

THE AMERICAN DREAM



A Short History

of an Idea That Shaped a Nation

JIM CULLEN

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CHAPTER 5

DETACHED HOUSES: THE DREAM OF HOME OWNERSHIP

 IN 1969, MY PARENTS, sister, and I moved from our row-house apartment in the Jackson Heights section of Queens, New York, to a first-floor rental in a two-family house on Long Island. The reason was the racial desegregation of our neighborhood public schools. The civil rights movement, whose first stirrings had focused on southern school systems in the 1950s, had spread across the country and was increasingly coming closer to home. This was apparent in the racial violence that now engulfed cities like Newark no less than Birmingham. Perhaps even more frightening than spectacular eruptions like the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King were more lasting structural changes in everyday life. The previous year, a political struggle over school integration erupted in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, and in the ensuing arguments, which resulted in a state takeover of the schools, even former allies—the teachers' union, black activists, Jewish residents—found themselves bitterly divided.

My father, a New York City firefighter who worked in the largely black Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, was not the kind of man to participate in protests or to carefully follow Supreme Court rulings. But he knew which way the political winds were blowing. He

was unhappy about the fact that as a kindergartener, I knew much more about Martin Luther King Jr. than about George Washington, about whom I knew nothing. He was also opposed to my pending transfer, via busing, to a more remote school. But in the broadest terms, he had concerns about the safety and quality of a system that, to put it more euphemistically than he would, was undergoing a difficult transition. So when he learned about an available first-floor apartment in a house in the nearby suburban town of Port Washington, he and my mother, who tended to share his views on such matters, left the city in which they had spent their entire lives in search of better ones for their children.

Port Washington, only about ten miles east of the Queens border, was demographically much further away, and not only because of its racial composition. Though we lived in its least affluent neighborhood of Manorhaven, the town was decidedly upscale. The street I lived on was a dead end, and I would often cut through some woods and end up among the mansions of Sands Point—the thinly fictionalized “East Egg” of *The Great Gatsby*. My mother, who as early as I can remember inculcated both a sense of pride in our working-class origins and an expectation for upward mobility, strayed far outside her decidedly urban background to serve as a den mother for my Cub Scout troop, a stretch she made to further my socialization in this new world. I look back on this period of my childhood fondly.

But Port Washington was also problematic for my parents. For one thing, they were in a sense only pseudo-suburbanites, because they were tenants in someone else’s home, not owners of their own. For another, my father was not entirely comfortable with the progressive educational style of Port Washington public schools, which emphasized newfangled ideas like open classrooms and a nontraditional curriculum. Finally, while I don’t believe any member of our family was ever subject to condescension or ill-treatment, the gap in class status between us and many of the people we dealt with troubled him greatly. I’ve been told on a number of occasions that my father became determined to move again after learning that I had called home from a friend’s parents’ car phone, such things being much more exotic than they are now. My mother, who loved the town but who also worried about her children growing up with their noses pressed up against the glass of their classmates’ windows, reluctantly agreed.

Unlike some of their contemporaries, who jumped at the chance to buy houses at the first available opportunity, my parents were ambivalent at best. They did not particularly welcome the burdens of debt, repairs, and taxes that home ownership entailed, and the real estate business held little charm for them. And yet for them, no less than for those with a penchant for carpentry or gardening, the decision to buy a house reflected a series of hopes and fears inextricably (if silently) bound in mortgage. One factor, as I’ve already suggested, was racism. But there were others, too, ranging from a thirst for privacy and autonomy (I remember vividly my parents’ rage when our landlord in Port Washington raised the rent, and how my parents refused to make eye contact with him) to a Dream of Upward Mobility that perhaps paradoxically rested on family stability—and good schools.

After what my sister and I regarded as an agonizingly boring search, my parents finally found something they liked and could afford. They scraped together two thousand dollars of their own and borrowed two thousand dollars of my paternal grandmother’s money, and, with the help of a Federal Housing Authority-backed mortgage, they were able to buy a quarter-acre split-level ranch for thirty-five thousand dollars in Northport, a small town about twenty-five miles east of Port Washington. My mother still lives there. The mortgage, along with a 1988 home equity loan that financed a finished basement apartment, was paid off in 1999.

And so it was that I finished my childhood at the tail end of the Baby Boom in a virtually all-white suburban town with friends who were generally (but not outrageously) wealthier than I was. The three-bedroom house in which I played, ate, and slept is, by almost any standard, an unprepossessing one, if for no other reason than there are about fifty more just like it in the postwar circular housing development in which it is situated. But, you see, it was *mine*: the bedroom, which could barely fit my bed, a desk, and a bulletin board that I filled with movie ticket stubs, newspaper cartoons, and photographs; the yard, bounded by a six-foot stockade fence, in which I reenacted entire sporting events single-handedly to imagined audiences of millions; the kitchen, with its gleaming Formica counters and enameled appliances. Each autumn, there were leaves to rake, and each spring, a lawn to mow.

It wasn’t until later that I began to reckon with the historical forces

that brought me to that house. To some extent, this is because my parents didn't want me to know. (Alcoholism, mental illness, poverty, and fraud figure in the fragments I've picked up from both sides of the family.) I don't doubt that the move to Long Island was principally a matter of devotion to my sister and me, but I suspect it also represented an opportunity for them to clean the slate, to start over. Indeed, every trip we made back to the city to visit my relatives' apartments somehow seemed like a trip back in time, our car a sealed capsule protecting us from a harsh frontier environment that would swallow us up if we ever broke down or even stopped. I was always a little afraid, and always a little excited, by the visits.

Looking back now, however, I see their flight from Queens—and our forays back there—in a less heroic light. Although racial and class segregation have more or less become a given in U.S. history, I feel shame about my essentially segregationist beginnings—as well as a sense of shame about my shame over my parents' actions. I have tried to take refuge in any number of justifications: that they were far from unusual; that the concerns they had about educational safety and quality were legitimate in their own right; that my father could say not only that some of his best friends were black but that he in fact had pulled black and Latino children out of burning buildings; and so on. At the very least, the facts surrounding my childhood complicate my nostalgia.

But if I cannot in good conscience straightforwardly celebrate this myth, I don't regard it as an outright lie, either. Frequent statements to the contrary, the United States was never a "free," "open," or "virgin" land. It has, nevertheless, afforded opportunities for a great many people (including some black and Latino people, among others) to do something that was previously difficult, if not impossible: acquire a place they could call their own.

"The American Dream of owning a home," we call it. No American Dream has broader appeal, and no American Dream has been quite so widely realized. Roughly two-thirds of Americans owned their homes at the start of this century, and it seems reasonable to believe that many of the remaining third will go on to do so. And if, like other American Dreams, this one is imperfect, even fatally flawed, it is also extraordinarily resilient and versatile. My story was only a fragment in a late chapter of what had already been a very long story.

For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land. A land of wheat, and barley and vines, and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of oil olive and honey; A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass.

—Deuteronomy 8:7–9, King James Bible, 1611

In the beginning, there was land. The United States of today may be a "welfare" state, but as Dorothee Kocks reminds us in her evocative book *Dream a Little*, it began as a frontier state. If the basic currency of the welfare state was cash, the coin of the realm in the frontier state was land. For much of American history, in fact, land was a more practical and accessible financial instrument than cash, which was rare, unstable, and, given the lack of a national currency, difficult to use. While other goods could function as a medium of exchange (the wampum of Indians and tobacco of farmers, for example), land was of particular importance very early in American history.

Land, however, was not always viewed as a desirable or even obvious commodity. At least initially, many indigenous American peoples thought land could no more be bought or sold than the air they breathed or the water they drank. Spanish and French colonists typically measured wealth in terms of the gold, fish, furs, or other forms of wealth they—or in many cases, their slaves—extracted from North America and shipped home for mercantile purposes. Controlling land was of course important for such enterprises, but more as an instrumental means to an end than something to be prized in its own right—particularly because so much of their dominions consisted of deserts, bayous, forests, mountain ranges, or other environments that seemed unprofitable at best and dangerous at worst.

Still, even many of these people knew that land, particularly arable land, could produce great wealth as well as confer less direct benefits for strategically minded generals, evangelically minded missionaries, or thrill-seeking adventurers. Moreover, land was a cheap way for imperial governments to court or reward important subjects. From the beginning, then, in America not only was an abstraction such as money important, but so too was the development of a particular place where a variety of people could transform, acquire, or lose lives.

A notion of America as a particular place was especially important for British colonists. In many cases, their motives were the same as their European rivals, but as relatively late arrivals in the colonial free-for-all, they began by claiming a stretch of territory—the Atlantic seaboard—that was far less remunerative than, say, the sugar plantations of the Caribbean or the gold mines of Peru. Of course, the British did acquire Caribbean colonies in short order, and the tobacco plantations of Virginia soon began generating revenue for the Crown. And like their counterparts, English monarchs also used land as a commodity; Pennsylvania, for example, was acquired as a whole and sold off in pieces by William Penn, who gained the right to do so as payment of a debt to his father.

But far more than the Spanish, French, or Dutch, the British saw the American landscape itself as an asset in its own right. Moreover, it could be more than a mere marketable commodity: it could serve as a *home*. Indeed, it quickly became apparent to everyone, especially the Indians, that the English came to stay. For many settlers, America was a refuge from hostile outsiders as well as a livelihood that could confer upward mobility: a land of dreams. This belief, whatever its factual validity (which, needless to say, varied widely), established the framework for the frontier society that would sweep across the continent.

Insofar as the British government looked at the possibilities of this frontier, it was as likely to see problems as possibilities. The mercantile orientation of English politics and economics made the Atlantic Ocean, not the American interior, the focus of imperial policy. Given the threat of French and Indian military power and the costs of containing it, the West was to serve as a perimeter that demarcated limits, not a seedbed for development—and certainly not a homeland that had to be protected. Many American colonists, among them George Washington, chafed at this policy. Indeed, tension over the disposition of western territory was a major factor in the political imperatives that led southerners in particular to support the Revolution.

With the achievement of independence the United States truly became a frontier state, in that land became an avowed instrument of government policy. Individual colonies like New York and North Carolina had claimed ownership of territory extending directly west to the Mississippi River but surrendered such claims in return for the national government assuming their debts. Led by Thomas Jefferson, Congress

in 1785 drafted a plan for survey and sale of this land. Seeking to avoid the tangled claims that had characterized the settlement of Kentucky, they divided western territories into townships composed of thirty-six sections of one square mile (640 acres) each. These grids—one in each town to be designated for the support of public schools—would have a decisive impact on the future landscape of the nation, ranging from the street-and-avenue patterns of many midwestern cities to the quilt-like landscape seen from an aircraft. In 1787 Jefferson played a pivotal role in congressional passage of the Northwest Ordinance, which codified federal supervision of these territories and the criteria for statehood for the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Subsequent acquisitions like the Louisiana Purchase from France, Florida from Spain, and Texas from Mexico were integrated into the nation on the tracks laid down in the Ordinances of 1785 and 1787.

To be sure, the circumstances surrounding these developments were not always orderly: treaties were made with Indians and Mexicans under duress, and thousands of settlers squatted illegally. Moreover, Congress rejected Jefferson's proposals to give the land away for free, to allow community self-government rather than the rule of appointed judges and governors, and to ban slavery in the Southwest (though it was banned in the Northwest Territory). But for all the limits and omissions of such policies, they nevertheless held out promise for a society in which an unprecedented proportion of a national polity could, and did, literally have a stake in their country. Though this vision is often rightly attributed to Jefferson, it was Washington who expressed it with unusual clarity and optimism. "I wish to see the sons and daughters of the world in Peace and busily employed in the . . . agreeable amusement of fulfilling the first and great commandment—*Increase and Multiply*: as an encouragement to which we have opened the fertile plains of the Ohio to the poor, the needy, and the oppressed of the Earth," he wrote in a letter to the marquis de Lafayette, at the end of the Revolution. "Anyone therefore who is heavy laden or who wants land to cultivate, may repair thither & abound as in the Land of promise, with milk and honey."

Still, if the United States professed a far more egalitarian basis for distributing national wealth than had ever existed, the fact remained that ordinary farmers and their families were not the only, or even primary, beneficiaries of the frontier state. Speculators of widely varying

scrupulousness were always a very large part of the equation, and the prospect of road, canal, and, especially, railroad construction promised to make very small groups of people very rich. Politicians promoted the frontier state for reasons that did not completely overlap: as a vehicle for extending trade to the Far East; as a means for rapid industrialization; as a "safety valve" for teeming cities facing the prospect of urban unrest. (Newspaper editor Horace Greeley issued his famous call "Go West, young man, go forth into the country" in 1837 as a means for dealing with financial panic that engulfed the nation that year.)

Amid this panoply of motives, however, there remained those who championed the value of the independent farmer cultivating a home as an end unto itself: Jefferson's republican dream of the independent yeoman still loomed large. Illinois politician Stephen Douglas, who wanted a transcontinental railroad as much as anyone, nevertheless emphasized the need to "subdu[e] the wilderness, and people it with a hardy and industrious population," an objective at least as important as increased trade with India and China.

This desire to extend what was widely called an "Empire of Liberty" made land not only the defining criterion of what it meant to be truly free in the United States but also a check on the growth of slavery. This was not immediately apparent. In the early nineteenth century, slavery entered new territory easily. Alabama and Mississippi, for example, were settled by southerners and quickly integrated into the plantation system. But by mid-century, it was apparent that much of the territory acquired from the Louisiana Purchase (and later Mexico) would become nonslave states, less for moral reasons than because of the relative economic impracticality of the slave system—a system that to a great degree depended upon people working land they did *not* own. While many southerners remained enthusiastic about territorial expansion in the decades before the Civil War, others were increasingly skeptical that a nation of freeholders was really in their interest.

As a number of historians have noted, the key to the eventual success of the Republican Party in 1860 lay in the way it could unite a number of disparate and even conflicting constituencies: abolitionists and racists; easterners and westerners; entrepreneurs and factory workers. The fulcrum of their ability to do this was land—specifically their proposal for a Homestead Act that would finally enact Jefferson's vision for giving away western territory to individuals. Interestingly enough, much of the early energy for this proposal originated in the East, not

only among boosters like Greeley but also among more radical figures like activist-actress Frances ("Fanny") Wright and George Henry Evans, leader of the Workingmen's Party that became a powerful presence in New York politics during the 1830s and 1840s. More prominent national eastern leaders were indifferent to giving away land to homesteaders—U.S. Senator William Seward of New York complained in 1854 the idea would give "the interested cupidity of the pioneer" undue influence in national policy—until western politicians made clear that such a proposal, which enjoyed widespread support, would provide a crucial incentive to bring the region into an emerging political coalition that fused free soil, free labor, and free men.

As proposed in the Republican platform of 1860 and signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, the Homestead Act was fairly simple. Any family head or adult male who was a citizen (or, in the case of immigrants, a male who simply declared an intention to become a citizen) could claim 160 acres of land in the public domain. In return, the recipient need only pay a small registration fee and promise to remain there for five years, at which point the title would be transferred to the settler. At the time of its passage, eighty-three million acres were available for settlement; fifteen million more from California, Colorado, Washington, and Wisconsin were added later.

The Homestead Act enjoyed its greatest success in the central and upper Midwest, where soil and climate conditions could support family farming. By 1880 a little over half of the 242,000 new farms in Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakota territories, and Minnesota were acquired this way. (The Act accounted for about two-thirds of Minnesota's new farms.) In 1866 a faction of Republicans in Congress sought to extend the homesteading to former slaves, but when Senator Thaddeus Stevens sought to add the forfeited estates of Confederates to the pool of available land, the measure was decisively defeated. Two days later, Congress did pass the Southern Homestead Act introduced by Indiana representative George Julian, an energetic supporter of the original act, which was a more modest measure that gave black and loyal white Americans the opportunity to acquire land that would not interfere with existing property rights. Here, in effect, was a law that could largely realize the celebrated promise of "forty acres and a mule"—a temporary ad-hoc war measure implemented by General William T. Sherman in Georgia and South Carolina in 1865, but one African Americans never forgot.

Unfortunately, the original Homestead Act and its successors never lived up to their original promise. Blacks and whites alike had trouble acquiring the knowledge, materials, and capital necessary to farm even land that was given away free, and speculators gobbled up much of it. Moreover, much of the American West, particularly as one crossed into the arid, grassy Great Plains—known for much of the nineteenth century as “the Great American Desert”—was not really suited to farming, and not even measures like the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, which offered larger tracts to settlers willing to irrigate it, made it attractive. Ironically, the cavernous spaces of virtually uninhabitable land led many westerners to congregate in cities and towns; as early as 1880 the West was the most urbanized region of the country. It still is.

But if the *reality* of the independent freeholder left a lot to be desired, the *dream* of the independent freeholder demonstrated great resilience, one that went to the very heart of American identity. Frederick Jackson Turner, whose 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” gave this vision its most systematic expression, laid out the premises of the frontier state with unusual directness as an 1896 school dedication in his hometown of Portage, Wisconsin:

Americans had a safety valve for social danger, a bank account on which they might continually draw to meet losses. This was the vast unoccupied domain that stretched from the borders of the settled area to the Pacific Ocean. . . . No grave social problem could exist while the wilderness at the edge of civilizations [*sic*] opened wide its portals to all who were oppressed, to all who with strong arms and stout heart desired to hew a home and a career for themselves. Here was an opportunity for social development continually to begin over again, wherever society gave signs of breaking into classes. Here was a magic fountain of youth in which America continually bathed and was rejuvenated.

The “social development” and “rejuvenation” Turner spoke of was a seamless process whereby the Indian gave way to the explorer and hunter, who in turn gave way to the trader, who then gave way to the rancher, who in turn gave way to the (beloved) farmer who tended land on which he built his home. Eventually, family farms gave way to towns and cities, but by then the process was presumably beginning over

again somewhere out West. To his critics—in decades to come, there would be many—this was pure fantasy. Moreover, even those who embraced it most fully were plagued by an unsettling feeling. Note the elegiac tone of Turner’s speech: he spoke in the past tense. Indeed, Turner’s purpose in writing his celebrated “Significance of the Frontier in American History” (which he delivered at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition honoring the four hundredth anniversary of the European discovery of America) was to declare the frontier, which he defined as an area with less than two people per square mile, was closed. “And now,” he concluded, “four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period in American history.”

This notion of a closed frontier would haunt many Americans for the next century. In 1920, Turner himself, finishing a career that in some ways was a disappointment (he failed to write a book-length masterwork), wrote that “it is to the realm of the spirit, to the domain of ideals and legislation, that we must look for Western influence on democracy in our own days.” A political Progressive, he hoped public institutions ranging from the federal government to state universities could provide a viable alternative. For the rest of the twentieth century, his imagined heirs proclaimed a series of disembodied “new” frontiers—from space exploration to the Internet—that would somehow extend the original one. The hunter, trapper, cowboy, and farmer would be replaced by the researcher, engineer, bureaucrat, and consumer. A livelihood would be made not in fields but in factories and office buildings. And the homes they returned to would not be “open” tracts but rather planned “developments” specifically zoned to house such workers.

Amid all these technological, political, and symbolic displacements, however, land never disappeared. Indeed, in the twenty-first century it remains as important as ever. To be sure, the local supermarket has taken the place of the family farm, which was virtually supplanted by agribusiness. But if anything, the desire for—and yes, even the reality of—a family homestead was as widespread as ever. Amber waves of grain may have receded into the distance. But a new frontier vista offered a clear view of an indigenous weed in much of North America: crabgrass.

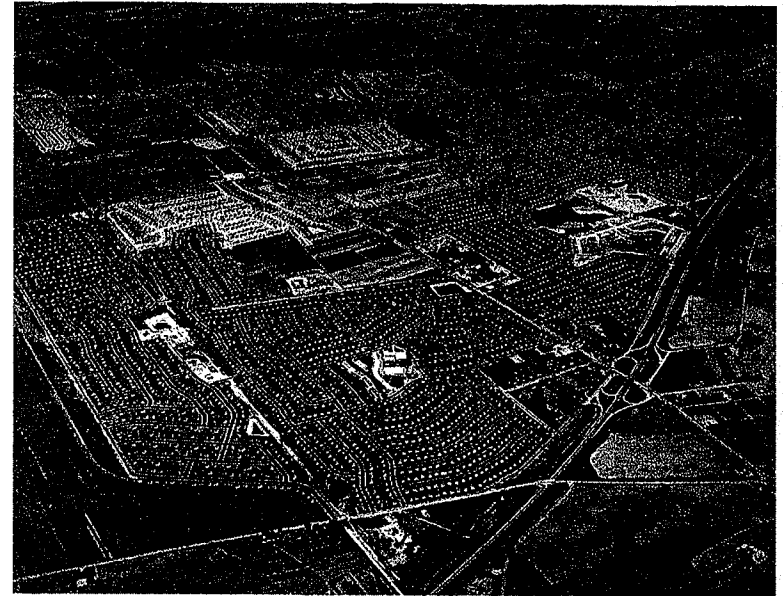
Americans have long tended to see city and country as separate places, more isolated from each other than connected. We carefully partition our landscape into urban places, rural places, and wilderness. Although we often cross the symbolic boundaries between them—seeking escape or excitement, recreation or renewal—we rarely reflect on how tightly bound together they really are.

—William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, 1991

In 1920, as Frederick Jackson Turner's career was ending, the official U.S. census showed that for the first time, more Americans lived in cities than on farms. This was a much-discussed statistic then and for decades afterward, and one that marked the arrival of a new social order. And yet that order was relatively short-lived. While cities remained important in American life—notwithstanding a tendency to fear and deride them as a source of many evils—the nation was not decisively urban for very long. The census of 1990 confirmed something that many had taken for granted much earlier: that most Americans lived in neither city nor countryside but in that demographic hybrid known as a suburb.

Conceptually, the American suburb can trace its origins to an unlikely union of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. From the Jeffersonian strain in American history, it drew on widely shared assumptions about the beneficent influence of nature, small communities, and home ownership. At the same time, the suburb reflected Hamiltonian realities about the centrality of cities as the source of Americans' livelihoods, and of commerce, not self-sufficient farming, as the true engine of national development. The resulting hybrid was pastoral—a managed geography that combined human effort and repose.

Strictly speaking, the suburb is of English origin and, in the larger scheme of human history, somewhat unusual. On most of the earth for most of the time, the outskirts of cities were considered unattractive terrain and relegated to the poorest people; the very prefix of the word "suburb" suggests precisely this inferiority. In the twentieth century, for example, the slums of cities from Paris to Rio de Janeiro were located on their outskirts, while their central districts remained the most sought-after residential turf. Beginning in the eighteenth century, however, Londoners began to construct what one historian has called "bourgeois utopias": strategically located garden communities outside



HOUSES REPRESENTATIVE Aerial view of Levittown, New York, 1954. The product of an unlikely marriage between the Jeffersonian love of the country and the Hamiltonian emphasis on the centrality of the city, suburbia has long been the site of the most widely realized American Dream: home ownership. (Photo from the World-Telegram & Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection of the Library of Congress)

of, but within commuting distance of, large cities. Such communities were the repositories of an emerging domestic ideology that emphasized close family connections, Protestant religion, and a belief in pastoral settings as the best havens for nurturing a responsible citizenry. Among the first was the town of Clapham Common, a village about five miles from London Bridge when the first families began moving there in the 1730s. By the end of the century, it had become recognizably suburban in a modern sense: a low-density community dependent on the city economically but dominated by single-family houses in park-like settings.

In the United States, the first traces of a suburban style surfaced at the turn of the nineteenth century in places like Beacon Hill, a vacant lot at the edge of Boston. This was, however, still part of the city, a neighborhood within walking distance of downtown. A more direct forerunner of suburbia was the early nineteenth-century town of Brooklyn, New York, located across the East River from Manhattan. It began growing rapidly when ferry services began moving commuters for a standard fare of two cents each way. Indeed, Brooklyn grew so fast that it soon became a major city in its own right before it became part of greater New York City in 1898. Meanwhile, in a manner reminiscent of Turner's frontier, other western Long Island towns—Williamsburg, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bushwick—evolved from rural hamlet to city neighborhood, pushing the urban frontier still farther back.

Ferries notwithstanding, suburban development for anyone not rich enough to own a horse and carriage could not really begin to develop until new forms of transportation—notably the railroad—made it possible to transport people beyond city limits relatively quickly and cheaply. Once that began to happen, increasing numbers of the well-to-do began to leave the central cities, with their bustling workshops, jostling social classes, and increasing urban problems, for homes on the perimeter. The towns along Philadelphia's fabled Main Line—Ardmore, Haverford, Bryn Mawr—became bywords for suburban affluence after the Civil War. So, too, did Chicago suburbs like Evanston, Lake Forest, and Highland Park.

The steam-engine railroad, however, was only one form of the urban transportation revolution of the late nineteenth century. Other varieties, which involved intracity travel, were at least as important. The horsecar, which combined the efficiency of a vehicle on tracks with the economy and flexibility of a horse, was first employed in New

York in the 1830s and remained in use across the country until the end of the century. Cable car service was popular in Chicago and especially San Francisco, where it was particularly well adapted to steep inclines like Nob Hill. The most important variation on locomotion, though, was the streetcar (and its close relation, the subway), particularly those that ran on electricity rather than steam or coal. First used in Cleveland in 1884, the streetcar spread widely and by the turn of the century had become the dominant form of transportation in the United States, accounting for over half of the nation's twelve thousand miles of electrified tracks. It is interesting to note how quickly the streetcar spread when one considers how long it took the automobile, which was invented at about the same time, to achieve its dominance.

In the short run, these developments helped cities, which grew not only in population but also in geographic size. The most striking example was Philadelphia, whose geographic boundaries grew from 2 to 130 square miles in 1854, briefly making it the largest city in the world. (Paris replaced it five years later.) Many towns annexed to Philadelphia were suburbs, which, like many such communities across the country, agreed to the change in status to cut their costs, raise their prestige, or satisfy (often corrupt) politicians and businessmen. Chicago expanded in a similar fashion in 1889, adding 133 miles to city limits. More common, however, were cities that grew in piecemeal fashion, such as Detroit, which annexed a series of townships, from Greenfield to Grosse Point, between 1880 and 1918.

By the late nineteenth century, however, there were already signs that urban growth would have limits. Beginning in 1868 the city of Boston doubled its area by annexing the cities and towns of Roxbury, West Roxbury, Dorchester, Charlestown, and Brighton. But in 1874 Brookline, a community that called itself "the richest town in the world," voted decisively against annexation. From that point on, affluent suburban areas, like Chicago's Oak Park or Oakland's Alameda County, rejected incorporation with cities. When Greater New York was created in 1898, the eastern part of Queens broke off to form the new county of Nassau. And while the southern part of what had once been Westchester County became the borough of the Bronx, border communities like Bronxville incorporated themselves to prevent precisely this possibility. Only in western cities did annexation remain common. In 1870, Los Angeles consisted of 29 square miles; by 1980 it was 465, with its greatest growth occurring between 1910 and 1930.

Cities like Houston (25 to 556), Indianapolis (11 to 279), and San Antonio (36 to 267) are comparable.

The reluctance of many communities to integrate with cities reflects the growing class and racial segregation of the nation's metropolitan areas, a segregation apparent everywhere from the types of work being done to the types of music being listened to. At the same time, however, what may be most striking about the course of urbanization and suburbanization in the United States is the degree to which it cut across American society as a whole. Horace Greeley of "Go west, young man" fame had it backwards: as industrialization proceeded, the country was not the safety valve for the city, but rather the *city* served as a refuge from the *country*. And, increasingly, the suburb served as a refuge from both.

Wherever they happened to live, Americans seemed united by an exceptional penchant for home ownership. It is notable, but perhaps not coincidental, that the greatest fervor appeared to come from immigrants. One study of Detroit, for example, showed that in 1900, 55 percent of Germans, 46 percent of the Irish, and 44 percent of Poles owned their own homes—figures that would have been virtually inconceivable in Europe at the time, particularly in Ireland and (what was once) Poland, whose residents were often virtual prisoners of foreign powers. In the immigrant-laden Massachusetts city of Newburyport in the 1930s, Irish and Italians tended to make home ownership an even greater priority than their children's educations; the percentage of those with property holdings who lived in the city for twenty years ranged from 63 to 78 percent. Still another study, this one of cities with more than a hundred thousand residents at the turn of the century, found that the proportion of immigrants who owned their own homes ranged from 11 percent in New York City to 58 percent in Toledo. Among the native-born, by contrast, 15 percent owned homes in New York City; the figure reached 40 percent in Los Angeles. As one noted historian, Kenneth Jackson, has observed, "Obviously variation by city and by ethnic group was enormous, but from an international perspective what is most important about these statistics is that it was not a native-American, or middle-class, or urban phenomenon, but an American phenomenon." Moreover, Jackson noted, while African Americans tended to encounter discrimination that blunted their own aspirations for home owning, and Jews' religious practices tended

toward group cohesion, all other ethnic groups were migrating to suburbia in the early decades of the twentieth century.

A number of interrelated factors contributed to the widespread opportunities for home ownership. Some, like the plentitude of wood on a continent whose forests had not been denuded, were intrinsic to the land itself. Others were more technological. The advent of the balloon frame house in the 1830s in Chicago revolutionized American architecture by making housing far cheaper and simpler to construct. (The characteristic wooden beams that define a building long before it is finished continue to be widespread in American contracting into the twenty-first century.) Still other factors were economic: though one often hears assertions about cheap labor being crucial for national economic health, the United States was to a great degree a country built on high wages, which not only stimulated labor-saving technological innovation but also gave workers sufficient wages to buy houses, which furthered economic development still more. Finally, the elaboration of a transportation infrastructure effectively brought more (and cheaper) land within the purview of a metropolitan area, creating an ever-widening radius of housing within commuting distance of cities.

All these elements were firmly in place by 1900. At that point, though, a new element appeared on the scene that would have a transformative effect: the automobile. Its impact on American society in general and on suburbs in particular has been so great that it is hard to believe that suburbs were really suburbs without it.

At the most fundamental level, the car transformed the physical geography of the metropolis. Before, the organizing principle had been the rail line extending outward. Now, however, the suburbs were defined not so much by a radius from the center as by a circumference circling it (like the Beltway that loops around Washington, D.C.). Cars also transformed the built environment, whether in the growing prominence of the garage or in the oversized signs, parking lots, shopping centers, or other kinds of architecture that were specifically designed to attract motorists. They also hastened the decline of cities by decentralizing many of their social functions and by draining financial resources away from their infrastructure. (The proverbial story of the huge Los Angeles rail system, eviscerated by funding for highways, comes to mind.)

Like the house, the car became widely celebrated as an emblem of democracy even for those who had not yet acquired one, and for many

of the same reasons. As with housing, cars were the focus of endless technological refinement. They also became relatively less expensive over time, allowing virtually all families (and even individuals) to acquire them. Like houses, too, cars were typically bought on borrowed money, which was lent in large measure because relatively high wages permitted it and in turn provided an ever-expanding market for those who sold them and related products. And Americans took to cars as passionately—and perhaps as irrationally—as they did to houses. “We’d rather do without clothes than give up the car,” one working-class housewife told researchers Robert and Helen Lynd in their classic 1937 study of Muncie, Indiana. “I’ll go without food before I’ll see us give up a car,” asserted another. Such sentiments were impressive when one considers them in light of the relatively severe economic conditions that preceded and followed that era, but car ownership, like home ownership, points to one more distinctively American trait: relative wealth. When Soviet authorities tried to discredit American capitalism by showing the 1940 film *The Grapes of Wrath*—a movie whose emotional power derives from a story line about the homelessness of displaced tenant farmers—it was yanked out of theaters after six weeks when it became clear that viewers were more impressed by the fact that the impoverished Joad family nevertheless owned a family car. Literally and figuratively, the automobile embodied personal mobility, and as such was the perfect complement for the anchorage provided by a privately owned homestead.

The most important contribution of the automobile to suburbia, however, may have had less to do with its use than with its means of construction. Henry Ford revolutionized American manufacturing by exploiting the principles of assembly line manufacture for what was at the time an extremely complex consumer appliance. But could the same techniques of mass manufacturing—control over large quantities of raw materials, a fixed sequence of assembly using fewer workers, economies of scale to lower per-unit price, and sufficient capital to provide financing for a wider array of buyers—be used to construct residential housing?

Abraham Levitt knew the answer. Levitt and his sons William and Alfred had been relatively small-scale contractors before the Second World War, when they received a government contract to build more than two thousand homes for war workers in Norfolk, Virginia. The experience, which proved difficult, nevertheless allowed them to

*and shoes!

develop a system for laying dozens of foundations every day and pre-assembling walls and roofs. Just as important, the coming economic forecast—which included a huge demand for housing in the wake of the Great Depression and the end of the Second World War, as well as the prospect of government aid to veterans and others—made the construction of large housing developments appear to be a worthwhile gamble. Returning to Long Island after the war, they built some high-priced residential housing but also acquired a four-thousand-acre tract of potato fields in the township of Hempstead. Their development, which was known at the time as Island Trees, was soon renamed Levittown.

The formula was simple. Trucks dropped off building materials at sixty-foot intervals. All the houses had concrete foundations (no cellars), asphalt floors, and rock-board walls. Freight cars delivered Levitt-owned timber to lumberyards, where one man could cut parts for ten houses in a day. The houses were constructed in twenty-seven steps by workers who specialized in particular jobs, aided by new electrically powered tools. Preassembled parts and appliances were provided by wholly owned subsidiaries, and the company used nonunion labor, making up for rainy days on weekends. At the height of production, thirty houses went up a day.

When complete, Levittown consisted of over seventeen thousand houses and eighty-two thousand residents, making it the largest housing development ever built in the United States. The Cape Cod-style homes, which were built in a few standard variations, typically offered about 750 square feet of space and were sold for as low as \$6,990, including a washing machine. As little as 10 percent was all that was necessary for a down payment, and because the mortgage, interest, principal, and taxes were often less than rent, virtually all were owner-occupied—particularly since government aid in the form of VA and FHA guarantees allowed the Levitts both the capital to build the houses and freedom from risk in lending it. In the coming years, they would build similar developments in Pennsylvania and New Jersey—and, more important, these would be followed by a wave of similar developments across the country.

Jefferson would have been disappointed: the United States never became a nation of yeoman farmers. And yet, in important ways, the suburbanization of the United States realized a Jeffersonian vision of small stakeholders. It realized some of the less attractive dimensions of

that vision as well; a wish that black Americans and other minorities would simply disappear. The explicit government policy of redlining certain towns, cities, and neighborhoods with high minority populations—declaring them too risky to insure—made them virtually worthless to banks and buyers. Nor could minority families escape such places, for reasons that included individual irresponsibility, government neglect, and the self-fulfilling prophecies of mass abandonment. Levitt himself refused to sell to African Americans for fear that it would hurt his business. In this regard, of course, both he and the government simply reflected the attitudes of the voters and customers they served. “We can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem,” Levitt explained in the isn’t-it-obvious, commonsense logic of the early postwar years. “But we cannot combine the two.” In 1960 not a single resident of Levittown was black.

That would change, very gradually, as many of those with African and other minority backgrounds made their fitful entrance into realms of American life from which they had formerly been excluded. To begin to understand why they may have done so—and to begin to understand the cost they and others paid for doing so—one must shift the tenor of the discussion away from the more external, structural elements in the American Dream of Home Ownership into a more psychological and symbolic realm. Only then can one begin to understand what kind of people this modern-day Dream of Home Ownership produced.

*Eden is that old-fashioned house
We dwell in every day
Without suspecting our abode
Until we drive away.*

—undated poem by Emily Dickinson (1830–86)

That attempt to understand began early. Among the first people to explore the cultural ramifications of the emerging suburban order was David Riesman, a sociologist whose widely read 1950 book *The Lonely Crowd* traced what he considered a historic shift from the goal-oriented, work-minded, “inner-directed” individual to a more self-conscious, consumer-minded, “outer-directed” one. Riesman did not focus on

postwar suburbanization, which was barely getting under way, and he carefully noted the implicit problems with inner-direction as well as outer-direction (the typical neurosis for the former is shame and guilt, while the latter is subject to a more free-floating sense of anxiety). But many of the elements Riesman and his colleagues noted in *The Lonely Crowd* would resurface in later studies as highly characteristic of the suburban personality.

Perhaps the best known of such works was William Whyte’s 1956 study *The Organization Man*. Whyte, who specifically linked the archetypal figure of the title to Riesman’s other-directed person, noted the high degree of social conformity that characterized postwar suburban life—in the offices of men who commuted to the city as well as in the communities they returned to each night. (He used the affluent Chicago suburb of Forest Park as his case study.) For Whyte, as for Riesman, this emphasis on “togetherness” imperiled the sense of independence and autonomy that had characterized much of earlier American culture, replacing it with a sense of conformity that was at best bland and at worst deeply hostile to pluralist traditions of democracy. As Whyte recognized, this critique was similar to the one Tocqueville had made a century before. But now, he felt, those most invested in the sense of individualism that once made the United States distinctive had lost the lineaments of the Protestant ethic that once animated the society. Even as these people heartily insisted “that there are some people left—e.g. businessmen—to defend the American Dream,” they were succumbing to the blandishments of an organization man who lacked the spine to keep the American Dream alive.

The work of people like Riesman and Whyte received a fair amount of attention in the 1950s, in large measure because one did not have to look very hard to find evidence of what they were talking about. As one suburbanite explained, “If you have any brains, you keep them in your back pocket around here.” Added another, “In the city I knew a lot of intellectual, progressive-type people. I’ll admit they are more stimulating, full of ideas, always wanting to talk about India or something. But I like the stodgy kind now. It’s more comfortable.” Stodginess, however, coexisted with yearnings for alternatives that ranged from pathetic to pathological. Such yearnings could be glimpsed in sources like Alfred Kinsey’s celebrated 1948 study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (his report on females followed five years later) but more commonly in fiction with titles like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and “The Secret Life

of Walter Mitty." In varied ways, all these works questioned—if not explicitly condemned—the enervating compromises implicit in the suburban ethos. Not that any of this mattered. Like much of their audience, the fictional Ricardo family (and their friends the Mertzes) would themselves be making the move to Connecticut in the hugely popular television series *I Love Lucy*. In both its content and the way it was watched, television soon became the quintessential mass medium of suburbia.

In the sixties, a previously latent unease with suburbia would become more explicit and intense, and it would appear from what had been largely quiet quarters. Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* may have been elliptical in describing an emerging female consciousness as a response to "the problem that has no name," but there can be little doubt as to suburbia's role as one of the principal sites of that problem. The economic crisis of the Great Depression had eroded the centrality of a man's role as the family breadwinner; the military crisis of the 1940s had given women a new sense of participation in the public workplace. After the war, many women—willingly as well as unwillingly—returned to their homes to become the seemingly ubiquitous suburban housewives of the 1950s. In fact, many began to drift back to offices and factories, if indeed they had ever left, but that tended to be played down in the reigning domestic ideology of the era. Such suburban women, who were educated or longed to be, chafed at the deadening routines and mindless suppositions about family life that passed as common sense. Friedan's particular form of feminism was subsequently criticized for presuming all women were like middle-class whites, but, if nothing else, her work—as well as its enthusiastic reception—shows the degree to which a widespread sense of anomie in the post-Second World War culture of suburbia affected those living at the center of it.

It fell to the children of such women, however, to mount the most furious attack on the culture that created them. Indeed, it seems that the youth movement of the 1960s, one whose memory lingers as a byword for American narcissism, was nothing so much as a sustained rejection of the "Little Boxes"—to quote the title of a song by folksinger Malvina Reynolds—and everything they stood for. For better and worse, the pastoral mythology of Woodstock and the urbanity of Haight-Ashbury (that is, the country and the city), free love and antiwar militancy, civil rights communalism and hippie self-indulgence, drew their power

from the degree to which they effectively negated suburban values of moderation, conformity, and the pursuit of happiness via a plot of land.

In retrospect, though, what seems most remarkable is not the power of such challenges, as compelling as they were, but suburbia's ability to (blandly) repel them. Despite a vast and varied critique of suburbia that was at my parents' disposal by 1969, they either rejected or were oblivious to it. They bought a house not because they wished to make a political statement or, unlike some of their peers, because they had an overriding emotional predilection for home owning. They did it because it made sense for them economically and because they felt it was the best means to their end of upward mobility for their children. If it was pointed out to them that even unconscious choices had political implications and consequences, they would shrug and say they wouldn't have done anything differently. And if, in sympathy for their position, it was pointed out to them that the fiery black leader Malcolm X also bought a house on Long Island for the safety and long-term security of his wife and four children, they would shrug and say that's very interesting and still maintain they wouldn't have done anything differently—unless, of course, he bought a house in their neighborhood. In this regard, I think, my parents were little different than millions of previous generations of Americans, whether they huddled on farms in the Midwest or managed to acquire a multiple-family dwelling in an urban neighborhood.

This is not to say that the character of suburban life was wholly static. From the perspective of a half century later, the most remarkable thing about *The Organization Man* is how dated it seems in its anxiety about conformity. This is less because conformity has altogether ceased to be a problem than because individualism seems to have run amok, typified by the so-called gated communities in which wealthy homeowners virtually barricade themselves from the outside world (except perhaps to admit servants; complaints about the difficulty in finding good help now seem as common as they were among the affluent a century ago). What Betty Friedan called "the problem that has no name" in the 1960s was replaced by a different one in the next generation: mothers who worked outside the home and struggled to find the resources—time, money, quality day care—for their families and themselves. The gradual creation of a large black middle class and the reform of the most flagrant government abuses have allowed African

Americans and other minorities to make their own migration to the suburbs, where class segregation is now in some places almost as obvious as racial segregation. The revitalization of some city neighborhoods, along with the general spread of city amenities—and city problems—has led to a blurring of just what constitutes a suburb.

Indeed, perhaps the biggest and most obvious change in suburbia is structural. Some suburbs are, or have become, cities in their own right. Yonkers, New York, for example, is both a commuting haven for Manhattan and the fourth-largest city in the state. Instead of leaving home to go work in the city each day, more and more Americans live in one suburb and work in another. So-called edge cities such as Towson, Maryland, or La Jolla, California, owe their existence to large metropolises (Washington, D.C., and San Diego, respectively) yet serve as surrogates or carve out economic niches independent of them for residents and those living in adjacent communities. Meanwhile, suburbia continues to sprawl, reaching into hinterlands and converting them into exurbia. The process seems almost Turnerian: exurbs suburbanize, suburbs urbanize, and restless settlers flee to frontiers—from Vermont to Idaho—in search of a “simple” life.

But for all the changes, suburbia remains a recognizable phenomenon. It also seems like a relatively stable one; my own suburban upbringing in the 1970s was not fundamentally different from that of young people in the 1950s or the 2000s. Like my predecessors and successors, I too knew a world of McDonald’s restaurants, shopping-center parking lots, and four-bedroom colonials surrounded by chemically treated lawns. Like them, I watched parades go down Main Street, went swimming in backyard pools, and shoveled snow to create easier pedestrian access for homes and automobiles. The routines, trivial in themselves, had a cumulative effect that felt like security.

This is why, shortly after our first child was born and my wife and I both got reasonably solid jobs, we bought a four-bedroom colonial in lower Westchester County, New York. (I use the term “we” loosely; the truth is that my wife’s parents gave us the down payment.) And when it came time for that child to begin his education, we sent him to private school. Ironically, a major factor in this decision involved a desire to avoid the rather severe racial segregation of our community and allow him to learn and socialize with African-American and Latino children. Not that I’m proud of, or can even finally defend, the decision. My wife and I both wished our local public schools weren’t so mediocre, or that

we could afford to buy a house in a community where the commitment to public schooling was greater (though in our view the kind of cultural homogeneity that characterized those communities in some sense constituted another kind of mediocrity). We viewed our choices as the best we could make of an inherently flawed situation, recognizing our complicity, our hypocrisy. Still, we may yet pay in other ways (and suffer with bad plumbing for the foreseeable future). Built as a bulwark against the ravages of time, nature, and the less pleasant realities of American life, home owning—from its rural beginnings to its exurban end—cannot finally be a refuge from any of them. But I’m grateful it still seems that way.