged “metropolitan corridors” and “bedroom communities” throughout the northeast and suburbanization spread south and west, the negative impacts of endless construction and massive population shifts became more visible and therefore harder to ignore. Social critics such as Edward Everett Hale and Frederick Law Olmsted, for example, praised suburban development but called for a more comprehensive consideration of the fate of lower-class Americans in the new domestic order. Writing to Hale in October of 1869, Olmsted spoke of his belief in the necessity of the “ruralizing of *all* our urban population and the urbanizing of our rustic population.”<sup>11</sup> He continued that he had difficulty distinguishing which group was in the worse position, “that which we see in the dense poor quarters of our great cities and manufacturing firms or that which is impending over the scattered agricultural population of more especially the sterile parts of the great West.” While writers of the 1840s and 1850s typically had minimized and even ignored ethnic and class issues in their representation of the ideal white-collar suburban home,

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<sup>10</sup> *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds of Small Extent*, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Olmsted to Edward Everett Hale, 21 Oct. 1869, Olmsted Papers, Library of Congress, no. 01916.

continued industrialization, immigration, urban development in the post-Civil-War era magnified poverty and discrimination.

William Dean Howells's *Suburban Sketches* (1871) attempts to address Olmsted's concerns through fiction. Howells himself had relocated from Boston to Cambridge in 1866, and in these sketches of life in the suburbs around Boston that were originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, he summons popular descriptions of country life within city reach even as he raises the curtain on elements of suburbanization that previously had been ignored or silenced. Applying his personal experience with suburban life (in childhood and adulthood) to depictions of the suburbs by the periodical industry he knew so well, he calls attention to the individuals whose labor supported early suburban growth and problematizes the position of the white male suburban homeowner.

Howells' narrators act as hidden observers of the suburban landscape, residents with knowledge of Boston and its surrounding communities. They commonly voice descriptions of country and city life that could have come straight out of pattern books, as when the narrator of the first sketch announces that his new house in Charlesbridge allows his family to "liv[e] in the country with the conveniences and luxuries of the city about us."<sup>12</sup> He characterizes his neighborhood as "a frontier between city and country," a unique borderland whose virtues had begun to be recognized by many former urban dwellers. Such statements become mere truisms, though, as the plots move forward, and readers are left wondering at the impulse to describe a space that is fraught with ethnic and class tensions as a paradisiacal dreamscape. In a passage that ostensibly

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<sup>12</sup> Howells, William Dean, *Suburban Sketches* (1871. Reprint Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2006), p. 10. All further references will be to this edition and will be cited in text with the abbreviation *SS*.

attempts to convey suburban Charlesbridge as an ideal combination of city and country, for example, Howells toys with the depiction:

The horse-cars ... went by the head of our street; while two minutes' walk would take us into a wood so wild and thick that no roof was visible through the trees... The trains shook the house as they thundered along, and at night were a kind of company, while by day we had the society of innumerable birds. ... All round us carpenters were at work building new houses; but so far from troubling us, the strokes of their hammers fell softly upon the senses, like one's heart-beats upon one's own consciousness in the lapse from all fear of pain under the blessed charm of an anaesthetic. (SS, pp. 10-11)

By making palpable the noise of construction, he reminds readers that the suburbs did not simply appear; they were built by laborers. As he takes readers alongside a narrator and his wife to procure a new cook from the Boston "intelligence office, which is in one of those streets chiefly inhabited by the orphaned children and grandchildren of slavery" (SS, p. 13), Howells invites us to consider the morality and repercussions of a white married couple's desire to satiate their "Libyan longings" (after their Irish girl left them and their "hearts sang of Africa and golden joys") within the suburban home (p. 13).

Over the span of the stories, it becomes clear that people are dreaming in the sense that they are asleep to the realities of other people's lives, and to the effects of their words and actions on the world around them. As characters transport themselves between work and home on horse-cars, steamships, and trains, Howells anesthetizes his language in an effort to mirror the suburban experience. At the same time though, he begs readers to stop and read more carefully, as if the process of outlining the apparatus that perpetuates the vision will enable the erstwhile invisible elements of the landscape to attain the status



of visibility. For Howells, this involves a reassessment of the narrator's own position as well as the recognition of acts of appropriation and colonization. The speaker in "A Day's Pleasure" contemplates his surroundings on a train:

It is noticeable how many people there are in the world that seem bent always upon the same purpose of amusement or business as one's self. If you keep quietly about your accustomed affairs, there are all your neighbors and acquaintances hard at it too; if you go on a journey, choose what train you will, the cars are filled with travellers in your direction. You take a day's pleasure, and everybody abandons his usual occupation to crowd upon your boat, whether it is to Gloucester, or Nahant, or to Nantasket Beach you go. It is very hard to believe that, from whatever channel of life you abstract yourself, still the great sum of it presses forward as before: that business is carried on though you are idle, that men amuse themselves though you toil, that every train is as crowded as that you travel on, that the theatre or church fills its boxes or pews without you perfectly well. I suppose it would not be flattering; for if each one of us did not take the world with him now at every turn, should he not have to leave it behind him when he died? And that, it must be owned, would not be agreeable, nor is the fact quite conceivable, though ever so many myriads in so many million years have proved it (SS, p. 86).

The passage invokes the sense of desperation that Thoreau warned against in *Walden*: the possibility that, despite the relocation, the home improvements, the endless paper-pushing, the tasty dinners, and the time spent with family and friends, it is all for naught—that the effort to locate and enshrine selfhood in the suburban landscape, to "take the world with you," is impossible, and that the very problem that the suburb promised to resolve is reproduced endlessly, street after street, neighborhood after neighborhood, defining the space itself and the people who live there.

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