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A Social History of the Private Fence in Nineteenth-Century America

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A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE PRIVATE FENCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICA

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

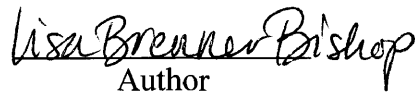
Lisa Brenner Bishop

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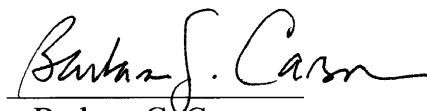
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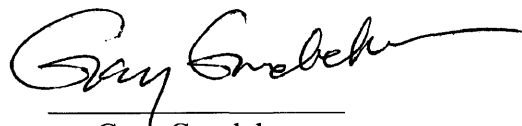
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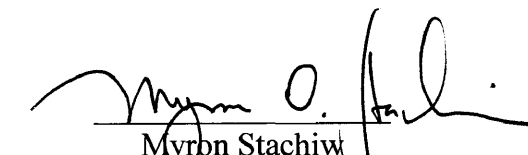
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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the fence as social history. Against a discussion of legal requirements, materials, and design it sees the fence as a response to changes in the spacial ordering of rural, urban and suburban landscapes in the nineteenth century. Through close readings of gardening and farming journals and newspapers, home management manuals and landscape architecture texts, changing attitudes toward fence use and their effect on community relations is revealed. Fence styles and usage reflected transformations in social structure, moral and aesthetic philosophy, residential settlement, technological innovations and legal mandates. They were practical structures necessary for life in the countryside, and essential to social regulation in the cities and new suburban neighborhoods.

Through the physical structure of the fence Victorian culture expressed its anxiety over the rapidly changing social and physical environment. Throughout the nineteenth century, the practical need for fences began to decline, but the psychological need for fences as social regulators, evidenced by the prescriptive literature of the period, remained. Practical fences, those containing or excluding livestock, were removed as laws were revised, farms sold, and agricultural practices pushed farther away from residential neighborhoods. In urban and suburban settings, private fences marked property lines, enclosed gardens, and separated the home grounds from the public street. Social fences, those that restricted or permitted access to people, were more difficult to remove because they filled a primary need for public order. In the latter half of the century, these social fences began their quiet retreat from the front yard. But their retreat was precipitated by the creation of alternative methods of social control such as the homogenization of neighborhoods and the spread of middle-class modes of behavior. Fences did not disappear, but underwent gradual transformations. They were recast in the form of curbs and sloping front yards, homeowners association handbooks, and gated communities.

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“We shape our dwellings and afterwards our dwellings shape us,” Winston Churchill wrote.¹ We build our environment and in return our environment patterns our lives - our ways of acting, thinking, feeling - indeed of living. We are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with our surroundings, entwined in a reciprocal process between ourselves and our immediate physical world. Homes and home spaces are invested with emotions and identities and as such, they become particularly compelling indicators of our aspirations, our experiences, and the cultural climate in which we live. We leave our mark on the land as we build our homes, not simply our taste in architecture or ornament but our ideas and beliefs about the larger social world of which we are, or are not, a part. The cultural constructions that comprise these ordinary landscapes, elements as diverse as buildings, gardens, fences and fields, reveal the kind of people we are. As Pierce Lewis so clearly stated, “Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form.”²

Central to this study is the consideration of individual and group response to the American landscape; to the clearing of land, organizing of communities, building of houses, and the establishing of family homes and gardens. The landscape reinforces identities. Permanent “improvements” to the land - homes and gardens, fences and pathways, roads and parks - make visible our commitment to a particular space and larger community. The nineteenth century saw significant, rapid change in the landscape,

¹Gregory K. Dreicer, ed., *Between Fences* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 7.

²Pierce F. Lewis, “Axioms for Reading the Landscape,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D. W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 12.

arguably greater than any before or since. One way its changes can be seen is through the expanded range of housing expressions. In 1803 the Louisiana Purchase cleared the way for westward expansion, effectively doubling the size of the United States and dotting the land with sod houses and log cabins. Cities exploded with both the beginnings of industrialization and unprecedented increases in population and immigration. They gave rise to crowded tenements and fashionable townhouses. As rail travel extended to the borderlands of eastern cities, suburban “garden” neighborhoods rose to accommodate middle class families able to afford the American dream of a single family home surrounded by a white picket fence.

Owning a bit of land on which to build a independent family home was a measure of economic accomplishment, of social standing and of morality. The 1890 census, the first to record home ownership, revealed less than thirty-eight percent of Americans owned their own homes, and the percent was even lower near urban centers.³ Rental houses, boarding houses, and apartments accommodated middle class newlyweds on their way to single family home ownership, a standard of achievement even in our own time. Building and loan associations, housing developers, and builders emphasized the importance of owning rather than renting a home. S. E. Gross and Company, Chicago’s largest developer at the end of the century, advertised homes with mortgage payments equal to average monthly rents.⁴ Installment plans, loans and other forms of credit extended the arm of consumer culture. Refinements, items such as the parlor, a front

³Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 94.

⁴*Ibid.*, 97.

garden and a surrounding picket fence, previously available only to the wealthy began to spread to the middle class.⁵

Fences were part of the complex language of material goods through which Victorian culture expressed its anxiety over the rapidly changing social world. Against a discussion of legal requirements, materials, and designs, this study sees the fence as a response to changes in the spatial ordering of rural, urban and suburban landscapes. In rural landscapes, fences were practical structures necessary for containing or excluding livestock and crops. In urban and suburban neighborhoods, fences restricted or permitted access to people. This study will focus on private fence use in these urban and suburban settings.⁶ Fences marked property lines, enclosed flower beds and vegetable gardens, and distinguished the family's private space from the public street. They reflected social concerns, and moral and aesthetic philosophies. I have drawn on evidence from landscape architect's and nurserymen's guides, etiquette manuals, agricultural newspapers, home and garden magazines, traveler's accounts, and fence laws to reveal the conditions which precipitated the decline of private fence use throughout the century. Advice literature was not able to address the many decisions individual homeowners faced when enclosing their property. Fence laws varied from county to county, and often changed as local communities grew. Ultimately, the decision to enclose private landscapes involved the balance of local fence laws, economic constraints, aesthetic

⁵Witold Rybczynski, *City Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 103.

⁶Due to the requirements of length, I have not included a discussion of public fences used to enclose cemetery grounds and individual plots, public parks and monuments, and semi-public pleasure gardens.

considerations, and community relationships.

Changes in the delineation of space and the organization of home grounds in the nineteenth century affected the use of private fences. In the early decades of the century, rural and village domestic landscapes received little attention from homeowners. In all regions of the country, the appearance of the land surrounding the house revealed the hard work of domestic life. By the 1840's, most Northern homes had adopted the white picket fences and orderly yard recommended by landscape reformers and neighbors. Southern and Western areas lagged behind, and typically fenced their homelots at mid-century. When most families had fenced their neat homelots, professional landscape architects criticized the overuse of fences and began to call for their removal. The wealthy, educated elite hired fashionable landscape architects to design their homegrounds with open vistas and fenceless borders. By the last quarter of the century, most fence laws in the South and North had relieved homeowners of their duty to fence out roaming livestock. Yet, despite these developments fences continued to be recommended for yard and garden enclosure through the close of the century. In fact, a close reading of gardening and landscape prescriptive literature reveals the ambivalence with which nurserymen, landscape architects and homeowners approached the use of residential fencing and the progress of civilization. Many rural farmers, villagers, and urbanites understood that in early nineteenth-century America, fences were a necessary element in the domestic landscape.

Fence as Necessity

Fences were a practical structure necessary for life in the rural, semi-rural, or

urban domestic landscape of the early nineteenth century, and ranked among the most important improvements to the landscape. Traditional agricultural practices based in England's enclosures and the evolution of local laws helped establish fences and boundaries as necessary components of community life and social order. Open-field agricultural practices were thought to be widespread throughout England from about 1300 until the end of the seventeenth century when enclosure had created new land distribution patterns and agricultural improvements. The open-field system of agriculture divided the arable land of a township into individual strips, and distributed one strip to each farmer. These strips were then grouped into furlongs, which formed two or three common fields. Hedges were few, with animals allowed to graze after harvest, and during the whole year on the parts left fallow. Farmers shared some of the cultivation responsibilities and regular meetings ensured that all participants agreed on cultivation practices. To enforce the boundaries in this open-field system, fines were levied for encroaching on neighboring strips.⁷

The inadequacies of the open-field system ultimately led to the establishment of enclosures. In the open-field system land was often inconveniently intermixed and dispersed, in small parcels, at a distance from the owner's house. This situation made considerable improvements to the land difficult, and encouraged encroachment by neighboring farmers or occupation by squatters.⁸ Unenclosed lands were also subject to

⁷Chris Senior, "Drystone Walls and Fields," (1998); from <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~chrisjs/drystone/drystonewalls.htm>; Internet; accessed 24 January 2000, p.8.

⁸George E. Mingay, *Parliamentary Enclosure in England: An Introduction to its Causes, Incidence, and Impact 1750-1850* (London: Longman Press, 1997), 33.

communal rights and obligations, particularly those customary regulations which allowed sheep and cattle to graze over arable land. The first large-scale enclosure of England's landscape, and the primary type of enclosure throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, was known as 'enclosures by agreement'. Enclosure had as its main objectives agricultural improvement and increased land value. Land owners agreed among themselves to enclose part or all of the fields and commons within their parish, and to allot the land in separate, compact fields of manageable size to each owner. Reorganized land was enclosed by hedges, ditches, or man-made walls or fences, and restricted grazing cattle and sheep. Communal rights and obligations were abolished and farmers gained greater freedom to plant, sow, harvest, and fallow their land at whatever season they chose.⁹ From 1750 through 1830 land enclosure continued through the more formalized Acts of Parliament, and by 1830 enclosures had divided the landscape with nearly 200,000 miles of hedgerow.¹⁰

In the eighteenth century fencing requirements reflected the common law, which was based on three rules; (1) a landowner was entitled to have his land fenced or unfenced as he pleased; (2) each person's land, whether fenced or unfenced, was considered by law to be enclosed; and (3) livestock and animal owners were required to keep their animals on their own land. This position held livestock owners strictly liable for any damages to person or property by their livestock. The implication, though not

⁹George E. Mingay, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Volume IV 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 45.

¹⁰Paul Blissett, "Hedges In Our Landscape," available from <http://www.hedgelaye.freemove.co.uk/hedlan.htm>; Internet; accessed 24 January 2000, p. 2.

expressly stated, was that the livestock owner had a responsibility to “fence in” his livestock with a well-built and maintained fence to protect himself from legal action and economic loss. Fence scrutiny was informal in the South, whereas in New England “fence viewers” were appointed to assess enclosures and settle disputes.

In the early nineteenth century areas with ample land and sparsely settled communities, primarily in the West and in marginal farming areas of the North and South, roaming livestock were generally not a nuisance. But as towns and villages grew, farmers moved into these unsettled areas to establish their fields and families. With more land devoted to raising crops and building homes, less was available for the open grazing of livestock. Farmers were forced to enclose increasingly larger fields of wheat and corn to prevent their plunder, and townsmen were required to fence their dooryard gardens. For most homeowners, the open grazing of cattle was not entirely satisfactory.

As farmers and townsmen began to outnumber livestock owners, individual community lawmakers were pressured to enact herd laws requiring owners to “fence in” their livestock.¹¹ In the nineteenth century, Southerners continued to fence livestock out of arable fields while Northerners increasingly enclosed their livestock. By the 1830's New England, and most other Northern states, had firmly established a fenced livestock boundary system and allowed livestock to openly graze in only the most marginal farming areas.¹² However, livestock grazing was still a problem in the second half of the century.

¹¹Jackson, 65.; see also Powell, 7.

¹²Thomas C. Hubka, *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn: The Connected Farm Buildings of New England* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1984), 84-85.

George Woodward, architect, civil engineer and author of *Woodward's Country Homes* published in 1868 wrote, "In spite of all laws to the contrary, cattle will intrude upon one's property, and each and all must at great expense build and maintain fences for their own protection. There has not as yet been devised any practicable mode by which the enormous sums annually spent in fencing might be saved."¹³

In the late nineteenth century, politics, economics, aesthetics, and land settlement created inconsistent fence laws within Western states, a condition which exists even today. Although most Western states initially adopted the common law, many did not enforce the strictly liable position which held livestock owners responsible for damages even if the animals were properly enclosed. Local legislatures frequently enacted statutes which imposed on property owners the obligation to "fence out" livestock by protecting only that property which was enclosed by a legal fence. Unless an enclosure met the legal definition of a fence, the property owner was not protected from marauding livestock.¹⁴ These statutes, known as open range laws, were well-suited to western states with large expanses of land and a topography which made fences difficult to build. Under the open range laws, livestock owners were not responsible for damages to private property unless that property was protected by a legal fence.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the nation's focus shifted from farms and ranches to cities and suburbs, and as automobiles and roadways multiplied, western

¹³George Woodward, *Woodward's Country Homes* (New York: Geo. E. Woodward, 1868), 106.

¹⁴Robert O. Dawson, "HorseLaw: Good Fences Make Good Neighbors," available from http://www.law.utexas.edu/dawson/horselaw/fenc_law.htm; Internet; accessed 24 January 2000, pp. 1-2.

legislatures were forced to re-think open range laws.¹⁵ Some states reenacted the earlier common law, or fence in, position with the modification that livestock owners were liable for damages only if it is proven that livestock escaped due to the owner's negligence. Negligence was typically defined as a poorly maintained fence. Although laws varied from state to state, and county to county, they did have the overall effect of settling disputes and clearly ascribing model citizenry to the presence of a well-kept fence.

Fence as Moral Symbol

At the opening of the nineteenth century, there was a call for the reformation of the domestic landscape and, by implication, the individual responsible for its appearance. From cottage gardens to rural farmyards, reformers cited rampant neglect of the home grounds. Traveler's accounts, agriculture periodicals, seed catalogs and nurserymen's literature, home management manuals, advice literature authors, and ministers all brought attention to the grounds around the home and called for homeowners to take greater responsibility for this critical component of the domestic landscape and the larger community of which it was part. In 1818 during his tour of America, William Cobbett found that "the example of neatness was wanting. There were no gentlemen's gardens, kept as clean as drawing-rooms."¹⁶

From these first decades of the nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth, the neglected dooryard, surrounding fields and slovenly farms were linked with questionable

¹⁵Dawson, 2.

¹⁶William Cobbett, *A Year's Residence in America* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., n. d. [written 1818]):3, quoted in Jenkins, 19, n. 68.

morality. Central to complaints about the general disarray of farms was the dilapidated fence, a blight on the orderly, efficient rural landscape. Solon Robinson, an advocate for progressive agriculture and a vocal landscape reformer wrote in 1855, “wherever we see the fields badly tilled, the fences broken, the buildings dilapidated . . . the garden a wilderness of weeds . . . we turn away in disgust, and say to ourselves, there is no pride.”¹⁷ Fences, a necessary feature of the prosperous farm, ranked among the most important, time-consuming, and expensive improvements to the rural landscape. In addition to an initial outlay of time, labor, and money, they required recurrent maintenance and upkeep. If kept well, they demanded annual painting, rebuilding, and frequent repairs.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, most American families did not concern themselves with the appearance of the land immediately around the house. The yards and gardens of Northern, Southern, and newly established Western houses reflected the hard work of family life. Critics attributed the disrepair of fences and unkempt yards and homes to thriftlessness, intemperance, laziness, and the unresolved question of accountability. While men traditionally maintained sole responsibility for the farm, and women for the house, the increasingly important “middle landscape” around the home had not yet been clearly defined. An 1829 observer believed that “one reason why so many door yards are neglected, is that it is a spot of doubtful jurisdiction, neither falling exactly under the scope of the word ‘farm’ which it is the man’s to oversee, nor being

¹⁷Solon Robinson, “The Farmer’s Errors,” *Report of the Massachusetts Board of Agriculture* 3 (1856): 348, quoted in John Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (new Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 71, n. 5.

properly in the house, where woman reigns.”¹⁸ Nearly a decade later, conflict over control of the front yard was still being waged.

Many front yards are neglected on account of the unsettled state of the law regarding the title to the ‘locus in quo.’ Some contend that the front yard is part of the farm, and under the supervision and control of the husband; while others insist that it is a ‘part and parcel’ of the house, and, being such, is within the jurisdictional limits of the wife; and consequently, subject to her government and entitled to her protection.¹⁹

This uncertainty reflected the emerging role that the domestic landscape played in revolutionizing social relationships, both within the home and in the larger community, eventually determining how the home, and women’s role in its management would be defined.

Dooryard and cottage gardens elicited stern admonishments as well. Numerous commentaries, such as the following, on the disorderly appearance of the house had the cumulative effect of linking domestic management with morality and virtue. The front yard fence, the public face of exterior domestic arrangement received an unequal share of criticism and attention. As these comments make clear, a disorderly home was reason enough to make sweeping, slanderous judgements of neighbors based strictly on appearances. A particularly vicious, and comprehensive attack on these negligent homeowners was published in an article entitled “Front Yards” in 1837,

It is high time front yards were attended to - the fences repaired, the trees and

¹⁸“Development of Character,” *American Agriculturist* 1 (June 1842), 80; quoted in Stilgoe, n. 6.

¹⁹*New England Farmer, and Gardener’s Journal*, ed. T. G. Fessenden, no. 1 (12 July 1837): 3, quoted in Christine White, “Reform and the Promotion of Ornamental Gardening” in *Plants and People: The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 1995*, ed. Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University, 1995), 105, n. 7.

shrubbery pruned, and the rubbish which has accumulated during the winter removed. Nothing is more indubitably indicative of the husbandry of the farm and the order of the house, than the condition of the front yard - and whenever and wherever you see one with the fences broken down, gates unhung, and its interior littered up with old shoes, dead cats, broken jugs, &c., you may call the man a sloven and his wife a slut, without exposing yourself to be mulet in damages in an action for slander - for if you go over the farm, you will find everything neglected - buildings and fences out of repair - cattle in mischief - the fields and pastures rooted up by swine, &c. &c. If you enter the house, you will find everything in chaos - dishes unwashed - beds unmade - rooms unswept, &c. &c. If you take the madam by surprise, you will find her surrounded by a group of squalid, ragged and dirty children - in perfect dishabille - hair uncombed - shoes slip-shod - stockings about her feet, &c., and in her flight from your presence, she will blunder over and upset the cradle and dye tub - knock down one child - box another's ears, and drag a third after her &c.,- and leave you to survey the arrangement of her furniture, and see the manner in which she manages the affairs of her household.²⁰

In effect, the moral character of the family was visible from the street manifest in the house and its environs. It created the first and strongest impression on their neighbors. An unkempt yard, with its broken fences and unhung gate, was a blight on the neighborhood, implying a disregard for the values of family, community, and republic.

With the protective enclosure of a fence, families were able to assert their moral concerns, social status, and taste. By mid-century Northern elite landscape reformers had created an awareness of exterior domestic space and successfully persuaded their less affluent and gentile neighbors to ornament and fence their dooryards. Those families with greater economic means began to fence, paint and generally improve their homelot. Gradually, fenced dooryards announced even humble farmhouses. Change was slower in Southern and Western households. Jack Larkin has attributed this to the fact that

²⁰*New England Farmer, and Gardener's Journal*, ed. T. G. Fessenden, no. 1 (12 July 1837): 3, quoted in Christine White, "Reform and the Promotion of Ornamental Gardening" in *Plants and People: The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 1995*, ed. Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University, 1995), 104-105, n. 7.

Southern and Western women were less reliant on commercial exchange, and less removed from daily household work, than their Northern counterparts.²¹ The added burdens of household order and ornament would become a priority later in the century. Southern and Western households began to reorganize and define their yards near mid-century and continued to fence their properties until well into the last quarter of the century, decades after fashionable landscape architects had begun to call for their removal.

Fence style and usage throughout the nineteenth century reflected changes in social behavior, moral and aesthetic philosophies, and technology. Like most consumer goods of the period, fence styles were a personal expression of taste, but they were tempered by economic constraints that increasingly had social consequences. Katherine C. Grier argues that this increasing emphasis on the positive influence of “personal possessions on character had the effect of tying the formation of character to correct habits of consumption.”²² In his 1850 book of designs for country houses Andrew Jackson Downing proclaimed, “Much of the character of every man may be read in his house.”²³ Clarence Cook’s *The House Beautiful*, a popular decorating guide of 1878, declared, “It is no trifling matter, whether we have poor pictures on our walls or good ones, whether we select a fine cast or a second rate one. We might almost as well say it

²¹Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life 1790-1840* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 130-132.

²²Katherine Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 7-8.

²³Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton, 1850), 25.

makes no difference whether the people we live with are first-rate or second-rate.”²⁴ By the second half of the century, the link between morality and taste had effectively permeated all facets of domestic space. Proper fence styles provided a rule by which to measure the moral caliber of the family and, in the second half of the century, their availability and variety expanded to meet the needs of a growing population.

Architect George Harney’s plan book of 1870 included several iron and stone fence designs for private residences. Urban residences, he wrote, required the security of a “substantial and strong” iron fence which conveyed “an idea of protection.”²⁵ These iron and stone fences were “suitable enclosures on the public streets of large towns, but hardly appropriate for the country, both on account of their greater cost, and because they have an artificial, finished appearance, that does not accord well with the country”²⁶ (Figure 1). The artificiality of the city, and city life, was juxtaposed against the authenticity of the country. Harney’s fence designs for country residences included popular rustic twig styles, impermanent and flimsy in appearance, that look as if they might be reclaimed by the forest at any minute (Figure 2). The industrial nature of iron fence manufacture recalled the drudgery of factories and machinery, while the creation of rustic fences involved “a ramble of a couple of hours in the woods.”²⁷

²⁴Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables Stools and Candlesticks* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Company, 1878), 49.

²⁵Harney, George E. *Barns, Outbuildings and Fences* (New York: George E. Woodward, 1870), plate 43.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Harney, plate 44.

IRON AND STONE FENCES.

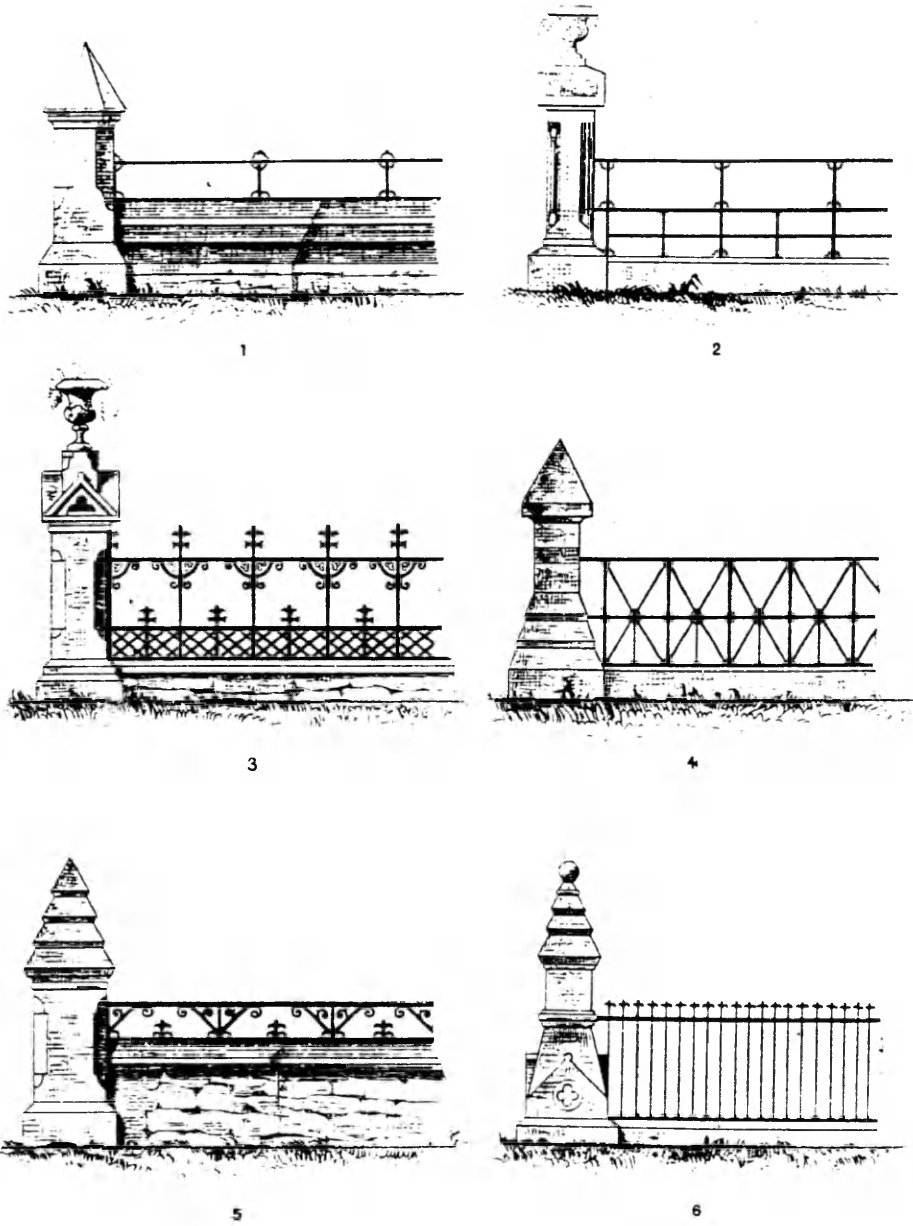


Figure 1. Iron and stone fence designs, illustration in George Harney, *Barns, Outbuildings and Fences* (1870).

RUSTIC FENCES

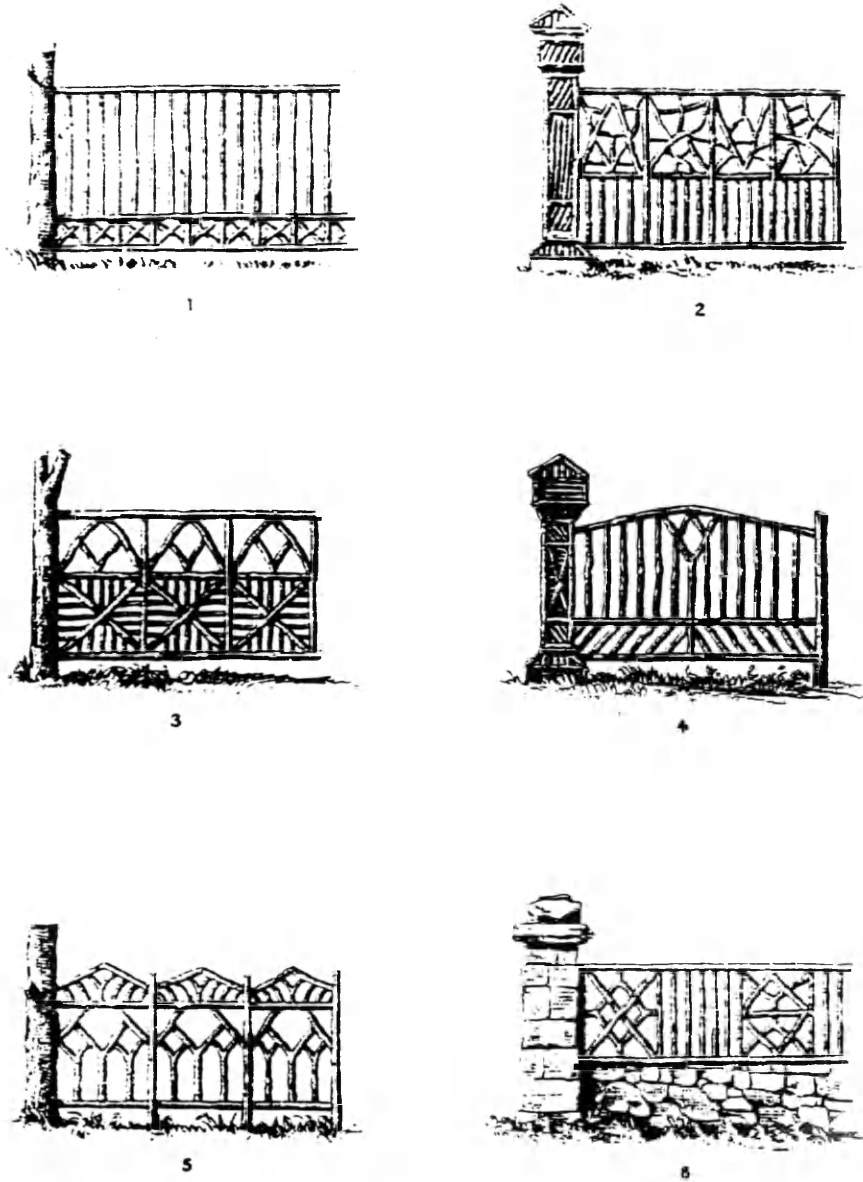


Figure 2. Rustic fence designs, illustration in George Harney, *Barns, Outbuildings, and Fences* (1870).

Fence styles also reflected technological advancements and systems of manufacture and distribution. Advancements in the iron industry during the nineteenth century enabled iron to be used in new ways and aided its transition from functional, utilitarian objects to highly decorative forms. Cast iron quickly became a fashionable material and a visible symbol of man's triumph over nature, as well as his wealth. It was durable and had the ability to be recast endlessly. Iron also lent itself to the new methods of mass production. Molten iron was poured into elaborate sand casts which were created from carved wooden designs. The resulting piece had the delicacy of a woodcarving combined with the permanence of iron.

Cast iron fences were available in hundreds of styles, from the highly ornamental to the relatively plain. Iron work catalogs offered examples of cast iron fence designs and recommendations for their use in private landscapes (Figure 3). Critics claimed iron work possessed an artificial quality only appropriate for public architecture, substantial private estates, or for burial plots in city cemeteries. Iron fences indicated formality, wealth, and status. Descriptions of Springbrook, the Seat of the President of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society mention the elegant mansion and spacious lawn enclosed by a light iron fence.²⁸ Loring Underwood's garden design book of 1907 suggests that iron fences enjoyed a degree of popularity despite the author's contempt for them. He questions, "What could be more ugly and cheerless than the common type of cast iron fence so suggestive of cemeteries and cheerless front yards of our commercial

²⁸Justica, "A Visit to Springbrook, the Seat of the President on the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society," *Horticulturalist* 3 (1849): 411, quoted in O'Malley, Helmreich, and Kryder-Reid, 186.

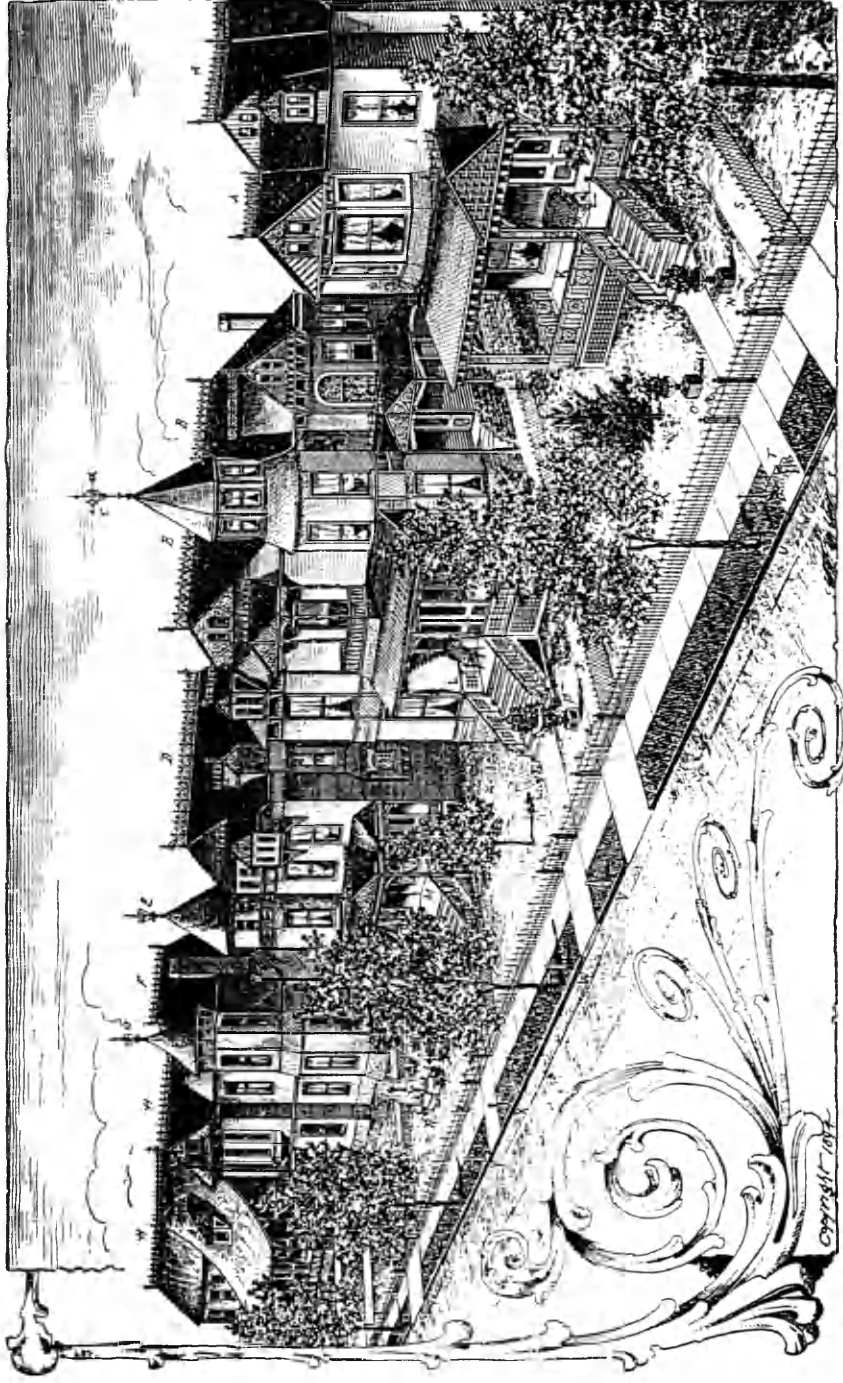


Figure 3. Iron fence usage, illustration in *Barbee Wire and Iron Works Catalog, 1899*. Warshaw Collection, Archives Center, Smithsonian Institution.

towns, and the other hideous affair of gas pipe one sometimes sees around a garden?”²⁹

Despite attempts to discourage the use of iron fencing material, evidence of their existence can be found in cemeteries and cities more than a hundred years later.

A less expensive alternative to cast iron was the woven, twisted or crimped wire fence, typically secured by steel or wooden posts and available in a great variety of designs, and at a lower price. Their advantage over iron was in the ability to view landscape features virtually uninterrupted, a feature that enabled the fence to blend into its surroundings and was in keeping with the open space aesthetic. The more invisible or unobtrusive the fence, the more highly lauded it was. Architects, landscape gardeners and reformers all understood what homeowners already knew, that in many cases a fence could not be eliminated on the basis of aesthetics because its function in the landscape was essential.

Many fence styles were tied to locally available materials and reflected the regional characteristics of the land. Small boulders were common to fields in New England and parts of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Field cultivation required the removal of small boulders found throughout the fields and provided ample material for enclosures. Nineteenth-century husbandmen typically built wooden or stone walls, four or four-and-one-half foot in height, to enclose their livestock. Early colonists felled or girdled trees indiscriminately and within several decades of settlement timber shortages, caused from fuel, and building and fencing requirements, had left their mark

²⁹Loring Underwood, *The Garden and its Accessories* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1907), 190. For examples of “lighter” styles of fences using gas pipe see Harney, *Barns, Outbuildings and Fences*.

on the land.³⁰

The southern states did not have fieldstones, and the tasks of land clearing provided ample wood for fences. Fence styles included picket or paling around gardens and homes, and worm or split rail fences around fields and crops. The worm fence is made from split rail lengths laid alternatively upon itself at severe angles effectively creating a zig zag appearance (Figure 4). This method of fence building was commonly used alongside roads and to enclose fields and delineate boundaries where land was plentiful as they occupied as much as ten feet of land in width. The effect was rough hewn and unrefined, considered inappropriate for the immediate vicinity of the home. In the late eighteenth century, a visitor to Jones Plantation near Charlottesville, Virginia, commented on the appearance of the worm fence in the South,

The fences and enclosures in this province are different from others, for those to the northward are made either of stone or rails let into posts, about a foot asunder; here they are composed of what is termed fence rails . . . laid so, that they cross each other obliquely at each end, and are laid zig zag. . . . These enclosures are generally seven or eight feet high, they are not very strong but convenient, as they can be removed to any other place, where they may be more necessary; from a mode of constructing these enclosures in a zig zag form, the New-Englanders have a saying, when a man is in liquor, he is making Virginia fences.³¹

While this fence type was suitable to enclose crops or livestock, around the home a painted picket or split rail fence indicated its elevated and refined status. Picket or paling fences originated in the seventeenth-century palisades, and evolved into the lower, more domesticated versions of the eighteenth century. This style continued to be the preferred

³⁰John Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580-1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 310.

³¹Thomas Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America* (reprint 1969), 2:323-24, quoted in O'Malley, Helmreich, and Kryder-Reid, 185.

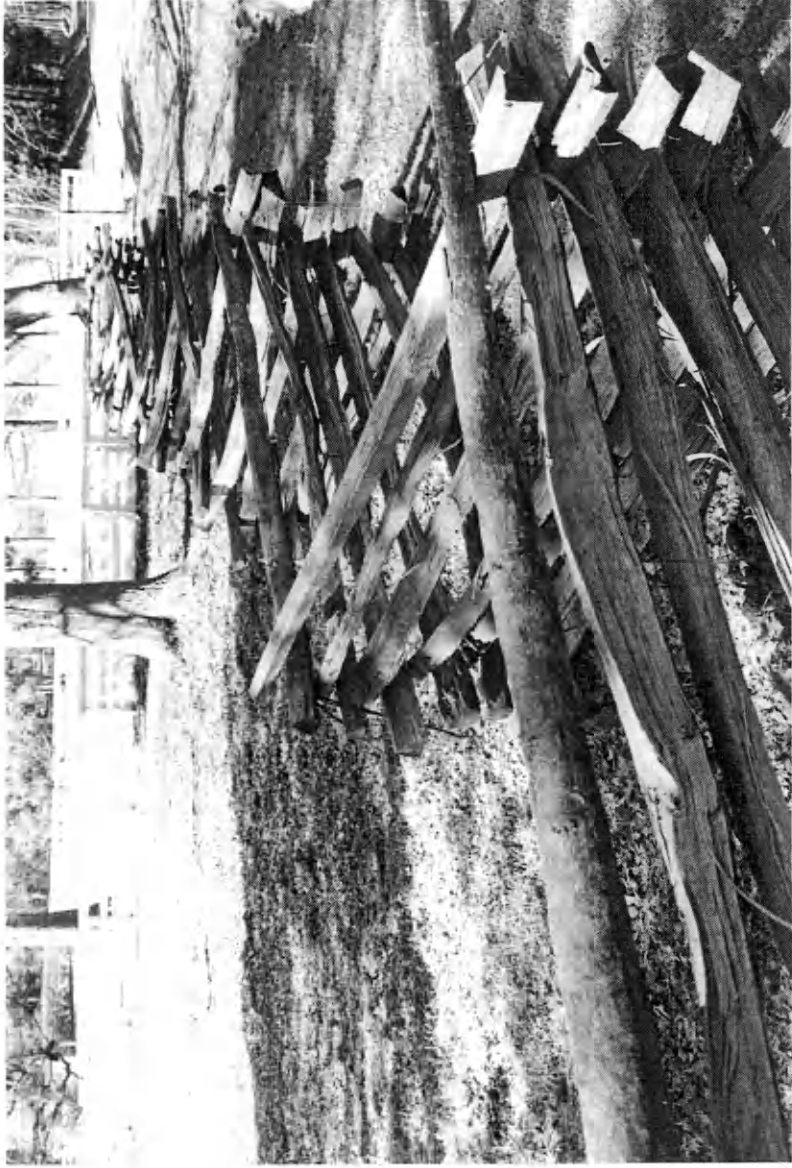


Figure 4. Worm fence, Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. Photograph by author.

fence style for used immediately around dooryards and homes throughout the nineteenth century. As the distance between house and fence increased, the formality and refinement in fence style decreased. Worm, split rail, post and rail, stacked or mortared stone, and other regional variations of economic fences styles were relegated to field enclosure.

The association of fences with social superiority and wealthy elitism that advanced in the eighteenth century must have been conscious, in varying degrees, in the minds of nineteenth-century homeowners. The exclusive nature of the fence confronted the passer-by with its owners' claims to social or moral superiority. Post and rail or picket fences elicited images of garden estates built in the late eighteenth century by colonial gentry and the planter classes. Typically these upper class homes were surrounded by a white picket fence; often rows of uniform trees emphasized their borders and enclosed their land. Barbara Sarudy's study of Baltimore, Maryland, gardens reveals their widespread use around the homes of eighteenth-century Chesapeake gentry and well-to-do artisans.³² Wooden pales or pickets consisting of simple post and rail or common painted flat boards continued to be the primary fence material for domestic use throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thomas Hubka's study of connected farm buildings in Maine revealed the popular acceptance of the white paling fence in the front yards of farm houses from 1820 through 1860.³³ In urban settings, the townhouses of the gentry boasted front yard gardens enclosed by white picket fences or

³²Sarudy, "A late eighteenth-century 'tour' of Baltimore gardens," 125-140.

³³Hubka, 70.

high brick walls.³⁴ Picket fence styles were popular throughout the nineteenth century despite objections from A. J. Downing, who considered their use in front yards “an abomination among the fresh fields, of which no person of taste could be guilty.”³⁵

Downing discouraged the use of all barriers except those on the side of the house nearest the outbuildings which, he conceded, were necessary for convenience. Hedges or rustic work covered in vine were preferable to stone or wooden fences, but sunken fences or terraces were ideal for maintaining a proper connection between the house and its grounds.

Fence as Social Boundary

Robert Frost’s often quoted poem “Mending Wall,” published in 1915, expressed in ink and paper how social relationships had long been defined between early New England settlers: “Good fences make good neighbors.” This simple sentiment was the culmination of centuries of human interaction with the fence and its commonly understood role of imposing order on the land and in the community. Fences made good neighbors, and good citizens, too. They were suggestive of order, industry, and prosperity. On the farm, they enclosed crops or livestock, and protected the dooryard garden in front of the home from chickens and other roving farm animals. Fences were legally required enclosures, necessary for keeping livestock out or in. The integrity of one’s fence announced the prosperity of the farm, the industry of the family, and respect for the community. In urban centers, the fence protected the front yard or gardens from

³⁴Rybcynski, 103.

³⁵Downing, *Treatise*, 295.

the city street, from the intrusion of spectators and swine, and from industrialism's dirt and moral decay.

The fence around the home grounds helped separate this private retreat physically and mentally from the uncertainties of urban life. Fences mediated the relationship between those within their boundary and those without, providing a nonverbal reminder of social responsibility and appropriate behavior. Although Victorian Americans tried to impose social control through elaborate codes of manners, ultimately the behavior of others could not always be regulated. Intrusion onto one's private grounds, whether on the farm or in the city garden, was a frequent concern during the nineteenth century. In 1819, William Cobbett's *The American Gardener* stated, "The fence of a garden is an important matter; for, we have to view it not only as giving protection against intruders, two-legged, but as affording shelter in cold weather and shade in hot."³⁶ Solon Robinson, in an 1850 editorial in the *American Agriculturist* lamented the difficulties of farming in Westchester County, New York, the changed population having made traditional agriculture nearly impossible. "But now, who will plant an orchard when he knows the fruit will all be stolen?"³⁷ Nearly twenty years later, nurseryman Joseph Breck warned that "every fine garden should be well secured by a

³⁶William Cobbett, *The American Gardener* (n.p.1819): 19, quoted in Therese O'Malley, Anne Helmreich, and Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, "Keywords in American Landscape Design" in *Plants and People: The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 1995*, ed. Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University, 1995),186.

³⁷Solon Robinson, "Day in Westchester County," *American Agriculturalist* 10, (January 1851), quoted in Stilgoe, 69, n.1.

fence or hedge if at all exposed to the public road.”³⁸ An 1869 *New England Farmer* article entitled “Dastardly Outrage,” described an orchard in Benton Harbor, Michigan, which had been vandalized. “The entire community turned out to save as many of the trees as possible. . . . Their labors were crowned with abundant success. . . . But the scoundrel was not to be balked of his revenge or malice. . . . Last week the orchard was again entered . . . The splendid orchard is now but a field of dead and decaying tree trunks.”³⁹

Throughout the nineteenth century communities of all sizes experienced dramatic growth. The general population almost doubled between the close of the Civil War and the dawn of the new century. Population growth was fueled by internal migration to urban centers and immigration. From 1860 to 1890, over ten million European immigrants arrived to swell already taxed urban centers.⁴⁰ Social classes and cultural groups intermingled in the marketplace and public street. Newspapers and books reported the crimes of the confidence man and other social counterfeits, and pointed to a crisis in social trust.⁴¹ As John Kasson points out, “the traditional modes by which individuals defined themselves and recognized one another, always particularly fluid in

³⁸Joseph Breck, *New Book of Flowers* (New York: Orange Judd and Company, 1866), 57.

³⁹“A Dastardly Outrage,” *New England Farmer*, 3 July 1869, 1.

⁴⁰Rybczynski, 121.

⁴¹Karen Haltunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982)

America, seemed to contemporaries to fall apart.”⁴² As fluid class distinctions threatened ones’ foothold in society, the management of impressions and etiquette became indicators of status. Increasingly, Victorian Americans retreated inward to avoid potentially ruinous social interactions. Etiquette literature described public manners as “a wall built up around us to protect us from disagreeable, underbred people who refuse to take the trouble to be civil.”⁴³ The diverse, mobile population of the nineteenth century had produced communities where neighbors were strangers. Public deportment offered a psychological defense to the unruly masses one encountered in the street, but one that required a collective knowledge of and conformity to middle and upper class modes of behavior. In contrast, the physical structure of the fence conveyed its expectations in a common language. As cities revealed themselves to be sites of social volatility and crime, urban dwellers found strategies of control in the establishment of police forces, the retreat to their homes, and their locked gates and fences.

Health reformers lamented the poor state of sanitation in the nations’ cities and successfully conjoined poor health with city living. From the earliest decades of the century they discouraged parents from raising their children in cities. Fresh air and direct contact with nature, amenities not available to city dwellers, were necessary for the proper development of the body and soul. Reformers proclaimed the virtues of rural life and warned of the health risks associated with city living. This anti-urban bias contributed to

⁴²John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 93.

⁴³[Longstreet, Abby Buchanan], *Social Etiquette of New York* (New York: D. Appleton, 1887): 9, quoted in John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 116, n. 13.

the development of peripheral neighborhoods and suburbs around urban centers, safe places for the spread of middle class ideals.

The overcrowding and ills of the city street led some Victorians to seek the perceived safety of the suburban neighborhood. At the high end, these new garden suburban neighborhoods of villa style homes such as Andrew Jackson Downing's Riverside, near Chicago, were under the design influence of landscape architects and home plan book authors. The more modest developments were often in the recommended cottage style, and extensive literature guided the homeowner towards domestic success. More than simple growth and expansion was taking place. The foundation of the community, the relationship between man and the land he lived and worked in had been inextricably changed.⁴⁴ Home was no longer the site of work, but the antidote to the corruption of the industrial world. Evidence of subsistence and work were gradually removed from middle-class landscapes and replaced by ornamental plantings and flower beds. The garden around the home became a crucial component of a space conceived of as a haven, a private Eden tucked into the landscape, invoking associations of God and creation. It was an indispensable feature of the middle class, Christian home. The garden was redemptive, offering moral and religious renewal for all classes.

Despite its inaccessibility to the majority, the single family home set in its own middle landscape or Eden was a goal for millions of Americans. By mid-century, reform had invaded every aspect of family life from a call for orderly fences and flower adorned dooryards to domestic architecture and parlor furnishings all with the purpose of

⁴⁴Jackson, 31.

establishing a proper home. Horace Bushnell, a Congregational pastor and author of the popular book *Christian Nurture* in 1847, outlined the importance of rearing children in the atmosphere of a Christian home. "If it were understood that Christian education, or training in the families, is to be itself a process of domestic conversion, . . . then the hearth, the table, the society and affections of the house, would all feel the presence of a practical religious motive. The homes would be Christian homes, and life itself a stream of genial piety."⁴⁵ The fusion of piety and domesticity, evident through the writings of Bushnell, Stowe, and others, reached its full expression in the gothic revival style of architecture that reached its peak in the 1840's and 1850's.⁴⁶ Houses were often designed on a cross plan, and crosses were frequently placed on the tops of gables. Some designs went as far as to incorporate stained glass windows arching toward heaven. The appearance of the house was inextricably linked to the character of the wife and mother. Bushnell wrote, ". . . the spirit of the house, which is your spirit, the whole working of the house, which is actuated by you . . ." ⁴⁷ is the best foil for the temptations of the corrupt world. Discussions of home and gardens in religious terms fostered a link between morality, sincerity, social duty and a proper home.

As domestic environments assumed heightened importance, their management

⁴⁵Horace Bushnell, *Views on Christian Nurture and of Subjects Adjacent Thereto* (Hartford: Case, Tiffany and Company, 1847; reprint, New York: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reports, Inc., 1975), 179.

⁴⁶Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., "Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History: The Romantic Revival and the Cult of Domesticity in America, 1840-1870" in *Material Life in America 1600-1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 536.

⁴⁷Bushnell, 206.

was not left to chance. A spate of advice literature, brought to the public through technological advances in the printing industry, helped Victorian Americans navigate the emerging complex social environment. Stereotyping, introduced in the 1830's, allowed entire pages of type to be reproduced through a molding procedure. The application of steam power to the printing press increased production dramatically.⁴⁸ These innovations, combined with greater amounts of leisure time, brought etiquette and gardening books, nurserymen's catalogs, home management texts and landscape books and journals to the literate, middle class public. Home management literature provided the education and guidance women needed to succeed in their expanded role. In 1841, Catherine Beecher wrote *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*. In 1869 she collaborated with her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe to write *The American Woman's Home*. These books reveal the importance placed on an appropriately managed home. They had the effect of validating women's difficult domestic work. By discussing the home in religious terms, they made the care and appearance of the home sacred.

The home was a moral and nurturing setting for family development and a haven from the corrupting business world. Furthermore in the home women had the authority that most other social settings denied them. This private sphere, the home and garden, was a foil to the morally bereft urban setting and the realm in which the wife and mother exercised her benevolent influence. An article in *Godey's Lady's Book*, "The Family Circle," described the family and home as a miniature society. The positive atmosphere

⁴⁸Crotz, D. Keith. "Science and Technology in American Gardens" in *Keeping Eden: A History of Gardening in America*, ed .Walter T. Punch (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992), 136.

of the home was crucial to the advancement of the larger community. “Thus intimately is the family relation connected with the progress of society.”⁴⁹ Through the deliberate transformation of the land around the home: the flower and vegetable gardens, the stretch of lawn, and the garden paths and fences, women were fulfilling their duty to family and republic.

The fence enforced the division between the public street and the private home by protecting the surrounding land, a middle ground of individual expression, where women's domestic control and social responsibilities were on display. The ideal of transforming the American landscape into a “well-ordered green garden”⁵⁰ began in Jefferson’s time and has dominated the American imagination until the twentieth century. Leo Marx interprets the fusion of Jefferson’s politics and tastes, the Jeffersonian dream, in the garden as a miniature middle landscape, as attractive for what it excluded as for what it contained. In the garden, Jefferson was free from the anxieties of political office. If America could be “transformed into a garden, a permanently rural republic, then its citizens might escape from the terrible sequence of power struggles, wars, and cruel repressions suffered by Europe.”⁵¹ This sentiment, barely transformed, was recast in the nineteenth century’s promotion of ornamental gardening and home beautification as a cure for the competition of the marketplace and the elevation of character and status.

This concept of redemption through working with the soil, cultivating flower and

⁴⁹“The Family Circle,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, December 1849, 336.

⁵⁰Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 141.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 138.

fruit in the domestic garden, appeared throughout the period. By the 1840's, ornamental gardening was growing in popularity among leisured women, thanks to the efforts of landscape architects, nurserymen, and home economists. The Stowe sisters' *American Woman's Home* emphasized the benefit of cultivating flowers and fruit for the children, especially the daughters, of the family. It also encouraged family labor outdoors as a means of assuring good physical and spiritual health. This important, healthful amusement taught the virtues of industriousness and habits of order.

Benevolent and social feelings could also be cultivated, by influencing children to share their fruits and flowers with friends and neighbors as well as to distribute roots and seeds to those who have not the means of procuring them. A woman or a child, by giving seeds or slips or roots to a washerwoman, or a farmer's boy, thus inciting them to love and cultivate fruits and flowers, awakens a new and refining source of enjoyment in minds which have few resources more elevated than mere physical enjoyments."⁵²

By the 1850's, interest in horticulture had been successfully promoted as a means of combating the moral decay that industrialism had brought to the city and had become a hallmark of the successful wife and mother. An interest in horticulture and a green thumb, essential for a healthy family, had become a moral imperative.

Ornamental gardening required leisure time and a steady source of discretionary income. A woman, "with the assistance of a labourer to prepare the ground, may turn a barren waste into a beauteous flower garden with her own hands."⁵³ Stowe suggested the

⁵²Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1869; reprint, Hartford, Connecticut: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1975), 295.

⁵³Thomas Bridgeman, *The Young Gardener's Assistant* (New York: A. Hanford, 1847): pt. 2, p. 15, quoted in Christine White, "Reform and the Promotion of Ornamental Gardening" in *Plants and People: The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 1995*, ed. Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University, 1995), 106, n.10.

father “set apart a portion of the ground . . . and see that the soil is well prepared and dug over, and all the rest may be committed to the care of the children.”⁵⁴ Even men required the helping hand of a laborer. Charles Dudley Warner, author of an 1873 gardening book advised that “. . . in carrying on a garden yourself, you must have a ‘consulting’ gardener; that is, a man to do the heavy and unpleasant work.”⁵⁵ Gardening implements such as hoes, rakes, trowels, watering cans, wheelbarrows and seeds, bulbs, bare roots, grafts and fertilizers all required time and money. Stowe dismisses this as a “trifling expense” and reassures her readers that the payoff is in family health and harmony.

According to critics, increasing amounts of leisure time in middle and upper class families threatened to encourage laziness, poor health, and weakened moral character. The wife and mother was responsible for directing her family toward hobbies that improved their character, enabling them to defend themselves from the corruption around them. Ornamental gardening provided a socially sanctioned pastime with opportunities for moral instruction. “A mother who will take pains to inspire a love of such pursuits in her children, and who will aid and superintend them, will save them from many temptations.”⁵⁶ Beautiful and improved nature promised to safeguard children from corruption and keep them grounded in a moral home. Powell’s home landscaping advice book of 1900 urged homeowner’s to strive for an individual and “homeful” property, a descriptive term defined by his belief that nature leaves some work to be done, that some

⁵⁴Beecher and Stowe, 295.

⁵⁵Charles Dudley Warner, *My Summer in a Garden* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1873), 113.

⁵⁶Beecher and Stowe, 389.

civilizing influence needs to be exerted upon it. If you do, “You will have kept your boys and girls with you; and no possible influence can attract them away.”⁵⁷

The cultivation of gardens solved the problem of beautifying the dooryard otherwise unadorned by cultivated nature. At mid-century, most middle-class homes in urban and suburban areas were enclosed behind wooden picket fences of varying designs, or walls of brick or stone. Houses were sited close to the street and often had ornamental flower and gardens evenly divided by a central pathway to the front door of the home. The public spaces of these homes strove to convey the status of the wife and mother through ornamental plant displays. Evidence of even the suggestion of work was conspicuously absent from these spaces. Less affluent homeowners frequently left the front yard in an uncultivated state, allowing grasses and weeds to come and go at will. In the South, yards were traditionally of packed, bare dirt or sand swept clean.⁵⁸ While few rural farmhouses would have been complete without a small vegetable or medicinal herb garden, urban and suburban landscapes reserved their landscape for display.

Not infrequently, the fence’s emphasis on a boundary provided an irresistible opportunity for transgression against one’s neighbor. As the fence expressed its owners respect for social order, “jumping the fence” expressed the trespasser’s disdain for restrictions. Despite attempts to enforce strict rules of social conduct, homeowners and

⁵⁷Edward Payson Powell, *Hedges, Windbreaks, Shelters, and Live Fences* (New York: Orange Judd, 1900), 135.

⁵⁸Front lawns, the closely clipped green expanse so common to the twentieth-century home, did not appear in the private landscape until the end of the nineteenth century, and then, only in homes of the wealthy or the middle-class that emulated them. Not until the middle of the twentieth century would agricultural advancements enable the majority of homeowners to cultivate a green lawn. See Jenkins, 32-33.

their gardens came up against intruders who threatened to overturn the delicate balance of neighborhood relations by trespassing on their property and stealing their fruits or flowers. This theme of thieves or intruders on one's property can be found throughout gardening literature. In 1870 Jacob Weidenmann reasoned that fences were used "principally for keeping our own land distinct and separate; also to prevent intrusion. . ."⁵⁹ *Vick's Monthly Magazine* offered home and garden advice and instruction along with social commentary from its editor, James Vick. In March 1879, the magazine published an article lamenting the lack of respect for plants and private gardens.

We can remember some years ago when the appearance of visitors to our grounds would cause almost as much alarm as a drove of stray cattle and a guard was immediately sent to watch their motions. Every man, woman and child almost would run for something, pick the flowers, and ruthlessly destroy the plants; while the more cultivated and refined of the ladies would merely pick the choice rose buds and eat them up.⁶⁰

Perhaps the most candid statements about the need to fence your garden as a means of protection from society came from Charles Dudley Warner's 1873 *My Summer in a Garden*, the author's witty chronicle of his observations on the growth of his garden, interspersed with political and social commentaries. Warner mused, "There would be no thieves if there was nothing to steal" and thus began his diatribe against the constant pilfering of fruit from his private garden,

The truth is, that the public morality is lax on the subject of fruit. If anybody puts gunpowder or arsenic into his watermelons, he is universally denounced as a stingy old murderer by the community. A great many people regard growing fruit as lawful prey, who would not think of breaking into your cellar to take it. I found

⁵⁹Jacob Weidenmann, *Beautifying Country Homes* (New York: Orange Judd and Company, 1870), 17.

⁶⁰"Improvement in Manners," *Vick's Monthly Magazine* 1, March 1879, 90.

a man once in my raspberry-bushes, early in the season, when we were waiting on a dishful to ripen. Upon inquiring what he was about, he said he was only eating some; and the operation seemed to be so natural and simple, that I disliked to disturb him. And I am not very sure that one has a right to the whole of an abundant crop of fruit until he has gathered it. At least, in a city garden, one might as well conform his theory to the practice of the community.⁶¹

Warner witnessed much of this activity in his garden particularly by the neighborhood children, seemingly unaware of the social regulations governing private property. The fence offered little protection against immoral, curious, or hungry children. The menace of young boys was so widespread as to be considered when choosing a fence for your home. Wire fences were purported to “posses all the desirable qualities of a good fence. . . . Should boys trouble them, a light coat of coal-tar is a fine remedy, as well as a good preservative of the iron.”⁶² For Warner, even the more treacherous and forbidding of fence styles provided little relief. He begins,

. . . it occurs to me that, if I should paper the outside of my high board fence with the leaves of “Arabian Nights,” it would afford me a good deal of protection, - more, in fact, than spikes in the top, which tear trousers and encourage profanity, but do not save much fruit. A spiked fence is a challenge to any boy of spirit. But if the fence were papered with fairy-tales, would he not stop to read them until it was too late for him to climb into the garden?⁶³

Warner’s tongue-in-cheek comments belie a serious conflict confronting neighbors even toward the centuries’ end as communities had become more homogeneous. He complains at length about his neighbor’s cow, a frequent invader in his garden and an almost permanent fixture in his pasture despite repeated complaints to the owner to “. . .

⁶¹Warner, 157-159.

⁶²Weidenmann, 17.

⁶³Warner, 161.

take her away; and he did, at intervals, shifting her to different parts of the grounds in my absence . . .”⁶⁴ Beyond the immediate home grounds lay Warner’s unprotected English-style “game-preserve,” a term that reveals his decidedly upper-class landscape. During hunting season, “while the game-law was on,” Warner was inundated with hunters on his property at all hours of the day and night. After considerable disruption to his sleep and his grounds, Warner caught one of the hunters as he left the grounds.

He came to a halt; and we had some conversation in high key. Of course, I threatened to prosecute him. I believe that is the thing to do in such cases; but how I was to do it, when I did not know his name or ancestry, and couldn’t see his face, never occurred to me. . . . He said he should smile to see me prosecute him. “You can’t do it: there ain’t no notice up about trespassing.” This view of the common law impressed me; and I said, - “But these are private grounds.” “Private h-!” was all his response.⁶⁵

Warner’s comments reflect the difficulty one had in asserting sole claims to the land and the differences in class perspectives. Etiquette literature from the second half of the nineteenth century echoed Warner’s concerns and called for an ideal of conduct which respected personal property and privacy.

Fences made aggressive statements about property rights and belonging, sentiments not always likely to foster neighborly discourse. Whether obvious or concealed, they were not neutral objects in the landscape and were heavily laden with cultural signs and meanings. Their presence affected the relationship between the people on the inside and those on the outside. More than just framing the house, the fence set it off as a stage upon which genteel manners were performed and morality expressed. The

⁶⁴Ibid., 118.

⁶⁵Ibid., 123-124.

fence and gate began the ritualistic process of admittance into both one's property and society and visually symbolized the transition between public and private life. In this sense, fences were interpreted as mechanisms of privilege and social discrimination, both for those who could afford them and those who were permitted to pass through them.

The fence is a component of what Dell Upton has termed the "articulated processional landscape," the meanings of which depend "on memory and the rapid dissolution and reformulation of individual experiences to establish its meaning."⁶⁶ While Upton applies his theory to the plantation landscape of the eighteenth century, it refers to the nineteenth-century domestic landscape as well. Passage through the fence gate was the first in a series of physical and social barriers encountered in the domestic environment. Ascending the front steps, passing through the porch or the vestibule, stepping over the threshold of the front door into the entry hall and, possibly, being received in the parlor were all acts in the presentation of the family and the visitor. In distinguishing the family, the home, and its grounds from all others, the fence was understood both physically and psychologically as a symbol of privilege and separatism. Through its enclosure and distinction of the home and its grounds, it became part of the visual vocabulary of design elements Victorian Americans appropriated to make social claims.

Along with ample prescriptive literature and promotional sales catalogs, public landscapes also helped teach appreciation and respect for the improved natural

⁶⁶Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia" in *Material Life in America 1600-1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 358.

environment. Cemeteries, parks, and public pleasure gardens introduced the general public to fashionable landscape design. These public spaces were believed to have the fortuitous effect of improving and elevating the character of the viewer. A December 1880 article in *Vick's Monthly Magazine* credits the public park with teaching widespread appreciation for flowers, a lesson in social behavior that rendered the fence unnecessary.

When I first put my place in order, and set out flowers, it was almost impossible to keep a plant or flower from being stolen. Even respectable people thought flowers common plunder, and everything within reach was taken by this class, and reproof or request to desist was considered an insult. Others made raids during the evening and early morning carrying off flowers and plants at pleasure, and I was considered a stingy fellow for complaining of the treatment... Things have changed wonderfully. Now I have no fence, the lawn being entirely open to the road and people stop and look and admire but I lose nothing.⁶⁷

Over time, examples of public and private gardens helped disseminate middle and upperclass ideals and teach appropriate behavior and public response to private landscape. As etiquette and example worked to enforce property rights and privacy, the protection of the fence seemed unnecessary. By 1900, Powell's country and suburban home landscape manual also suggested that relations among neighbors had improved. He says, ". . . the old reason for a fence is gone . . . Animals do not any longer run at large, and our neighbors are not our foes."⁶⁸

Fence Reform

Proper fences were defined as much by their placement as by their materials and style. In 1841, Andrew Jackson Downing complained that "the close proximity of fences

⁶⁷*Vick's Monthly Magazine*, December 1880, 73.

⁶⁸Powell, 113.

to the house gives the whole place a confined and mean character,”⁶⁹ and obstructed broad expanses of land. Restricting access to land, or to views of it, met with resistance and hostility throughout the century. Nathaniel Parker Willis wrote extensively about the state of the changing American landscape. In 1851, Willis complained of the land along the Bronx River, “so aristocratically fenced up”⁷⁰ as to obscure the public view. Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer’s 1888 commentary on the fences in exclusive Newport, Rhode Island, decried the lack of appropriate fence material and design employed by homeowners. “In at least one case we find a massive stone wall, some eight feet in height, which would be admirable for the protection of a large park, but seems out of place encircling a few acres in a thickly built settlement, and sins against that neighborly freedom of prospect which is beauty’s sole salvation in such a settlement.”⁷¹

Eager to define their new culture, in the early nineteenth century Americans had turned to their wilderness as the basis for a new American nationalism. As Roderick Nash has advanced, it was the wildness of American scenery that distinguished our continent from Europe. The prevailing belief that God was most expressive through this original condition of nature, gave Americans a distinct advantage over Europeans whose wilderness state had long disappeared. The same logic, he concludes, worked to convince

⁶⁹Andrew Jackson Downing, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, 6th ed. (New York: A. O. Moore and Company, 1859), 295.

⁷⁰Nathaniel Willis, *Hurry-Graphs; or, Sketches of Scenery, Celebrities, and Society* (Auburn, New York: Alden, 1853); quoted in Stilgoe, 68, n. 1.

⁷¹Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, *Accents as Well as Broad Effects: Writings on Architecture, Landscape and the Environment*, ed. David Gebhard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 351.

Americans that the inspirational qualities of nature they had inherited would inevitably lead to artistic and literary excellence.⁷² American identity was so firmly rooted in the land, the abundance of nature was our national pride. Restricting access to this national resource deprived Americans of the ability to improve and uplift their moral and physical condition through close communion with God, threatened their attainment of a better life, and compromised their identity as Americans.

Powell may have understood this connection when he wrote *Hedges, Windbreaks, Shelters, and Live Fences for Country and Suburban Homes* in 1900. He grounds his advice for laying boundaries in the land in the need for family privacy and domestic convenience. He sees this need fulfilled in the most naturally harmonious materials - trees and shrubs. Caution is given to respect the natural prospect. "It is morally illegal to cut off the pleasures of a neighbor by a high hedge, a row of trees, or a fence."⁷³ Instead of manmade fences Powell resurrects the hedgerow, so pervasive a feature of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English landscape, for its abilities to equalize temperature and precipitation. Osage orange was the preferred shrub beginning in the 1840's, although it became invasive in Northern climates and needed excessive drainage in the lower West. Honey locust was favored in the Eastern climates and was planted freely in the 1870's. Osage orange and honey locust were course bushes suitable for enclosing areas some distance from the house, while buckthorn was "more tolerable" near the home. Shrubs, trees and hedges were set away from the house, leaving the foundation

⁷²Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 69.

⁷³Powell, 94.

exposed.

Frank Scott, a proponent of Downing's philosophy of suburban landscape design, offered an idealized vision of a suburban street in his *Beautification of Suburban Home Grounds* of 1870 (Figure 5). Here the front fence is not entirely absent, but reinvented in one foot high curbing delineating the street from the front yard. The houses are sited several feet above the sidewalk with a sloping front yard, removing the family from the sidewalk and road. The fence has figuratively moved from the far edge of the property to the steps and porches of the home. Jacob Weidenmann's suggestion of the same year recommends curbing as an alternative to the "unsightly appearance of front yards in streets . . . created by the different styles and patterns of front fences, which vary in height, shape, and color."⁷⁴ But Weidenmann shows less desire to remove fences than to reform their use. His concern, echoed by other critics of domestic landscapes, is with appropriateness and taste. Weidenmann's ties to Downing's philosophy are evident in his emphasis on the creation of lawns and the "open or unbroken view, either upon a pasture field, woodland, water, or distant scene;" but his acknowledgment of the necessity of fences is equally apparent. His discussions of fences for country, town and city lots include several recommendations for styles appropriate to front ornamental grounds. Iron fences, "are a desideratum when light and of pleasing patterns," and although costly, "will, in the course of time, prove economical." Wire fences "will soon gain the favor they merit," as they are "appropriate to the elegant residence as well as to the more humble country home." Picket fences, sufficiently used everywhere need only a "slight

⁷⁴Weidenmann, 39.

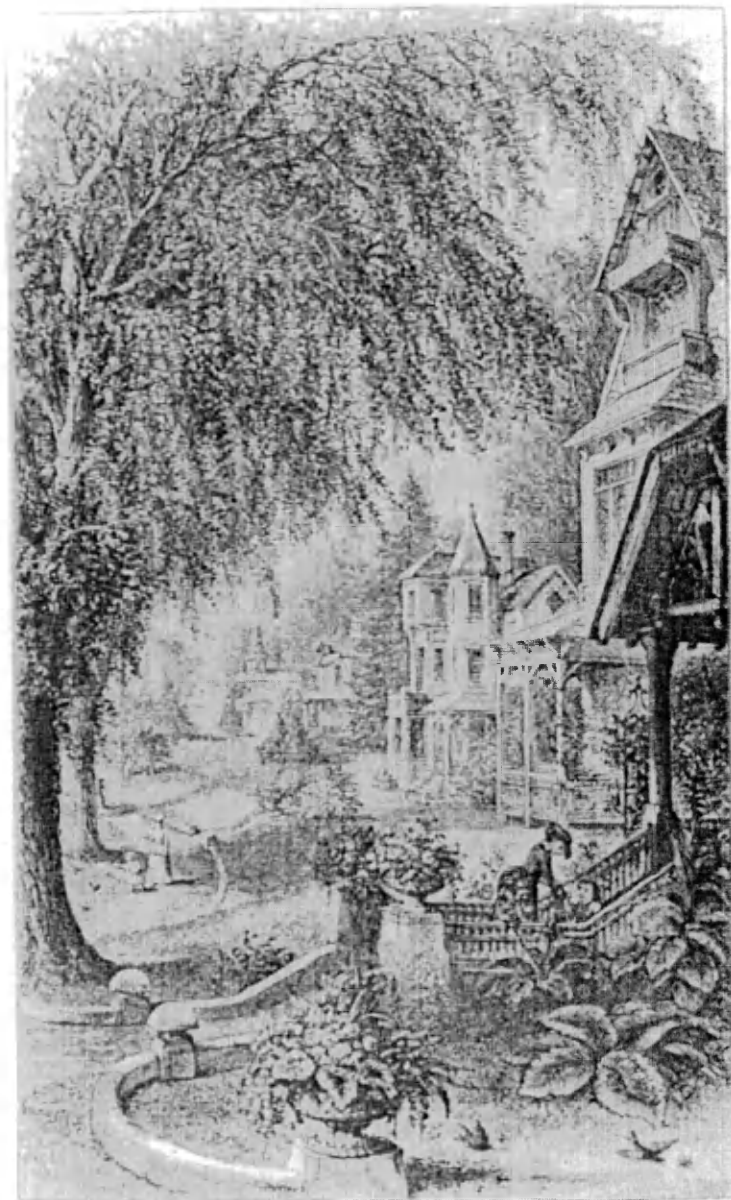


Figure 5. Idealized suburban street scene, illustration in Frank Scott, *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds of Small Extent* (1870), reproduced in *Keeping Eden* (1992).

change or alteration . . . to improve the whole appearance of a place.” Painting these fences brown or drab, rather than the traditional white, was emphasized. The following recommendations were preceded by his standards for their use. “When there is no necessity for a fence, do not build one to cut up the land, and define its limits to the spectators. Landowners would have the credit of owning more land than they really possessed could they do away with fences, which always make the property appear smaller than it is. Therefore, we prefer such fences as are least conspicuous, except when something rich and tasteful is made.”⁷⁵ The objection was not leveled against the fence, but the obvious, unattractive or inappropriate fence. The less “conspicuous” a fence was, the more comfortable Weidenmann was with its use. In a society where democracy and equality were held up as ideals the “conspicuous fence” was too aggressive in its claims to exclusion, distinction, and superiority to be comfortably used. At the same time, it was too necessary to be entirely discarded. By decreasing its height and mass and camouflaging its surface, the fence and the families’ social concerns were effectively masked.

The inconspicuous fence had its origins in the eighteenth-century picturesque landscape movement. By the middle of the nineteenth century Andrew Jackson Downing had begun to successfully transplant elements of this style, and its contempt for barriers, on American domestic landscapes. Bernard McMahon’s 1806 *The American Gardener’s Calendar* recalled the concealed fence when he wrote of the absolute necessity of the fence around one’s pleasure garden as a defense, noting that “a foss being a kind of

⁷⁵Weidenmann, 17.

concealed fence will answer that purpose . . . without interrupting the view of such neighboring parts as are beautified by art or nature.”⁷⁶ The foss or ha-ha was an eighteenth-century French construction, also used on British country estates, that kept unwanted animals out of gardens and lawns while, unlike fences and hedges, maintaining the illusion of a continuous stretch of landscape. It consisted of a cup ditch with one straight wall on the house side, often reinforced with stone or brick, the other side angled upward to meet the height of the surrounding land. As Dora Galitsky points out, “The name derives from the expression of amused surprise one would utter when coming across it. Of course, if one found it by unexpectedly falling in, it might have another name.”⁷⁷ Its requirement for a wide swath of land rivaled even the worm fence, and the labor required to excavate it reserved its use for the upper classes. The ha-ha received little attention from prescriptive literature in the middle of the century, but reappeared in 1898 in L. H. Bailey’s suggestions for rural home grounds. Although scarcely visible from the house, it had the effect of keeping cattle out and bringing the adjacent landscape in, thus answering, “all the purposes of a fence.”⁷⁸

Throughout the nineteenth century attitudes toward fence use underwent subtle transformations. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the white wood paling

⁷⁶Bernard McMahon, *The American Gardener’s Calendar* (n.p.1806): 65, quoted in O’Malley, Helmreich, and Kryder-Reid, “Keywords in American Landscape Design” in *Plants and People: The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 1995*, ed. Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University, 1995),186.

⁷⁷Dora Galitsky, “Dirt,” *Garden Design Magazine*, October/November 1996, 32.

⁷⁸L. H. Bailey, *Garden-Making: Suggestions for the Utilizing of Home Grounds*. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1898), 182.

or picket fence had been an essential feature of the country estate and, along with high brick walls, a necessity around the homes and gardens of the urban gentry. By the mid-nineteenth century, landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing had successfully introduced open, fenceless vistas to private landscape design. His *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* first appeared in 1841, but its influence on American landscape design continued into the last quarter of the century. Downing cast fences in a negative light and equated the use of all but highly natural forms, such as hedges, ha-has, and rustic work, as tasteless offences to the spirit. At the close of the nineteenth century home grounds embraced lower and “lighter” barriers in the forms of raised curbing and wire or ironwork, alone or set upon low walls. In the early twentieth century, private fences had all but disappeared from the front yards of residential neighborhoods. In a figurative sense, fences left the private homelot to encompass whole neighborhoods.

Downing’s legacy to the twentieth-century home landscape was not the disappearance of the fence, but the innovation of less conspicuous fence forms. Despite pleas for unobstructed stretches of land by Downing and other landscape reformers, the conditions which necessitated the use of fencing would not allow their disappearance from the landscape. Although the practical need for fences had been in decline, the social need for them, as evidenced by the prescriptive literature of the period, remained. In the latter half of the century, fences began their quiet retreat from the front yard. But their retreat was precipitated by the creation of alternative methods of social control such as the homogenization of neighborhoods and the spread of middle-class modes of behavior. Fences did not disappear, but underwent gradual transformations. They were recast in the

form of curbs and sloping front yards, homeowners association handbooks, and gated communities.

Fences in the Twentieth Century

The decline in the residential use of fences corresponded with an increase in the social stratification of neighborhoods toward the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The development of streetcar and steam-railroad networks paved the way, literally and figuratively, for the creation of towns and cities far more segregated than they had been in the pre-Civil War era. Frederick Law Olmstead gave voice to the belief that the suburbs could protect family privacy and property while providing “safe” social interactions. “The fact that the families dwelling within a suburb enjoy much in common, and all the more enjoy it because it is in common . . . should be everywhere manifest in the completeness, and choiceness, and the beauty of the means they possess of coming together . . . and especially of recreating and enjoying them together on common ground.”⁷⁹ These new suburbs promised to relieve anxieties over public intrusion through homogenous neighborhoods where neighbors shared similar philosophies about public behavior, and where social harmony was guaranteed.

One of the earliest of these upscale suburban neighborhoods was Llewellyn Park in West Orange, New Jersey, begun in 1853 by Manhattan merchant, Llewellyn S.

⁷⁹Frederick Law Olmstead, Calvert Vaux and Company, “Preliminary Report Upon the Proposed Suburban Village at Riverside, near Chicago” (New York, 1868): 7, 26-27, quoted in Clark, “Domestic Architecture,” 539.

Haskell.⁸⁰ In his epilogue to Downing's *A Treatise on Landscape Gardening* of 1859, Henry Winthrop Sargent praises Llewellyn's development as helping to solve the daunting problem of intruders. Sargent highlights the difficulties of selecting a site for a country or suburban residence and cautions one to consider "the proximity of nuisances, or the danger that an advancing population from the neighboring city will soon supply them." Sargent's discussion reveals a concern with not only present but "anticipated annoyances" and admits the necessity of fences in this regard. "High boundary fences, and a separate gate-lodge for each place, seem necessary for protection from marauders."⁸¹ These social problems were solved by the semi-public, neighborhood park created at Llewellyn Park. By protecting the entire neighborhood with a peripheral fence and gate-lodge, interior fences were made unnecessary (Figure 6).

Early twentieth-century planned communities like Shaker Heights in Ohio followed this tradition, instituting aesthetic control through strict building codes and covenants. They demanded conformity of design and, from the street, created a visually and economically uniform community. In an era in which true character was supposedly revealed through the appearance and physical layout of the home, the outward appearance of these neighborhoods reassured the suburban homeowner that he or she was among equals. The standardization of building materials, lot sizes, paint colors and landscape requirements in effect became the protection the fence had previously afforded. Through the purchase of a home in these planned communities, the homeowner was relieved of the

⁸⁰Rybczynski, 180.

⁸¹Downing, *Treatise*, 508.

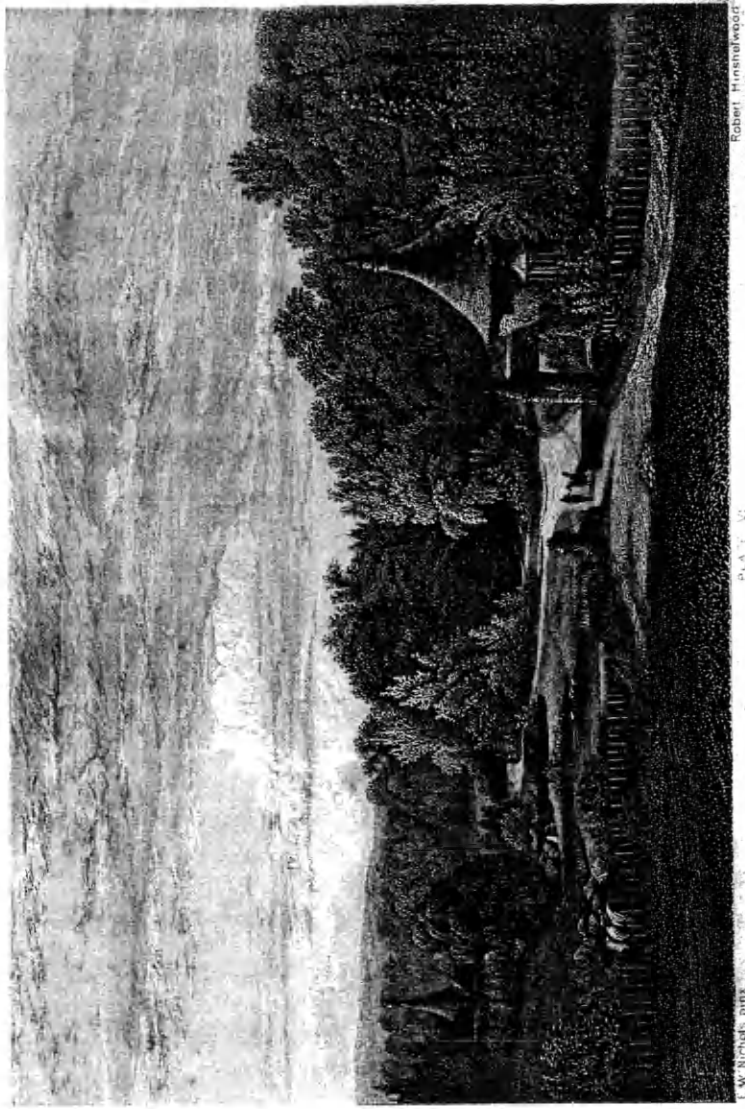


Figure 6. Entrance to Lewellyn Park, West Orange, New Jersey, lithograph in A. J. Downing, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1859).

constant social interactions with the unrefined masses that required regulation.

Restrictions against the use of fences in the gated communities of our own time have maintained this standard. The Homeowners Association Handbook of Ford's Colony in Williamsburg, Virginia, which was recently awarded the National Community Association of the Year Award, states that "All property lines shall be kept free and open and no fences, hedges, or walls shall be permitted thereon without Committee approval."⁸² The question of whether these Homeowners association documents are enforceable was recently answered in 1999, when Ford's Colony brought suit against a homeowner whose unkempt property was in violation of Association rules. The covenant read,

All Lots and Parcels, whether occupied or unoccupied, and any improvements placed thereon, shall at all times be maintained in such manner as to prevent their becoming unsightly, unsanitary, or a hazard to health. If not so maintained, Declarant or the Association shall have the right, through its agents and employees, to do so, the cost of which shall be added to and become a lien upon said lot .⁸³

The judge found in favor of the community, and ordered the homeowner to "improve" his unkempt lot, thereby affirming the enforceability and strength of such community associations. The implications of this decision, that individual property rights are secondary to community property rights, have an historic ring to them. The idea of privately owned land for individual use is, in many ways, an illusion. Regulations at the levels of community, county, and state government have always controlled even that most hallowed piece of land - the home ground.

⁸²"Ford's Colony Homeowners Association Handbook," 8.

⁸³Ibid.

Gated communities attempts to regulate the daily life and the social relations among their residents are often disparaged. Karen Danielsen, Director of Residential Policy for the Urban Land Institute, a real estate research organization based in Washington, cites a growing trend in middle-class communities toward "increasingly trying to exercise control over their neighbors" through formal ordinances more commonly associated with master-planned and gated communities.⁸⁴ The primary purpose of the fence, to mediate social relationships and provide a sense of privacy and security did not disappear, but was reinvented and reformed in many ways such as the covenants of planned communities, the consensus of neighborhood etiquette, and local zoning ordinances. Contemporary debates about the regulation of fencing continue along lines strikingly similar to those of the nineteenth century and are as strong today as they were over one hundred years ago. Recently the debate over the aesthetics of fencing and its relationship to neighborliness took form in a call for local ordinances in Haverstraw, New York, that require fences to be placed "nice-side-out" rather than "nice-side in." Residents complained about at least a dozen homeowners who erected stockade style fences with the nice, finished side facing in toward their homes, and the unfinished side facing out toward their neighbors. Not unique to Haverstraw, this breach of fence etiquette can be found throughout the country. One county code enforcer likened these fences to spite fences that effectively say, "'To hell with you, and I don't care.'" John Stilgoe attributes these fences, along with unmown lawns, to "a collapsing code of visual

⁸⁴Patricia Leigh Brown, "Offensive fences: Trend toward putting nice-side-in sparks unneighborly squabbles" *Dallas Morning News*, 14 March 1999, 6A.

neighborliness.”⁸⁵ This trend is, perhaps, advanced by the combination of dual income families with less time at home and an ever mobile population which lives in a house for an average of five years, often never knowing their neighbors.

Contemporary use of the phrase “good fences make good neighbors” testifies to the tenacity of tradition and the extraordinary mental link between the assertion of property rights manifest in fences and boundaries, and the mediation of social relationships. Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out the power of built environments, such as the architecturally similar neighborhood, to convey coherence and homogeneity, and to suggest common function and shared activity. These environments or cultural products encourage us to see reality in terms of simplified wholes, and satisfy the human need for order, pattern and relatedness.⁸⁶ These basic needs are met through the use of fences, through their assertion of property rights, orderliness, and manmade patterns on the land. Fences were not eradicated by the end of the nineteenth century, but they were recast in more subtle, socially compatible forms. The social conditions and concerns that called for divisions and barriers in the domestic landscape throughout the nineteenth century have not disappeared, in some cases we simply have created alternative social controls. Consequently, when people begin to perceive a breakdown in the consensus of social rules, fences and barriers will be erected in greater numbers. Already, the American Fencing Association reports that 38,880 miles of chain link, 31,680 miles of wooden, and

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶ Tuan, Yi-Fu, “Place and Culture: Analeptic for Individuality and the World’s Indifference.” In *Mapping American Culture*, ed. Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 33-34.

1,440 miles of ornamental fencing are purchased annually in the United States alone, enough to circle the earth three times.⁸⁷

A letter entitled “Good Fences and Good Neighbors” appeared in the *New England Farmer* in 1869. The author recalled a conversation with his neighbors when “an elderly lady asked an old gentleman what was the best thing to make good neighbors. After a moment’s hesitation he replied, ‘keep good fences.’ What could he have said in so few words that would comprehend as much?”⁸⁸

⁸⁷David B. Givens, “Good fences do make good neighbors,” interview by Curt Suplee, *Staten Island Advance*, 12 August 1999; available from http://www.silive.com/home_and_garden/advance/0812homefenc.html; Internet; accessed 11 January 2000.

⁸⁸V. B., “Good Fences and Good Neighbors,” *New England Farmer*, March 1869.

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