

BORDERLANDS

Economical, healthful, beautiful, and Christian
homes.

—advertisement for *The American*
Woman's Home

AROUND 1820, IN PORT CITIES SUCH AS New York and Boston, wharves, houses, shops, offices, factories, livery stables, and markets were crowded together for the convenience of buying and selling. Buildings of wood, brick, and stone rose no more than three to five stories. The steeples of churches and the masts of sailing ships defined the skyline. In this era, the owners of businesses, their families, employees, and servants lived in close proximity to each other as well as to the waste products of workshops and factories. Rough wooden wagons jostled elegant horse-drawn carriages in muddy streets strewn with filth and rubbish. Pedestrians crowded onto sidewalks if they could find them, or kept to the sides of the streets. Respectable girls and women were very restricted in their movements, lest they be considered prostitutes or “public women.” Peddlers shouted their wares while beggars moaned for alms. There were no public parks. Trees and grass were scarce.

One by one, American middle-class families chose to reside at the edge of the city rather than in the center. The edge of the city was just a mile or two away. Depending upon topography, it might be reached by boat, on horseback, by private carriage, or by an energetic walker. Historians have debated what the edge was like. Some have written

of the “borderland” as a place where prosperous families who disliked urban congestion might set up housekeeping, lured by the scenic charm of living near farmers’ fields and woods.¹ These affluent families sought more delicate amenities than noisy urban centers could offer—pure air, pure water, access to fields and gardens, meadows where children might play, lanes where women might walk, trees that would offer shady relief from the stifling summer heat of the city. Were the families who thought they were moving to “the country” on the borders of the city misled?

The periphery of the city in this era was not the country. The edge was neither rural nor urban. It formed a distinctive gateway zone between city and country. Entrepreneurs in this zone ran industries that required extensive space, such as ice gangs, glassworks, and rope walks, and more noxious ones such as tanneries, soap factories, glue factories, powder works, slaughterhouses, and brick factories. In the summers, religious revivals staked their tents in the borderland. In addition, the periphery included small businessmen who handled traffic to and from the rural hinterland, carters and wheelwrights. “The scattered centers, the absence of dense settlement, the fuzziness of boundaries, the bucolic appearance of the landscape—all these bore a resemblance to the country,” Henry Binford observes in his study of Boston’s first suburbs of Cambridge and Somerville. “To many outside observers, the suburbs of this period seemed an economic backwater.” It was easy to misread the “awkward embrace” of city and country. Residents might have entertained bucolic fantasies about moving to the countryside, but they entered a zone of “improvement enterprise and the fringe economy,” where shrewd local business people calculated how to turn them into customers.² Borderland bankers, real estate salespeople, transit owners, and landscape gardeners were among the earliest suburban growth promoters.

Contest over land defined the borderland. This contest began as a cultural tension between rural farmers who wanted to farm and more sophisticated residents who worked in the city but wanted to live amid fields, woods, and meadows. It 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. Sooner or later, the quest for borderland life in a pastoral setting and the growth of hinterland enterprises led to the systematic subdivision,

sale, and development of residential property. With new residential development, debates about public transportation intensified. Would residents patronize the steamboat, steam railroad, omnibus, horsecar, and, eventually, electric streetcar? Would they accept supporting infrastructure such as piers, tracks, paving, rails, and wires?

None of the new transportation technologies caused suburban development. Transportation technology enabled rival groups of businessmen to push lines out of the city or pull them into fringe areas in order to maximize their investments in land. From the commuter's point of view, early suburban transportation was often arduous and irregular. First the omnibus carried small groups on an infrequent basis. Then steam railroads or horsecars served larger groups on more regular schedules, but they were still prone to accidents and delays. The fare determined which class would choose to travel, and how far. As transport started to carry people to the periphery on a regular basis, more systematic selling of land occurred. Sometimes businessmen who developed the transportation subdivided the land, while at other times different entrepreneurs were involved. Public transport always provoked local debates on how borderland residents could "control the degree of their urbanization."³

By the 1840s, around Boston, New York, and many other cities, the borderland was both fiercely protected and actively developed. Residents who favored retaining pastoral charm opposed those who had a financial stake in expanding their business interests. Class, crosscut by occupation, influenced citizens' positions on future development. While all classes lived in the borderlands, the rich had two houses, one on the fringe and one in the city. The poor were farmers or farm workers with small dwellings. Only middle-class men and women tried to have it all, to sustain a country ambiance near the city with just one residence. They struggled with the difficult commutes and became the most ardent defenders of building single-family houses among the trees and flowers, removed from the pollution, epidemics, and economic stresses of the city. Rejecting the urban row house and looking down on the country farmhouse, they invented a new approach to residential space located on the borders of the city.

By boosting a new style of suburban life, middle-class illustrators and writers also made important contributions to emerging suburban growth machines. Nathaniel Parker Willis's *American Scenery* of 1840

celebrated the visual pleasures of the urban fringe as well as more remote places. Borderland residents delighted in natural settings where they could look back at the city they had escaped, yet they savored being close enough to engage with urban life on a regular schedule. In Bartlett's scenic view of the broad Hudson River from the rocky heights of Weehawken, New Jersey, the careful observer can discern a small sailboat approaching a pier where passengers wait in line to be ferried across the water to the distant buildings of Manhattan. In his view of the Brooklyn ferry, farmers with carts of hay share the ride with fashionably dressed women who might be going shopping.

The new suburban way of life appeared in manuals of advice for homeowners and prospective owners. Middle-class families who

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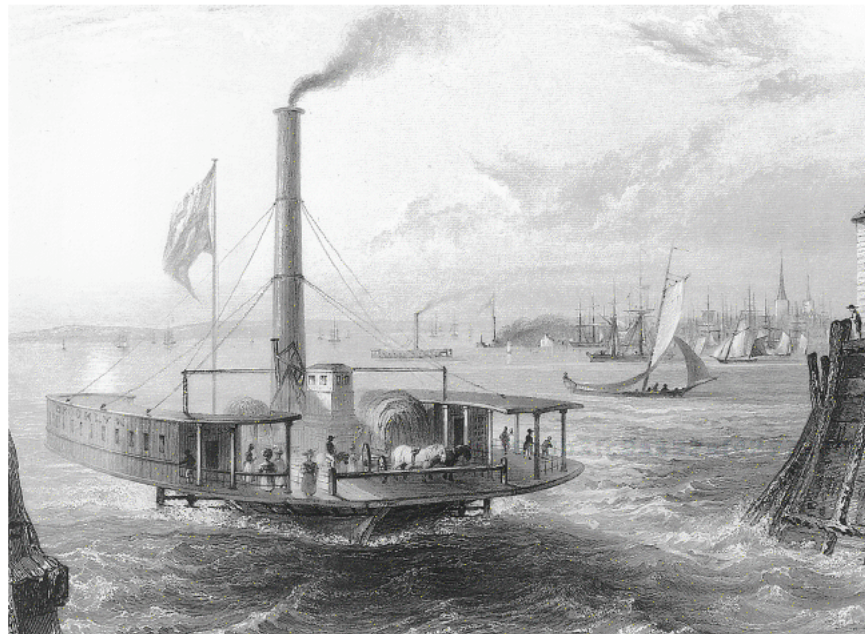


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Church steeple and ships' masts are the tallest structures in distant Manhattan.

Detail of *View of New York, from Weehawken*, steel engraving
from a drawing by W. H. Bartlett, in Nathaniel Parker Willis,
American Scenery, vol. 2 (London: G. Virtue, 1840).
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

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Farmers with carts of hay share the deck with well-dressed women heading for the city. Detail of *The Ferry at Brooklyn, New York*, steel engraving from a drawing by W. H. Bartlett, in Nathaniel Parker Willis, *American Scenery*, vol. 2 (London: G. Virtue, 1840). Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

sought out the borderland needed to define the material culture appropriate for new settings. Two inspirational leaders produced best-sellers about suburban properties. Although all prescriptive literature needs to be read with a skeptical eye, one man and one woman offered exceptional insights about the possible configurations of suburban space. Andrew Jackson Downing achieved renown for his landscape designs for middle-class suburban properties. Catharine Esther Beecher achieved an even greater influence with designs for houses to support middle-class women. She offered technologies for heating, ventilating, cooking, and bathing, as well as instructions on spiritual guardianship of family life. Together they had a broad influence in shaping the romantic, remote yards and houses favored by middle-class suburban families whose gender roles were thought to derive from divine authority.

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