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Building Main Street: Village Improvement and the Small Town Ideal

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BUILDING MAIN STREET:
VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT AND THE AMERICAN SMALL TOWN IDEAL

A Dissertation Presented

by

KIRIN J. MAKKER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2010

Regional Planning
BUILDING MAIN STREET:
VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT AND THE AMERICAN SMALL TOWN IDEAL

A Dissertation Presented

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KIRIN J. MAKKER

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Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning
DEDICATION

To Jeffrey with whom I live on Main Street.

And to community governance groups in small towns everywhere. May their love of place continue to promote civic beautification and strong community.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the course of my dissertation research and writing, I was diagnosed with severe endometriosis, a terrible and painful disease that is highly undiagnosed because it physically manifests only on the interior of the body. Through two major surgeries, I continued to work on my dissertation, a distraction that was both needed and dreaded. This experience seems to be common --- traumas strike while we least want or need them. I want to thank my husband, Jeffrey Blankenship, my mother and father, my brother, Provost Teresa Amott, literary cartographer and good friend Eric Bulson, architectural historian and architect Stan Mathews, sculptor Ted Aub, and my other colleagues in the Art and Architecture Department at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and my committee members Max Page, Patricia McGirr, and Ethan Carr for their unfailing support during the long arduous journey of this project. I am a better scholar, teacher, and writer because of their faith and encouragement.

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I’d like to thank Jorja Marsden at the Town Offices for letting me peruse through her copies of zoning bylaws; Ann Opperman at the Red Lion Inn for letting me browse the hotel registers from the nineteenth century (a real thrill!); Nancy Fitzpatrick for offering me a subsidized rate at the Red Lion Inn for short-term research visits; Corey Kazenberg at the Norman Rockwell Museum; and finally Pat Flinn, secretary of the (still running!) Laurel Hill Association, for her generosity and hospitality.
ABSTRACT

BUILDING MAIN STREET: VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT AND THE AMERICAN SMALL TOWN IDEAL

September 2010

KIRIN J. MAKKER, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AUSTIN
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Before the American small town was enshrined as an ideal, it was a space of dynamic and pioneering progressive reform, a narrative that has been largely untold in histories of professional planning and landscape history. Archival research shows that village improvement was not simply a prequel to the City Beautiful in the years following the 1893 Chicago Expo, but a rich and complex history that places the residential village at the center of debates about the middle landscape as a civic realm comprised of complimentary and oppositional pastoral and urban worldviews. The second half of the nineteenth century saw an extensive movement in village improvement that affected the physical, economic, and social infrastructure of rural settlements of all sizes in every region of the country.

As a concept referenced by planners working on comprehensively-designed suburban communities, the small town ideal has never been historicized with respect to the history and theory of the nineteenth century village landscape improvements. This study broadens the study of village improvement to include the history of ideas and
debates surrounding rural development on the national and local level between the 1820s and 1880s and, in doing so, argues that the discussion-born theory of village improvement within a national rural reform movement led by some of the nineteenth century’s most respected and influential reformers including B.G. Northrop (education), Col. George Waring (sanitation), N.H. Egleston (conservation), Isabella Beecher Hooker (women’s rights), and F.L. Olmsted, Sr. (landscape architecture) was modeled on the Laurel Hill Association in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and that the local practice of this one society over the same period together comprised the most active sustained discussion about the civic society and physical infrastructure of rural settlements in American history.

This narrative tracks reform movements in rural settlements over several decades, beginning with landscape gardening through sanitation and up to the professionalization of city planning and the country life movement. Planning veered from broadly conceived urban pastoralism and multi-disciplinary rural improvement toward preservation planning. This trend was in line with an associated shift from planning as a series of fine-grained locally led practices to expert-driven professionalized planning as grandiose comprehensive vision.

Keywords: village improvement, civic improvement, beautification, social capital, rural residence, small town, main street, comprehensive planning, sprawl, neo-traditional design (NTD), new urbanism, transit oriented development (TOD), suburbia, city planning, nostalgia, pastoral, pastoral cities, urban pastoral, landscape, urban history, Beecher, Egleston, Eggleston, Northrop, Olmsted, Waring, Rockwell.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“The last fifteen years have witnessed a great change in the model town of Stockbridge. The story of this transformation shows how easily the same good work might be done in every country village in the land.”

These words of Birdsey Grant Northrop in the 1869 article, “How to Make a Town Beautiful,” published in *Hearth and Home* magazine, signaled the maturation of a cultural shift in how American intellectuals and elites thought about the quality of life in United States rural village and town settlements. Similar to a growing consciousness about urban life occurring in the more populous regions of the country on the eastern seaboard and in the middle west, the “construction” of American “small town culture” based on a residential village ideal gained a prominent position on the nineteenth century stage of reform with Stockbridge, Massachusetts as its first and foremost “model.” American thinkers and writers awakened their senses to residential village life as an extension of domestic health, and considered the many ways that countryside townscapes could be improved and developed—physically, economically, and in terms of civic society. In a time of widespread faith in environmental determinism, the improvement of rural settlements was on par with the development of urban areas; rural communities held the power to garner a healthier American citizenry, both physically and mentally.

Village Improvement and the Design Lineage of Suburbia’s Residential Village

Northrop, considered in his time the “father of village improvement,” introduced an agenda for the American rural settlement that was echoed in a series of lectures,
articles and books from other major environmental reformers during the latter half of the nineteenth century including sanitary engineer George Waring, women’s rights advocate Isabella Beecher Hooker, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., forestry spokesman Nathaniel Hillyer Eggleston, and others. With origins in early nineteenth century transcendentalist thought and landscape gardening theory, in particular the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing, post-Civil War reform advocates operated according to a long-simmering worldview that saw pastoral space as synthesized with urban modernity and progress in an open dialectic. “Urban pastoralism,” according to scholar James L. Machor, combined the nostalgia for a simpler past of the pastoral ideal with contemporary advancements of urban space and culture. As such, those operating under the urban pastoralist paradigm did not glance back in order to enact former patterns in the present; rather, the old ways were admired only to involve them in a concurrent commencement into the future. This worldview had a profound effect on how rural settlement space was seen during the middle decades of the nineteenth century and how it was ideally imagined in the future.

To post-Civil War reformers, “rural settlement” included sparsely populated farming communities in Kansas, new towns in California, the suburbs of Chicago, older towns in the process of suburbanization outside Philadelphia, and resort towns in Maine and elsewhere. The rural improvement discussion was “multi-” or “pre-disciplinary” in the sense that it drew equal attention from educational reform administrators, sanitary engineers, feminists advocating women’s knowledge of domestic plumbing and hygiene, foresters and arbor day supporters, and landscape park designers. Advocates of village improvement argued that ideal rural settlements were residential canvases of
landscape beauty, municipal and sanitary innovation, cultural amenities and social
growth. This pastoral urbanist residential village ideal was private and communal,
nostalgic and future-oriented, romantic and rationally planned. Between the early 1870s
and early 1880s, the discussion of organized rural improvement went national and
theorized the residential village ideal as an American institution.

Yet just as the village improvement movement peaked in the early 1880s with
the creation of the National Association for Rural and Sanitary Improvement (1882-
1884), reform advocates began to change their tune concerning the American rural
settlement. The New England town, that original model for the movement, was
increasingly discussed as a terrain best kept separate from modern urbanization.
Coinciding with the flowering of the conservation movement, rural space was refigured
into a separate pastoral ideal, out of step with cities, sometimes spatially, sometimes
temporally. This worldview did not seek a pastoral city ideal, an evolving landscape
where rural and urban were harmonious valued components. Rather, the rural operated
alone; the village was precious and past-looking. By the 1890s, village improvement,
the first wide-scale project in the purposeful municipal programming of small towns in
the United States, not as utopias or new planned communities, but as existing settlement
fabric ripe for development, was no longer a unified movement. But a legacy of this
intense period of attention on the American rural settlement remained in the residential
village ideal as a planning concept. The design lineage of today’s suburban residential
village is a place inclusive of dual and contradictory identities: first, a space of shared
values, strong community, public/private cohesion, nostalgic and future-oriented; and
second, a space separated from urbanism, private and past-oriented.³
Figure 1: Main Street looking East, Stockbridge, 1829 before improvements to streetscaping. Compliments to the village center at this time usually were in reference to foliage and bucolic scenery. Drawn by Electa Webster (Courtesy Stockbridge Library).

Figure 2: Main Street looking Southeast, 1866, at the dedication of the Civil War Monument. Image from A History of the Red Lion Inn In Stockbridge, Massachusetts (Stockbridge, MA: 1987)
Figure 3: Two views of Main Street, Stockbridge circa 1900, well planted with elm trees and landscape features including gravel sidewalks and marble crossings. Images from *A History of the Red Lion Inn In Stockbridge, Massachusetts* (Stockbridge, MA: 1987)

From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, the residential village ideal is hardly a dynamic model for development; dysfunctional in multiple ways, suburbia has lost its progressive dual and contradictory private/civic identity. Today, designers and planners grapple with the challenges of a pervasive sprawling ex-urban space built on private experience: technoburbs, edge cities, burbopolises that include vast tracts of suburban housing, freeways that move commuters around in private
vehicles, mega-office parks, strip malls, and big-box stores separated from residential spaces comprise contemporary sprawl.

Figure 4: Twenty-first century suburbia. Photo taken near Monroe, Ohio. (Uploaded August 5, 2009; Accessed February 21, 2010)

Whereas a century ago, reformers and planners saw decentralization through suburban development as a solution to the problems of the modern industrial city, today’s anti-sprawl brigade of academics, architects, planners, historic preservationists, nature and farmland conservationists, environmentalists, advocates for alternative-to-automobile transportation, and center-city enthusiasts see suburbanization as an urban condition run rampant and in desperate need of repair. The sprawling form of contemporary suburbia is blamed for exacerbating segregation and social inequalities, for destroying rural ways of life and natural habitats, for pollution, and for wasting
resources in a repeated process of building neighborhoods and infrastructure anew as older areas languish.

Figure 5: Twenty-first century suburbia. Photo taken outside of Tucson, Arizona.

As historian Becky Nicolaides writes, “To many contemporary observers, suburbia has failed to provide a successful or sustainable living environment, although it continues to dominate how metro areas are developed and to attract numerous home seekers. Two key questions have emerged: how can we fix the problems of the suburban metropolis? And can we do so without jeopardizing the qualities that make current suburbs so popular?”
On the whole, this dissertation documents the transition from civic governance to professional planning expertise, a history that was matched by a growing rift during the late nineteenth century into the twentieth between planning as a series of incremental fine-grain changes to the physical fabric of a town (a practice) to planning as a holistic, even grandiose, plan of changes best exemplified by the proposals of Patrick Geddes, Ebenezer Howard, Daniel Burnham, and Louis Mumford (a theory). The former small-scale planning process was in place before the advent of expert-driven professional planning, when municipal development was inspired by robust civic society—local citizens and leaders thinking through how to apply romantic transcendentalist values to the development of the built environment. Whereas the latter more formalist stage of American planning was founded upon modernist principles, a mode of thinking that was far more abstract, visionary, comprehensive, and theoretical.

In addition, this dissertation highlights the importance of civic governance and a blurred relationship between public and private land ownership, rights, and responsibilities in small communities. If some reconciliation between city and country is foundational to the American dream, as Witold Rybczinski has argued in his book *Last Harvest: How A Cornfield Became New Daleville: Real Estate Development in America*, then planners and designers must understand how to plan for governance and the sustainability of civic society in their comprehensive design proposals of suburban spaces.5

The history of village improvement offers contemporary planners a more sophisticated understanding of the design lineage of the residential village ideal and
argues for the development of metropolitan space built on an urban pastoralist paradigm. Sub-urban areas should be conceived of as evolving landscapes where rural and urban operate in harmony as equally valuable components, rather than a type of space rooted in a pastoral ideal. In particular planners need to become sensitized to the fine-grained development of civic society in the design of smaller communities.

Through this history, village improvement emerges as not a minor prequel to the City Beautiful and the advent of professional city planning, but as a substantial movement in rural improvement spanning the second half of the nineteenth century. This narrative shows that before the small town was enshrined as an ideal, it was a space of cutting edge progressive physical, social, and economic reform. Finally, the study shows that idyllic small towns did not take shape without extensive public and private municipal projects followed by an ethic of preservation.

As a concept referenced by planners working on comprehensively designed suburban communities, the residential village ideal has never been historicized with respect to the history and theory of village improvement in the nineteenth century, largely because the activity has been remembered in city planning history lectures as flower-bedding in municipal spaces by women’s groups in the decade following the 1893 Chicago Expo. This dissertation broadens the study of village improvement to include the history of ideas and debates surrounding rural improvement on the national and local level between the 1820s and 1880s. In doing so, this research positions the residential village ideal as a melded product of two ways of conceiving of the middle landscape: the urban pastoral and the pastoral. Village improvement’s long nineteenth
The urban pastoral and the pastoral paradigms are reflected in other philosophical frameworks used for understanding the design lineage of twentieth century (sub)urban design. Planning historian William Fulton has identified the “formal” or “civic” and the “informal;” Suzanne Sutro Rhees and Johnathan Barnett have suggested “monumental” and “picturesque.” Many scholars throughout the twentieth century from Ebenzer Howard to Lewis Mumford to Peter Calthorpe argue that the most successful comprehensively designed communities should contain elements of both philosophies.7

Yet suburban histories have unfortunately positioned the residential village ideal not as a melding of these dichotomies, but as a predominantly private space devoid of community and robust local governance. Despite recent studies that show how less affluent/politically-connected classes and ethnic groups have lived in and defined suburbia in ways that contrasted with how wealthier classes have claimed and shaped suburban spaces, historian Becky Nicolaides argues that the “ideal of suburbia as a place of quiet, beauty, wealth, and Arcadian delights” dominated the visual and verbal rhetoric of comprehensive planning concerned with metropolitan development starting
in the late nineteenth century. Nicolaides writes that suburbia “represented the spatial expression of a new value system that emerged out of broad changes in society, economy, religion, and culture. Rooted deeply in the history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—across national boundaries—the elite suburb came to express a new bourgeois conception of the world.” The fallout of this perspective on suburban history has been that urban designers have appropriated the residential village ideal without really understanding the broader rural settlement ideas that had sponsored it. 8

In contrast to the suburban ideal fixed within a purely pastoral paradigm, village improvement’s long nineteenth century history presents the idyllic residential village as a social place where the civic realm was integral to the development of private spaces. Formal and informal; monumental and picturesque; urban pastoral and pastoral meld comfortably. This dissertation historicizes the residential village ideal as a planning concept through focused study of the theory and practice of village improvement at the national level, via an assessment of the movement’s rise and central ideas as tracked through contemporary debates in printed media between the 1820s and 1890s; and at the local level through a detailed history of the Laurel Hill Association’s work during the same period.

Through my research, I argue that the discussion-born theory of village improvement within a national rural reform movement modeled on the Laurel Hill Association in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and the local practice of this one society over the same period, together comprised the most active sustained discussion about the American rural settlement in United States history. By bringing to light this deeply embedded history, the intellectual framework of twentieth century suburban planning
may be re-set to consider rural space as an extension of urbanization and modernity’s march forward, assisting us today as we consider the future of sprawl in a postmodern era.

**The Small Town Ideal and American Planning**

The residential village ideal is one version of a more general small town ideal concept, which itself resides within a larger intellectual framework of ideas that inform the design and development of planned or revitalized communities. Planning historians and theorists Ann Forsyth and Katherine Crewe posit this term “intellectual framework” in their classification of comprehensive districts and towns built between the end of World War II through the early 21st century. The framework is composed of a developments’ “key assumptions and intellectual histories, and particularly their social, ecological, economic, political, and aesthetic character. It is a classification not of the physical forms of such planned communities but of their underlying design, planning and development ideas….” Forsyth’s and Crewe’s classification term is useful for positioning the relevance of the small town ideal as an influential concept in American planning because the framework considers the breadth of ideas (including nostalgic reminiscences for an ideal which may or may not be based in reality) that inform planners’ vision for their plans, physically and socially.

Although Forsyth and Crewe focus on the intellectual framework of mid- to late-twentieth century communities, the residential village ideal has been present in professional planning since Clarence Stein and Clarence Perry advocated for the neighborhood principle in the 1920s and 30s. Stein’s and Perry’s neighborhood unit was essentially a re-creation of the village in the city. Historian Carol Christensen
writes that “greentowns were modeled not after the preindustrial city but after an idealized conception of the preindustrial village. To planners, ‘community’ was virtually synonymous with ‘village.’” The physical form of the village gave planners a model for emphasizing “family life, friendly association and cooperation, and simple pleasures—presumed social elements of a village society.” In 1939, the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) released the film *The City*, a plea for renewed community using images of New England village Shirley, Massachusetts. The film was narrated by Lewis Mumford, whose own vision for reformed city and metropolitan life “hinged on the small town ideal.” James Rouse, developer of Columbia, Maryland, believed passionately in the virtues of a small town atmosphere for creating self-reliance and strong community; the ideal was essential to his planning vision for the new town.  

Nowhere has the influence of the small town ideal been more apparent than in the work of late twentieth century neo-traditional developments. Andres Duany, considered a father of the movement, titled the speech believed to be the first formal rhetoric on the subject, “The Second Coming of the American Small Town.” In the article, Duany argues that the traditional American town offers the best model for reforming suburbia and creating places where people most desire to live. Celebration, a neotraditional development that is primarily residential with some mixed-use completed in 1996 by the Walt Disney Company, is “a traditional American town built anew.” Indeed Forsyth and Crewe argue in their assessment of post-World War II comprehensively designed communities that “many developers and designers have
directly transferred an ideal about small town life into designs for precincts that are primarily residential, although with some mix of uses.”

It is almost 70 years since the city planning movement in America had its real beginning, although it is less than 20 years since it assumed its more definite form. This does not mean that important activity of one kind or another did not occur in the earlier times. There was indeed much important activity that led up to this movement. Some of the activity assumed the character of the plans for the improvement of villages and cities, the designing of groups of distinguished buildings and other architectural achievements, and the planning of parks and park systems. During this earlier period of America, the establishment of the first village improvement association at Stockbridge, Mass., in 1853 was of
great importance, coupled with the fact that within 30 years thereafter a hundred societies of the same kind came into existence. The creation of Central Park in 1857; systems of Chicago, started in 1869; Boston, begun in 1857; and Kansas City, begun in 1893. The first efforts during 1857 of a commission to examine into the conditions of the slums in the cities of New York and Brooklyn marked the beginning of a great housing betterment.¹³

The text printed above is the opening paragraph in Chapter IV, “The City Planning Movement in America” in Karl B. Lohman’s *Principles of City Planning*, a 1931 textbook on city planning for teachers and students of the subject as well as zoning or planning commission officials. As is typical of United States city planning movement histories, Stockbridge is located at the beginning of the narrative, a pre-history point of departure that maintains that village improvement in this small resort town of 4000 people in Western Massachusetts was “of great importance” as an antecedent to professional city planning.

Primarily discussed by city planning historians and cultural geographers, village improvement has been presented consistently with the tenor of this 1931 text as an activity that gave rise to professional city planning, the city beautiful, and/or city efficient. Geographers have maintained that village improvement played a role in the creation of a settlement ideal, but have limited the scope of their studies to the work of societies in New England and their regional influence over the physical details of townscape development and its links to late nineteenth century colonial revival tourism.

As paragraphs or at most a few pages in these studies, village improvement’s story has been thin both in terms of its significance as a national topic of discussion during the 1870s and 80s that advocated for more than a repetition of New England village imagery, and as local planning practice in the decades prior to and during this period. The Laurel Hill Association of Stockbridge has been mentioned as noted in the
excerpt above, but no scholars have delved into the records of the famous organization to learn more about their practice as a private/public municipal agency or planning organization.

This assessment of Stockbridge’s significance to the history of planning belies village improvement’s fundamental identity as a rural reform movement as well as its position within an urban pastoralist conceptual paradigm, a limited examination that ultimately obscures the movement’s importance in generating the residential village ideal planning concept.

The earliest histories of village improvement were written at the turn of the twentieth century in the forms of articles and pamphlets by leaders in the burgeoning field of civic improvement. Jessie M. Good, Secretary of the National League of Improvement Clubs (later the National League of Improvement Associations) and landscape architect Warren H. Manning each wrote essays about the history of village improvement. Good wrote that the Chicago World’s Fair was pivotal to improvement efforts; the “gospel of beauty” she insisted came about because the fair drew people from all over the country and ignited enthusiasm for beautified civic spaces. These folks went back to their hometowns and initiated beautification programs modeled on what they had seen at the White City.

Warren Manning positioned village improvement within the history of park-design and forestry; improvement societies were part of a general growing interest in making “our whole country a park” by helping to preserve public open space. Both Good and Manning presented village improvement as an ad hoc, predominantly New
England, and sporadic movement of community-betterment groups in the years before the Chicago Expo and parks planning. Both authors also emphasized the creation of national organizations circa 1900 as the dawn of widespread improvement. The general story was that although improvement had started in 1853 in Stockbridge, there was not much activity before the 1890s.¹⁴

In terms of local histories of improvement, residents of towns with formerly or still active societies have written short volumes in the twentieth century to add to the work of urban historians and geographers. These include *A History of the Hancock Point Village Improvement Society* in Maine; *City Beautiful in a Small Town: the Early History of the Village Improvement Society in Oberlin*; *The Story of the A.V.I.S. [Andover Village Improvement Society] Thirty Years of Growth; Katonah Village Improvement Society, 1878-1978*; *Fifty Years with the Springs Village Improvement Society* in New York; *Farm Town to Suburb: The History and Architecture of Weston, Massachusetts 1830-1980*; and *The Laurel Hill Association, 1853-1953*.¹⁵

Decades later, these local history texts and the aforementioned periodical essays plus a few other articles written around the same time became the main sources of information on village improvement for scholars writing about the development of the city beautiful, professional city and park planning, women’s municipal reform work, and the development of the New England village as an influential cultural landscape. Urban and city planning historians have written studies of their substantial respective topics and only use village improvement in minor ways within their larger narratives. These studies include Jon Peterson’s *The Birth of City Planning in the United States*, William H. Wilson’s *The City Beautiful Movement*, Alison Isenberg’s *Downtown
America, Linda E. Smeins’ Building an American Identity: Pattern Book Homes and Communities, 1870-1900, and Daphne Spain’s How Women Saved the City. J. B. Jackson, in American Space and John Stilgoe in Borderlands, wrote short pieces on village improvement within their studies of the American cultural landscape.16

Historical geographer Joseph Wood has written that a settlement ideal formed in the late nineteenth century modeled on the New England village suggested a suburban vision. His theory is based on a study of “the nature of the village and its role in New England life” and his research brings together the work of nineteenth century elites in the context of Romanticism, American industrialization, domestic revival, and the burgeoning tourism industry during the period. My study looks at the theory of the national movement beyond New England to consider this larger discussion’s role in fostering an American small town ideal.17

Finally, Thomas Campanella in his book Republic of Shade: New England and the American Elm discusses improvement activity all over New England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly with respect to the organized planting of elm trees. Campanella cites the Sheffield Tree Bee in 1847 as the point of origin for the village improvement movement. He also devotes several paragraphs to Stockbridge’s transformation at the hands of the Laurel Hill Association and notes its general influence as a society, particularly in the creation of an elm-laden New England village identity important in the development of New England tourism at the end of the nineteenth century.

This dissertation will expand both the historical context of village improvement society work that has been presented in Campanella’s and other works on the early
history of village improvement as it pertains in particular to the national movement spurred by the work of the Laurel Hill Association. My research, thus, augments these scholars’ coverage of village improvement’s story by providing a more detailed history of the struggles and successes of Stockbridge’s influential LHA and a more comprehensive examination of an associated push for rural planning nationally, paying particular attention to the debates and discussion among the movement’s leading advocate-theoreticians.18

**Stockbridge in the Berkshires**

Stockbridge, Massachusetts was settled by whites of European descent in 1734 as a mission for the Mahican Indian tribe (also known as the Stockbridge Indians). During the federal period between the end of the Revolutionary War and the beginning of the War of 1812, Stockbridge evolved from a colonial settlement to a New England village economically and socially. In the early 1800s, Stockbridge had a struggling farm-based economy, but by the 1820s, industry had settled into Curtisville and Glendale where there was water power and the farming economy had begun to prosper. Factories developed in the area that manufactured paper, textiles, furniture and leather goods. Sawmills and lumber yards that had only supplied locally were now beginning to distribute their goods regionally. Trade and intercourse with the outside world increased and the white population expanded from 1200 to 1400 persons. Key civic structures beyond churches began construction. In 1812, women in the town organized a lending library. Associations formed, mostly related to larger reform movements in New England or the nation. Communication with the outside world was improving. In 1825, the Housatonic National Bank opened on the main thoroughfare right next to the
Stockbridge House, now the Red Lion Inn. There since the eighteenth century, the village hotel was called upon to meet increasing business travel needs.19

Between 1830 and 1837, the population in the township went from 1580 persons to 2036. In 1838 railroad service began with the opening of the Hudson and Berkshire Railroad from Hudson, New York to West Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Just over a decade later in 1850, the Pittsfield and Stockbridge Railroad Company opened and the village gained direct rail service, primarily meant for passengers. Stockbridge, because it was not on a rail line that directly linked with a major city did not appeal to manufacturers looking to move goods via freight trains and so retained its rural village qualities.

A literary culture born from the residency of prominent writers developed in these decades as well, that both drew attention to Stockbridge as civilized village and brought prose and poetry artists from afar to Stockbridge to visit their intellectual and aesthete friends. Stockbridge’s long-term literary residents included bestselling novelists Catherine Sedgwick, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Nathaniel Parker Willis, and G.P.R. James. Even before the railroads arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, when there was just one stagecoach arrival a week in Stockbridge, “gentlemen made their journey in their private carriages” and the homes of prominent families in town “resembled much more a hostelrie [sic] of the olden times than the quiet house.” Soon there were regular stops in Stockbridge on the stagecoach line between Albany and Boston, four each way.
Daniel Webster, Martin Van Buren, Harrison Gray Otis, Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Frederika Bremer, Mathew Arnold, and other notable men and women stopped in town for pleasure, visiting the Sedgwicks or staying at the Stockbridge House (now the Red Lion Inn). Nearby Lenox was the home of Fanny
Kemble, William Ellery Channing, Henry Ward Beecher, and George William Curtis. Just north in Pittsfield lived Oliver Wendell Holmes and Herman Melville. In addition, literary visitors to the region included Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and William Cullen Bryant. This literary acclaim, combined with growing knowledge of Stockbridge’s famed rural beauty, with an absence of noticeable industry, made the village an attractive place to visit in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.  

By the middle of the century, visitation increased among relatives and close friends of local families. The guest registries between 1856-1862 at the Stockbridge House show the same names over and over, staying for one to four months during the summer and early fall. Stockbridge was nationally famous through its connections to wealthy and educated families; the town drew visitors from:

Dayton, Ohio
Chicago, Illinois
New York City
Brooklyn, New York
Staten Island, New York
Boston, Massachusetts
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Louisville, Kentucky
Newburgh, New York
San Francisco, California
Albany, New York
Hartford, Connecticut
Virginia
Michigan
St. Louis, Missouri
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Washington D.C.
Charleston, South Carolina
Savannah, Georgia
Returning natives were proud of their village home, particularly after they had spent time as urban dwellers, and they fueled both local and national fame for the town. On the second Anniversary Day of the Laurel Hill Association on August 22nd, 1855 Stockbridge native Stephen E. Burrall was invited to give the keynote address. Burrall, who had lived in Stockbridge until career aspirations took him to New York, credited a wholesome and tranquil life in the village for his success in the City. In sentimental tones, he mused that Stockbridge was “a place so old, in this new land of ours, that it seems almost to possess some of the graces of the antique; a place remarkably refined and finished in its air, and withal one of those quiet places in this busy world, where one can hear himself think.” He praised the village specifically, remarking that it was “a place that is renowned even in the annals of this distinguished country for the men and women it has reared, who have wrote works worthy of enduring and excellent remembrance.”

Stockbridge was also distinguished for its intellectually stimulating social life and conservative display of wealth. The place was “elite” but not “aristocratic”—upper middle class New Yorkers and not simply the very rich summered there. Joseph H. Choate, who built Naumkeag in Stockbridge in the late 1880s commented that around the dinner table in Stockbridge, one was “esteemed” while in Lenox, an adjacent resort town that became associated with a garish nouveau riche crowd, one was “evaluated.” As noted, the period between the 1850s and the 1890s saw an immense shift in the ownership of land as the descendents of prominent ministers and farming families sold parcels to summer sojourners who wished to build country houses after having spent seasons at the Stockbridge House. These summer sojourners-turned-summer-residents
then sold acreage to their family, social friends, and business colleagues. Joseph H. Choate, for example, was in a law practice with Charles Bridgeman, who had built a house some years prior to Naumkeag’s construction. The two houses were in view of one another, in a Berkshire version of *villeggiatura*. Some summer residents eventually retired from their professions in cities and became permanent residents. Thus the population in Stockbridge actually rose during this period, something highly unusual for a nineteenth century farming community (not centered around a booming factory) in New England.23

Stockbridge’s rise in visitation coincided with a new and growing “scenic tourism industry” of the 1830s-1860s that Dona Brown writes about in her book *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century*. The Berkshire towns undoubtedly benefitted from this general increase in travel, but Stockbridge itself did not fit the profile of the new industry’s great resorts. The village did not have a seaside, awesome waterfalls, a great mountain range, or natural springs in its back yard. John Hayward, a prolific publisher of guidebooks that described “the principal mountains, rivers, lakes, capes, bays, harbors, islands and fashionable resorts” barely mentions Stockbridge in his 1839 edition, describing it as simply a “fine farming town.” Rather, Stockbridge’s development as a summer colony is better explained within the context of ideas and interests that drove the rise of the pastoral “rural residence,” particularly among wealthy New York city dwellers. It is no coincidence that the development of country estates increased in and around Stockbridge after 1850, when the town acquired regular passenger train travel to and from New York City.24
Figure 9: Stockbridge in 1876 (upper) and 1904 (lower). Maps show transfer of land and development of summer home estates during the last part of the nineteenth century. F. W. Beers, County Atlas of Berkshire Massachusetts (New York: Published by R.T. White & Co. 36 Vesey Street, 1876) and Barnes & Farnham, Atlas of Berkshire County, Massachusetts (Pittsfield, Mass: Published by Barnes & Farnham, 1904).
Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into three chapters, the first two of which concern the ‘theory’ of improvement, a regional and national story, and a third chapter which concerns the ‘practice’ of improvement, a local narrative. All three sections locate the residential village ideal’s roots in the larger narrative of village improvement, staging a nineteenth century cultural context for a twentieth century planning concept.

Specifically, Chapter Two, “Origins,” tells the back-story of ideas and circumstances that preceded organized village improvement’s birth in New England, focusing on the redefinition of the ‘rural’ during the late eighteenth century through the antebellum period; growing nostalgia for a village social order among educated urbanites; and the coincident rise of the rural residence in the region. The chapter argues that organized village improvement grew from increased attention on the rural as both a place of private retreat and communal identity based on shared landscape aesthetics, uniting in the concept of the residential village ideal. Chapter Three, “The Village Improvement Movement,” describes the national discussion about organized rural improvement as articulated by its main advocates between the early 1870s and mid-1880s. The chapter ends just as the movement began to lose momentum and reformers decamped into causes with narrower and more focused agendas, and discussion about rural places began to figure the village as a precious space, separate from urban development, a middle landscape situated within a more purely pastoral rather than urban pastoral paradigm.

Chapter Four, “Village Improvement Practice in Stockbridge, Massachusetts: From Planning to Preservation,” describes the initial three decades of improvement
activity in Stockbridge, detailing the genesis of the Laurel Hill Association, its function as a planning, parks, and municipal works organization between 1853-1880s, and the Association’s turn in the mid-1880s and 1890s toward preservation as a means of controlling the aesthetics and economic structure of the town.

This dissertation examines the roots of the residential village ideal, a planning concept that has had enormous influence on twentieth century comprehensively designed suburban communities, through an examination of the trajectory of ideas, debates, and discussions of village improvement at both the national level, as a theory, and at the local level, as a practice. This dissertation broadens the study of village improvement to include the history of ideas and debates surrounding rural improvement on the national and local level between the 1820s and 1880s and, in doing so, argues that the residential village is a complicated middle landscape civic realm comprised of the complimentary and oppositional worldviews ‘urban pastoral’ and ‘pastoral.’ Village improvement’s long nineteenth century history presents the idyllic residential village as a social place where private and civic space harmoniously intersected and overlapped.

If we wish to work progressively and sustainably on metropolitan development in the coming decades, we must reconsider the intellectual framework of ideas that have shaped the way we think about rural settlement space. By unearthing this deeply embedded history, the intellectual framework of twentieth century suburban planning may be re-set to consider rural space as an extension of urbanization and modernity’s march forward. Were contemporary planning to filter the problems of sprawl through
an urban pastoralist lens, the conceptual distance between the rural and the urban might collapse and a more fluid and dynamic suburban space and civic society might ensue, something both reflective and critical of our post-industrial post-modern moment.
Notes

1 Birdsey Grant Northrop, “How to Make a Town Beautiful,” *Hearth and Home* 1 (January 2, 1869): 28. The copy of the article that I have has a typo and prints “goo” instead of “good” in the quotation that I used. My assumption from the content of the sentence is that Northrop meant “good.”

2 Stockbridge’s Laurel Hill Association was not the first organized civic group to plant trees, but the group is believed to be the first organized society to call itself a “village improvement society” that would take on the general task of beautifying and improving life in a rural town. See Richard Ross Cloues, “Where Art is Combined with Nature: Village Improvement in Nineteenth Century New England” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1987).


“Village improvement” and “village improvement movement” in the scope of this study refer to the organized movement societies modeled on the Laurel Hill Association in Stockbridge between the 1820s and 1890s. Although a certain level of improvement activity had occurred in villages, particularly in New England, during the eighteenth century in the form of tree-planting and/or common maintenance, this work was not organized on the scale of the later village improvement movement covered here. For information about the early and more ad hoc improvement work done in villages and cities, see Joseph Wood, *The New England Village* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins”

For a discussion of the rural-urban dialectic or urban pastoralism, see James L. Machor, Pastoral Cities: Urban Ideas and the Symbolic Landscape of America (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 3-23. For a discussion of pastoralism or the middle landscape paradigm, see Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). This dissertation maintains that village improvement had a broader set of ambitions than can sit comfortably in the middle landscape paradigm; village improvement situates within a pastoral urbanism paradigm.


6 I am basing this statement on the several conversations I have had with colleagues when discussing my dissertation topic, but this is seen repeatedly in city planning textbooks. See, for example, the classic Donald A. Krueckeberg, Introduction to Planning History in the United States (Piscataway, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1982). A more comprehensive list of previous studies on village improvement appears in n. 15.


8 Specifically, see Dolores Hayden, Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth 1820-2000 (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 26-35, 42-44. Hayden writes that Downing “suggested public parks surrounded by romantic houses in rural towns” as a way of addressing the “problem of isolation,” but the historian maintains that Downing and Beecher “failed to understand the intense desire for community on the part of potential suburban residents” (43). Also see Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Robert Fishman, Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia (New


How much early twentieth century planners, particularly Stein and Wright were influenced by British theory concerning the use of small-scale proxemics in the planning of new communities and how much these planners framed those discussions within a familiarity of the small town ideal as uniquely American is impossible to tell. The aim of this dissertation is not to prove that the small town ideal has been influential, but rather to start from the assumption that the ideal has been and continues to be present in how planners and designers think about new communities and proceed from there to study the ideal’s roots through a focused study of the village improvement movement. For an excellent study of the connections between American and European reform efforts during the developing years of professional city planning see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Belknap Press, 1998).

In terms of planned revitalization, the small town ideal has been a repeated referent for preservationists, though the link between preservation planning in small towns or cities in neighborhoods is not typically residential planning. Historian David Hamer writes that historic districts are driven by two basic stereotypes in terms of their interpretation and treatment: village or Main Street. The National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street Program economically redevelops the past by selling a nostalgic small town ideal. David Hamer, History in Urban Places (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 88. Also see Alison Isenberg, Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People who Made it (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 255. For information on the National Main Street Center see http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/ (accessed Septeb

er 10, 2009).


16 Jon Peterson, The Birth of City Planning in the United States (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); William H. Wilson, The City Beautiful Movement (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989); Alison Isenberg’s Downtown America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Linda E. Smeins, Building an American Identity: Pattern Book Homes and Communities, 1870-1900 (Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press, a division of Sage Publications, inc, 1999); Daphne Spain, How


18 Thomas J. Campanella, Republic of Shade: New England and the American Elm (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). My dissertation will present a slightly different story for the birth of the village improvement movement based on archival research that delved deeper than Campanella’s study. Campanella uses information in a local newspaper article and a B.A. thesis from Harvard written by an undergraduate student named Richard Berenberg, a source of questionable accuracy as I have not found any archival material in Sheffield or Stockbridge to back up some of the details Campanella pulls from Berenberg’s thesis (Campanella was mistakenly informed that Berenberg’s thesis was a Ph.D. dissertation which may account for his faith in the undergraduate text). In correspondence with Campanella, the scholar explained that, as it was a minor piece of his research, he did not cross-check his information with other archival documentation, either in the form of records in Sheffield, Massachusetts or in the archived minutes of the Laurel Hill Association located in the Stockbridge Public Library Historical Room.

19 In Massachusetts, towns are geographic districts within which there are several village centers. In Stockbridge, these village centers are Stockbridge, Curtisville, and Glendale. Colloquially, these are known as the “other Stockbridge.” Leo L. Lincoln and Lee C. Drickamer, Postal History of Berkshire County 1790-1981 (North Adams: Excelsior Printing Co., 1982), 156-157. “These census data were compiled from both the manuscript census records and the official census reports available in the Sawyer Library at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts.” Further discussion of Stockbridge’s population growth refers to the European-descent demographic. Arthur J. Roberts The Red Lion Inn: Three Hundred Years of Living History, 1704-2004 (Cohasset, Mass: Gerd Ordelheide, 2004).


21 Guest Registries Stockbridge House, 1856-1862. Registry books dating to 1856 are stored at the Red Lion Inn.


CHAPTER 2

ORIGINS OF VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT

Village improvement was started by New Englanders swept up in the nineteenth century’s wave of reform. This activist impulse occurred through many different kinds of projects and was theorized about and advocated for by dozens of people during the 1800s, but interest in and aestheticization of the rural was a consistent and popular area of overlap, evolving but also ossifying in pieces over the course of the century. The rural—what it was, how to see it, how to improve it, and how to value it—gained cultural currency in the process. Village improvement’s origins are embedded within this larger antebellum narrative of reform and associated attention on and re-definition of the rural. Although elements of this context have been explored by other scholars studying the history of suburbia and parks, what follows is a restructuring of this narrative relative to the birth of village improvement. Ultimately, organized village improvement grew from increased attention on the rural as both a place of private retreat and communal space of shared landscape aesthetics. A rich perception of the rural emerged in which the countryside settlement became figuratively both individual retreat and communal shared space, symbolic of new ideas about rural aesthetics and taste; and mythically tied to an agrarian past but in momentum toward the future. It was an evolving landscape idea that was simultaneously pastoral and urban.

The period between the end of the war of 1812 and the start of the Civil War was a period of immense social, economic, and territorial change. A larger portion of the workforce was increasingly engaged in commercial manufacturing over traditional
agriculture. Factories entered the scenery of the countryside so that farms began to look like relics of former days. Canals, and then the first railroads, shrank perceptions of space and time as goods and people began moving more quickly across regions. Migration increased and quickly-settled new towns and booming cities lacked sanitation and cultural institutions. Cities had a rhythm of life and pace unfamiliar to those who had grown up in New England villages. Human perversity that had been easy to ignore in small rural communities became institutions of vice and debauchery in the slums and whores of cities. Additionally, to many in the Anglo-American middle class, the nation’s social order was in jeopardy from falling birth-rates and increases in immigration. Expanding non-Protestant urban populations were poor and uneducated. Finally, filth was suddenly a major concern as populations increased and its presence signaled the inevitability of disease. To the descendents of colonial American families, the country looked unlike anything they had known as children and the future of their nation was not secure.¹

These changes caused simultaneously two linked phenomena: first, a burgeoning middle class of classically-educated men and women raised on protestant ethics and republicanism with money and newfound leisure-time; and second, communities and places that were, as historian Ronald Walters puts it, “troubled by the pains and dislocations of sudden expansion,” and thus offered opportunities and canvases for reform. In short, “America’s economic development provided reformers with problems in need of solutions.”²

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, aspects of rural life were both inspiration for urban citizen reformers and a means of subject for reforming both
individual lives and American society. Each reference to rural life helped cultivate the village improvement during the middle decades of the nineteenth century in New England and New York. On the one hand, the term “rural” was increasingly aligned with spiritual uplift: first, romantic and transcendentalist philosophy and aesthetics; second, a nostalgic pre-industrial farm village community ethos and social order; and finally, compelling new ideas about the potential for British-imported-turned-American landscape gardening to nurture an improved American civilization among the growing middle class. And on the other hand, rural space was a physical canvas for American social reform. The acquisition of a rural residence guaranteed a middle class family’s health and economic status. Because American country settlements were disgraceful barren quagmires of filth and disorder, any interest in spending time in the country demanded that these backward areas be beautified according to contemporary landscape aesthetics and modern standards of sanitation. Finally, human progress was best assured in the midst of industrialization and urban modernization by integrating communally-shared rural spaces into all social spaces (whether garden cemeteries, urban parks, or residential villages in the countryside). The following chapter outlines the historical context specific to village improvement’s origins first by describing the shifts in the meaning of “rural” during the early decades and then by illustrating reform activity centered on American rural spaces.

The Meaning of “Rural” for Reformers

Romanticism and Transcendentalism

During the second half of the eighteenth century the western world saw the rise of romanticism, rooted in the philosophical writings of Diderot and Rousseau, a shift in
belief systems and aesthetic values that placed increasing importance on the search for human fulfillment through the ‘natural state.’ This was a broad intellectual transformation from ideas stressed in the age of enlightenment that did not place profound importance on man’s emotive experience in response to nature. At its core, romanticism fueled an antagonistic reaction to the guiding principles of an industrial society among writers and artists anxious about its social effects.³

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, William Cullen Bryant had read the English poet Wordsworth marking the start of the American romantic movement in literature and art. Bryant’s writing about the Pallisades and Catskills of New York; Washington Irving’s stirring detail of meadows and valleys; and James Fenimore Cooper’s breathtaking descriptions of ‘wilderness’ at the edge of civilized territories gave readers a lyrical and reverential perspective on nature. Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, and other Hudson River School painters created huge detailed canvases of farmland and wilderness offering patrons a window on the landscape served up like a meal on a plate before their eyes; their paintings offered a way to figuratively feast on nature as a private emotional act as well as worship it. Although based in dense and complex ideas, these writers and artists were ‘best-sellers’ (Washington Irving the first American international bestseller in history). They popularized a perspective on the outdoors that was optimistic, respectful, and, most importantly, wrote beauty into the narrative of the civilized man in nature.

The transcendentalists, however, rearticulated this lyrical view of nature into religious and cultural practices that valued equally toiling on the farm and reading extensively to develop one’s inner soul. In several essays and lectures done between
the 1830s and 50s, Ralph Waldo Emerson framed reverence for nature within a larger argument about the moral pitfalls of materialism and greed. Utopian communities including Brook Farm (1841-1847) started by George Ripley and Fruitlands (1843) founded by Amos Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane took these ideas to communal practice, eschewing capitalist society to live a simple life in a rural setting amidst like-minded people.  

Morality, and more specifically the moral identity of the nation, was at the heart of Henry David Thoreau’s transcendentalist belief system. Thoreau was neither a minister or a businessman (the two prevailing career paths); he found inspiration in neither the New Testament or in the economic guidance of Poor Richard’s Almanac. He wanted to see Americans spending less time on commercial and material pursuits (which risked enslavement through dependence on mechanical progress), and more time on soul searching through a variety of activities, both physical and contemplative. He had wanted a farm, but unable to afford one, he moved to Walden Pond and through the generosity of Emerson, squatted there and built a cabin in 1845. Contrary to popular imagery, Thoreau’s ‘rural’ experience was time spent in ‘civilized nature’, not an isolated and primitive spot in the wilderness. Walden was less than a mile from Concord village. He tended a vegetable garden, canoed around the pond, strolled into town “every day or two,” entertained visitors, read the local newspaper, and contemplated a life (he perceived as) un-enslaved by modern mechanical aids. Thoreau’s example and *Walden; or Life in the Woods* (1854) aligned the transcendentalist path toward a moral and meaningful life with the simple pleasures of rural living, albeit a predominantly solo one.
Although fully committed transcendentalist practitioners were small in numbers, their compelling ideas filtered through society in a fashion similar to the aesthetic and lyrical views of nature presented by poets and artists. A cultural industry was emerging, in part caused by an enlarging middle class with leisure time to consider the unique philosophical or religious qualities of the outdoors. But, of equal importance, were technological developments in printing that increased the amount of material available to readers and those interested in the aesthetic representation of advancing romantic ideas. Between 1811 and 1816, the introduction of steam-power, combined with the invention of cylinder and rotary presses, initiated a revolution in the publishing industry. Not only were books less expensive than ever before, but periodicals, magazines, and pamphlets diversified and proliferated. Communities initiated circulating libraries and book clubs to meet increasing interest in printed works. As Raymond Williams has observed, these changes also signaled a new role for society’s writers and artists. No longer dependent on a small group of elite patrons, these authors could now reach a much larger audience. The result was that religious leaders, literary writers and visual artists gained influence in middle class society as intellectual and cultural guides. As sacred views of nature and transcendentalist practice disseminated through the various more readily available media, the middle class’ awareness of the connection between a cultured and moral life and rural sensibility became more and more acute.6

Nostalgia for Agrarian Village Life

While nature and rural space began to take on a sacred status among the middle class, perception of the plowed earth’s economic importance was on the decline,
something that ultimately added a nostalgic dimension to this new philosophical lens on the outdoors. The escalated development of cities and associated transformation in social structure that occurred in the first decades of the 1800s fostered a political economy that redefined rural-urban relationships; there was now an opportunity impossible in the eighteenth century to put differential value on landscape and living environments.

Unlike their Puritan ancestors, middle class New Englanders of the antebellum period were not surrounded by a frightening untamed wilderness. And while their parents may have tilled the earth, they spent much of their adult lives in the growing cities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. They had the opportunity, unafforded their parents, of looking at the landscape purely from the perspective of curiosity and admiration. In short, the natural world was not instinctively stressful to them and often they saw it through the rose-colored glasses of an innocent childhood spent in a close-knit village community in the country. Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier all matched “their nature worship with eloquent impressions of agrarian rusticity.” Scores of essays, poems, and letters evoke fervor and newfound fascination with country life in the mid-nineteenth century; rural imagery was the most consistent theme in both written and visual arts. “Rural” was called “the purest adjective, in its associations in the language,” writes historian Judith K. Major. With book publishing on the rise, two popular authors in particular met city folks’ growing nostalgia for rural life: Sarah J. Hale and Susan Fenimore Cooper.7

Genteel novelist Sarah J. Hale’s work Northwood (1827) was an early work in the genre of agrarian simplicity with moral overtones, a narrative type rooted in this
period that eventually dominated best-seller lists during the first part of the twentieth century. Hale’s novel recounted the story of a young man who, after experimenting in the city, returned to a virtuous life in a small farming community in New Hampshire. Hale’s novel was such a popular success, it landed her a position as editor of *Godey’s Ladies’ Book* where she would publish countless editorials and essays that drew associations between domestic ideals and rural life. Under her editorship between 1837 and 1877, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* became one of the most widely read and influential women’s magazines of the nineteenth century.  

Similar to Hale’s work, Susan Fenimore Cooper’s book *Rural Hours* (1849) was also a popular meditation on simple pleasures in the country, although more concerned with the character of plants and behavior of animals in rural spaces than the poetry of hoeing beans. As scholar John Stilgoe writes, Cooper “understood the country as scenery, as backdrop to her dreams and aesthetic theories, not as an evolving artifact of agriculture.” Similarly, a village’s virtue to Cooper was directly tied to how much it retained its rural character despite being a place of commerce. The country store, one-stop shopping for families of the surrounding area, was a communal success because the town remained rural. Once a town became a young city, people did not meet all in one place and that was to the detriment of the community. To Cooper, rural was equated with stable community life.

The aforementioned shifts in political economy combined with the concurrent arts and letters movement in American romanticism, cultivated a nostalgic and idyllic perspective on the countryside and village community life among the middle class in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, many of whom had grown up in small New
England settlements. Groups such as the American Tract Society produced pamphlets in the 1830s that used village life as the model social order. Sunday schools organized their teaching through structured communities that mimicked those found not in cities, but in country settlements. The “rural” represented not only a pastoral physical landscape, but a social community ideal as well, something that would continue to inform how Americans approached reform projects through the Progressive Era.¹⁰

**Rural Art and Rural Taste**

Romanticism and transcendentalism had shaped a religious perspective on nature. Economic and territorial changes stirred nostalgic visions of the agrarian village as a favored social order. Meanwhile, English landscape gardening concepts and a burgeoning movement in American horticulture placed value on the aesthetically improved landscape; human progress could be measured in rural art and rural taste.

Widespread interest in horticulture in the United States did not occur until the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Botanical gardens were few and generally private, but an increasing number of nurseries offered Americans opportunities to own and cultivate gardens in ways in which they were unable in the eighteenth century. Greater interest in horticulture initiated the first horticultural societies in the United States, first in New York (1822) and the second in Boston, Massachusetts (1829). Throughout the 1820s and 30s, periodicals devoted to the subject that ran through the 1820s and 30s included *American Gardener Magazine*, *Horticultural Register*, *The American Farmer*, and *The New England Farmer* among other similar publications produced by horticultural and agricultural organizations. Although English books were the central guides and references, the editor of *The New England Farmer*, Thomas G.
Fessenden produced a compendium volume on fruits and trees entitled *The New American Gardener* (1828). In that same year, two other titles on horticulture were published in the *United States: Treatise on the Cultivation of Flowers* by Roland Green and *Economy of the Kitchen-Garden, Orchard, and Vinery by William Wilson.*

Of these, only Fessenden included a short piece on landscape aesthetics written by Andre Parmentier, a “French horticulturalist with much taste and science” who ran a small nursery in Brooklyn, New York. Parmentier’s piece was entitled “Landscapes and Picturesque Gardens” and lambasted renaissance-ordered spaces in favor of the “modern style” in which serpentine paths, groups of trees, and blind fences sponsored a “constant change of scene, perfectly in accordance with the desires of a man who loves, as he continues to walk, to have new objects laid open to his view.”

Parmentier echoed the most contemporary ideas of English writers on landscape gardening. What constituted the picturesque in England had been debated for several decades among artists and philosophers following Edmund Burke’s outright dismissal of renaissance rationalist concepts of beauty in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). William Gilpin argued that irregular lines and roughness in the objects of a landscape were part of a subset of the beautiful (“picturesque beauty”) while Sir Uvedale Price insisted that the irregular and rough deserved their own distinct category (not a subset and not an intermediary) which he called the picturesque. Near the close of the eighteenth century; the landscape gardener Humphry Repton had capitalized on the picturesque, renewing a connection between dwelling and landscape through the reintroduction of formal spaces adjacent to the house, but situated as to enjoy views across smooth and irregular lines of clumped
trees. After Repton died in 1881, J.C. Loudon became the most widely read English gardening writer of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{13}

The man who translated Price, Gilpin, Repton, Loudon and others’ ideas into a set of landscape gardening aesthetic principles for an American audience, however, was Andrew Jackson Downing. Downing’s *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening Adapted to North America* (1841) went far beyond Fessenden’s guidance on horticulture and limited suggestions via Parmentier on the picturesque and beautiful. It was not only the first American book on “rural art,” it also described the acquisition of rural taste as inextricably tied to the nation’s progress—and presented this task as perfectly attainable. Downing redefined his countrymen’s understanding of the rural into a practice and expression of advanced civilization. The preface explicitly promotes “an essentially world view,” writes historian David Schuyler, “a vision of stable society, at a time of tremendous economic and social change.” Downing offered a picture of America that was “social order characterized by permanence, love of place, and a corresponding degree of civility in human interaction.” One reviewer of the book suggested that Downing’s advice amounted to a more patriotic lifestyle. Love of country and a strong relationship to one’s community would ensue if Downing’s guidance were followed in strict order. The tastemaker effectively offered a comprehensive and convincing argument that the reformation of American society was inextricably tied to its comprehensive adoption of landscape gardening on several scales: private single family cottage on a lawn to shared spaces in the country and city. Both the adoption and example of taste would diffuse these principles across the
country. Downing’s book was an instant best-seller and went through six editions. Despite its expensive price, it sold almost 9,000 copies by 1853.14

A new cultural interest in nature, brought on by the larger philosophical movement of romanticism and the smaller American development of transcendentalism during the early decades of the nineteenth century, corresponded with general nostalgia among the middle class for farm village life and the rise of landscape gardening aesthetics. The next section of this chapter will discuss the various ways that rural space became a method for and a subject of reform, isolating the narrative trajectory of ideas and practices relevant to the birth and maturation of village improvement in New England.

Reforming America through Rural Spaces: Where and How

Village improvement, when it began in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1853 and then matured into a national movement in the 1870s and 80s, ultimately occurred because American reformers had turned their attention to rural space as both a project for and a means of improving America during a time of great economic, social, and territorial changes. Yet, the causes of organized village improvement are not easily stratified into a linear progression of ideas and practices. Rather, village improvement manifested from several circumstances that occurred in small pieces simultaneously over the first several decades of the nineteenth century—cultural projects and indicators that were at once acts of independence and retreat (living separated in a home in the country), and expressions of shared communal values (living amidst a village of homes.
in the country, communally directing the development of shared space). The circumstances governing these seemingly contrary movements were: increasing faith in the importance of a rural residence to a family’s health and economic status; and proposed solutions to the insanitary and ugly qualities of America’s country settlements (particularly as urban citizens began to return to the countryside). These conditions further that argued for communally-developed shared rural space, based on common taste in rural art, in order to ensure the social, cultural, and economic health of the nation.

**Rural Residence**

In the 1830s and 40s, cities were still largely considered the centers of culture, but that began to change as cities became overcrowded, less pleasant to occupy and morally suspect as appropriate settings for family life. As ‘the rural’ gained attention as a location of religious inspiration, taste and artistic merit, an alternative dwelling concept gained currency. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century new ideas about the ideal domestic setting for a family emerged that redefined how middle class Americans envisioned home life. By the 1890s, a distinct suburban image formed: the detached family home surrounded by a picturesque garden or clipped lawn.\(^\text{15}\)

Unlike the early eighteenth century where both parents worked either within the home or within the farm associated with a home, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century period saw fathers leave their families to travel elsewhere to work while the mothers stayed home. These changes in family structure concerned ministers, who since the 1700s had increasingly described private life as a controlled refuge from society. Increasingly during the early decades of the nineteenth century, religious
leaders wrote and spoke at length about the family as the core unit of a moral society free of greed and sinfulness.  

Women gained importance as safeguards of the private realm, more and more feminized and isolated from society. Poems, songs, novels, and prints published in the millions portrayed sentimental sketches of wives and mothers, keepers of heaven on earth. How-to manuals such as Catherine Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (1841), and the many essays in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* by Sarah Hale framed these new values of domesticity, privacy, and isolation within a larger world order that favored the rural residence for family life.

Equally important to the detached home’s symbolic indication of a family’s moral health was a domicile’s assurance of a family’s economic stability. As suburban historian Kenneth Jackson writes, “It is no accident that land is called real estate.” Property had for centuries been the most basic instrument of economic and social power. As this idea travelled with immigrants to the New World, Americans continued to divide and parcel land. In the nineteenth century, property was still both a mark of status and insurance against ill fortune.
Figure 10: Andrew Jackson Downing - Cottage Residences (1842), Design II.
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/2/23/Andrew_
Combined with romantic and nostalgic ideas about rural life, the family home became an Edenic retreat where a family could secure not only the nation’s moral and economic health, but America’s refinement in rural art and rural taste as well, a modern expression of national spirit. Alexander Jackson Davis published *Rural Residences*, a sourcebook for village designs in bucolic settings, in 1838. This was quickly followed by Downing’s *Treatise* (1841) that offered a theory and practice for landscape gardening, and then Downing’s second book *Cottage Residences* (1842), which offered the same comprehensive guidance, but for country dwellings. Davis and Downing had both drawn inspiration from Sunnyside, Washington Irving’s country estate in Westchester County that combined farming, horticulture, picturesque aesthetics, and a house that, according to historian Roger Panetta, “at different times has been called rural Gothic, picturesque Tudor villa, quasi-medieval, suburban cottage, and cottage villa, was an eclectic expression of a variety of architectural styles….” Its diverse architectural ornament was democratic expression.\(^\text{19}\)
Figure 11: Sunnyside, photographed in 1933. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, HABS NY,60-TARY.V,1-.  

Downing had included an image, engraved by Davis, in his *Treatise* of Irving’s home. Sunnyside was a practical working model for New Yorkers already swept up in the scenic tourism guidebooks’ descriptions of the region that had “linked literature, history, and domestic life in a romantic trinity.” Views of the best-selling author’s estate proliferated in published prints that ended up on stereographic cards, magazines, sheet music, daguerreotypes, cigar boxes and pottery. Sunnyside, a large estate that required a cook, housemaids, and several gardeners, was by no means a modest dwelling. Yet the popular imagery suggested that Irving’s estate was a foundation of democratic American lifestyle, that it was a modest home and “the quintessential expression of the American spirit—an icon of domesticity.”20
Together, Downing and Davis presented potential clients and the public with two basic approaches to domestic architecture: the villa (for the affluent with three or more servants) and the cottage (for those with moderate income). Eventually, the ‘cottage’ became the dominant rural residence of middle class families who moved to the “borderland” in the late nineteenth century, but in the pre-village improvement period of the 1830s and 40s, the ‘villa’ modeled on Sunnyside and theorized and diffused by Davis and Downing defined the rural residence in educated society. The rural residence, an American version of a landed estate, was a private home, but a democratic and social institution.\(^{21}\)

**Reforming Where Americans Settle Together: The Residential Village**

Andrew Jackson Downing and others wanted to reform rural America, not only through improved and tasteful housing, but also through the cultivation of communal and shared values in landscape aesthetics. This effort manifested in and drew inspiration from garden cemeteries in the 1830s, and urban parks in later decades. The rural residence, though a private space, was an essential piece of this larger effort by reformers to cultivate shared aesthetic sensibility.

Popular standards of rural art and rural taste have some democratic roots in transcendentalist philosophy and utopian settlements, but Downing brought these goals to a much broader reading public. He also had the clout of being a best-seller and authority on rural art and taste; he was a charming and fashionable guide in the manner that Raymond Williams has discussed. Downing made a compelling argument that active participation of rural residents in the shared development of their village environs was integral to the development of American rural art and rural taste. The famous
landscape designer, more than any other writer in the 1840s, connected the future success of his “apostles of taste” with the aesthetic qualities of their villa townscape. The undercurrent of Downing’s argument was that the village was a shared residential space as an extension of the villa or cottage; ideally, a town was not a bustling commercial center. Shared physical space and common standards of rural aesthetic values, rather than a market or industrial-dependent economy, should drive the village’s reason for being and overall physical character and social order. Historian Kenneth Jackson, who has written about Downing’s ideal suburb, notes that the plan was organized as a series of single-family cottages on large lots surrounding a “commonly-owned park at the proposed village center….Thus, the community-oriented park and the privately oriented houses would foster the union between human culture and nature.”

The Context: Nineteenth Century Rural Settlements

As prose, poetry, and visual imagery covered agrarian village life in nostalgic tones, and landscape gardening drew interest in the rural residence, the real-time dismal condition of America’s rural settlements came into sharp focus. Nineteenth century New England saw an immense amount of regional resettlement, both by native residents and a rising population of immigrants. Second and third generation Anglo-Americans fled their families’ farms for industrial mill towns, moved to urban centers, and migrated west to new city settlements, larger farms, and emerging towns. Immigrants from Ireland and Germany pursuing rural life settled onto freshly abandoned farms in the northeast or joined the westward migration. Toward the latter part of the century, the first suburbs around New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago began attracting urban dwellers in pursuit of fresh air and foliage. The countryside was in a constant
state of flux. Rural communities—whether villages, bustling commercial towns, or suburban enclaves—were typically unplanned and unsanitary places with little unity among citizens.²³

**Figure 12:** Milton, North Dakota, between 1900-1909. Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo.

**Figure 13:** Harlingen, Texas, between 1900-1903. The Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, [image number 02993], courtesy of The Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.
Figure 14: Harlingen, Texas, between 1900-1920. The Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, [image number 02994], courtesy of The Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

Figure 15: Woodward, Iowa, c. 1907. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [PAN US GEOG - Iowa no. 79]

Figure 17: Main Street, Wheaton, Illinois, 1908. DN-0006420, Chicago Daily News negatives collection, Chicago History Museum
“Dreary, treeless, dusty, desolate, disordered, and disreputably approaching villages and country places out at elbows are in many parts of the country the rule, not the exception” wrote a journalist in New Haven. The editor for *Scribner’s Monthly* observed that thousands of villages scattered throughout the northeast region in need of “a public spirited attempt made to reduce their disorder to order, their ugliness to beauty, their discomforts to comfort.” Villages were a mish-mash of “inharmonious aggregations” rather than “beautiful wholes.” They lacked sympathetic unity, both socially and physically.²⁴

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Figure 18: Walkerville, a suburb of Butte, Montana, 1905. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-118655.
Further, rural settlements often did not have basic municipal services and regulations, setting a poor example to residents and newcomers. Private grounds were neglected, dwellings were dilapidated, and streets were cluttered with piles of decaying brush and trash. One writer made specific note of the discarded “fruit cans, broken harrows, carts or sleds” commonly seen along small town streets. Generally there were no sidewalks other than the occasional rotting wooden planks placed before a building at the resident’s expense. “Most American villages are quagmires in the spring and autumn,” wrote a journalist from the time, citing that citizens and visitors couldn’t walk through town and expect to have dry feet and clean trousers. Ladies, he argued, were accommodated even less by American village public space. Chances for unplanned socializing while out, the popular hallmark of village life, were strictly limited to summer months.25
Additionally, towns just outside cities that became some of the nation’s first suburban areas were unprepared for their new residents; communities that had not originally been clean and ordered places began to sprawl undirected. Journalists argued that despite the emergence of many charming suburban retreats outside of New York City, residents of those pastoral escapes had to wade “through all manner of filthiness and disorderly debris, making his landing as it were in the very dung-heap of the place.”26
**The Residential Village**

Downing wrote many essays that touched on the improvement of country life in the *Horticulturist*, the magazine he edited between 1846 and his death in 1852, but there were four essays in particular that laid the groundwork for organized improvement work in association with residential village life. The first two, “On the Improvement of Country Villages” and “Our Country Villages,” argue against what Downing called the “graceless village,” a landscape devoid of street trees and lacking tasteful architecture. Downing passionately advocated for the scenery he observed in New England towns, and Massachusetts locales in particular. “Show us a Massachusetts village, adorned by its avenues of elms, and made tasteful by the affection of its inhabitants, and you also place before us the fact, that it is there where order, good character, and virtuous deportment most of all adorn the lives and daily conduct of its people.” In separate articles Downing outlined the need for street trees and village park space.27

In “Trees in Towns and Villages,” Downing described the beauty of roadside arbor plantings in New England towns. “Our mind dwells with unfeigned delight upon exceptions” to “the general neglect and inattention to the many charms in country towns and villages.” In New England, “where the verdure of the loveliest elms waves like grand lines of giant and graceful plumes above the house tops, giving an air of rural beauty….We remember Northampton, Springfield, New Haven, Stockbridge and others whose long and pleasant avenues are refreshing and beautiful to look upon.”28

First and foremost, however, “the indispensable desiderata in rural villages” was “a large open space, common or park, situated in the middle of the village…well planted with groups of trees, and kept as a lawn.” The park was to be the “nucleus or
heart of the village and would give it an essential rural character.” Surrounding the park were to be “grouped all the best cottages and residences of the place; and this would be secured by selling no lots fronting upon it over less than one-fourth acre in extent.”

Connected to this central park should be “wide streets with rows of elms or maples.” Wire fences should be erected rather than wooden slatted ones because they foster a seamless expanse of park space and lanes lined with trees. To Downing, “public parks, public gardens, public galleries, and tasteful villages” were institutions that together would cultivate a union between art and nature. Village-parks were residential enclaves; industry and commerce did not reside within the village center.29

Significantly, to Downing and other Americans who favored the expansion of rural residence life, the house in the country was not simply flight from the city. It was a movement toward the cultivated and tasteful rural, and as such it required aesthetic sensitivity throughout the entire commuter experience, from city dwelling to county dwelling. Improvements to the grounds of one’s country estate were not enough; the nearest village, where one’s family and guests first arrived, was also a canvas that needed beautification. It was also an example and contagious in a positive way upon the improvement of America’s taste in general, just as was the example of an improved rural residence.30
"The man who loves not trees, to look at them, to lie under them, to climb up them, (once more a schoolboy) would make no bones of murdering Mr. Jeff's. In what one imaginable attribute, that it ought to possess, is a tree, pray, deficient? Light, shade, shelter, coolness, freshness, music,—all the colors of the rainbow, dew and dreams dropping through their soft twilight, at eve and morn,—dropping direct, soft, sweet, soothing, restorative from heaven. Without trees, how, in the name of wonder, could we have had houses, ships, bridges, easy chairs, or coffins, or almost any single one of the necessities, comforts, or conveniences of life? Without trees, one man might have been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but not another with a wooden ladle."

Every man, who has in his nature a spark of sympathy with the good and beautiful, must involuntarily respond to this rhapsody of Christopher North's, in behalf of trees—the noblest and proudest drapery that sets off the figure of our fair planet. Every man's better sentiments would involuntarily lead him to cherish, respect, and admire trees. And no one who has sense enough rightly to understand the wonderful system of life, order, and harmony, that is involved in one of our grand and majestic forest trees, could ever destroy it, unnecessarily, without a painful feeling, we should say, an ache at least to murder in the fourth degree.

Yet it must be confessed, that it is surprising, when, from the force of circumstances, what the phrenologists call the principle of destructiveness, gets excited, how sadly men's better feelings are warped and smothered. Thus, old soldiers sweep away ranks of men with as little compunction as the mower swings his harmless scythe in a meadow; and settlers, pioneers, and squatters, girdle and make a clearing, in a centennial forest, perhaps one of the grandest that ever God planted, with no more remorse than we have in brushing away dusty cobwebs. We are not now about to declaim against war, as a member of the peace society, or against planting colonies and extending the human family, as would a disciple of Dr. Malthus. These are probably both wise means of progress, in the hands of the Great Worker.

But it is properly our business to bring men back to their better feelings, when the fever of destruction is over. If our ancestors found it wise and necessary to cut down vast forests, it is all the more needful.

Figure 20: Cover of *Horticulturist: Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste* edited by Andrew Jackson Downing, March 1847
Over the ensuing decades, other writers echoed Downing’s pleas to re-make America’s villages into residential enclaves with integrated shared space expressive of common landscape aesthetics. Susan Fenimore Cooper; close friend of Downing, Frederika Bremer; author of home-life guides, John Ware; essayist and country estate owner, Nathaniel Parker Willis; and popular commuting gentleman-farmer and writer, Donald Grant Mitchell presented the urban dweller with further argument for putting time, effort, and money into “settled” rural village experience. “Every season there is a whirl of citizens,” Mitchell wrote in *Rural Studies with Hints for Country Places* (1867), “tired of city heats and costs, traversing the country in half hope of being wooed to some summer home, where the trees and the order invite tranquility and promise enjoyment. A captivating air about a village station will count for very much in the decision.” Ware, in his book *Home Life: What It Is, and What It Needs* (1864) mixed nostalgia for the pre-industrial village into his suggestions for the most desired qualities in a rural settlement: “Somehow there is a home-spirit which looks out from these [Northampton, Springfield, Portsmouth, New Bedford, Salem] and many a lesser New England village you look for in vain in the crowded streets of the city and its suburbs.”

Although the rural residence during the pre-village improvement period, rather than the settlement, was more extensively covered in publications at the time, the residential village and nostalgia for pre-industrial rural agrarian landscape and village order demonstrate shifting ideas about the salient characteristics of the country settlement during the mid-century decades. The lens on the village was rose-colored and selective. In Downing’s vision, residents did not intermingle because they shared
commercial or other business interests; the village was not a mixed-use settlement. Anything that was produced was first and foremost an expression of taste; second, it might be something that developed land value (the only kind of economic growth).

“First impressions count for a great deal,” wrote Donald Grant Mitchell, “whether in our meeting with a woman, or with a village. Slipshoddiness is bad economy in towns, as is [sic] people.” Communal cohesion occurred because of overlap in landscape and architecture aesthetic practices, fostering a new village ideal directly tied to the rural residence. It was only two years later, in 1869 that Birdsey Grant Northrop’s article proclaiming Stockbridge a “model town” was published in *Hearth and Home* under the editorial direction of Mitchell.  

Reforming How Americans Settle Together: “Social Planting Reform”

As the rural residence and residential village image gained favor between the 1830s and 1860s, a third area of reform initiatives occurred: advocacy for roadside tree planting. This theory and practice, though minimal, occurred alongside and with a general enthusiasm for the rural among reformers. While the rural residence and residential village functioned as ideals that melded private and community life according to the adoption and example of landscape aesthetics, tree planting as both an expression of good citizenship and organized activity began to socialize standards of landscape aesthetics ‘on the ground.’ This was reform and community development through the shared application of landscape aesthetics in public spaces.
During the 1820s and 30s, Thomas Green Fessenden zealously promoted public tree planting through articles in the *New England Farmer*, a widely-read magazine Fessenden edited and published out of Boston. Standard practice for editors of newspapers and periodicals of the period, Fessenden often republished pieces from sources all over New England, including the *Christian Spectator, Age*, the *Lynn Mirror* and the *New York Statesmen*. Authors varied, and typically were not listed. As an editor, Fessenden redistributed ideas that were just beginning to gain interest to larger and more diverse audiences. Articles such as “Trees by the Roadside,” “Shade Trees,” and “Shade Trees and Sidewalks” outlined the benefits of sylvan villages. In 1826, an
article that originally appeared in the *Christian Spectator* was republished in the *New England Farmer*. The article read:

I regard the man who surrounds his dwelling with objects of rural taste, or who even plants a single shade tree by the road-side as a public benefactor; not merely because he adds something to the general beauty of the country, and to the pleasure of those who travel through it, but because, also, he contributes something to the refinement of the general mind; he improves the taste, especially of his own family and neighborhood. There is a power in scenes of rural beauty, to affect our social and moral feelings.  

Fessenden’s magazine communicated the same benefits of tree planting that Downing would espouse and the Village Improvement Society movement would embrace as guiding principles decades later. Proposing and executing improvement plans, including the installation of sidewalks, Fessenden argued, would produce “an increase in solid wealth and comfort.” Adorning villages with rows of trees, reported an unnamed writer in the *New England Farmer*, would also “serve to arouse public spirit, and call forth the ingenuity, taste, and exertions of the enterprising young gentlemen of the place.”

In 1830, the Massachusetts General Court institutionalized the appreciation of trees by passing a statute protecting ornamental and shade trees growing along streets and highways. Any person who “wantonly and without cause, break, cut, mutilate, injure or destroy any tree standing and growing by the side of any public or private way…shall forfeit and pay to the use of the Commonwealth, a sum not less than five dollars….” The text from this statute was published in full with enthusiastic endorsement in the *New England Farmer* less than two weeks after it passed into law.

Significant to the story of Stockbridge’s early village beautification consciousness, Massachusetts put shade tree protection into law decades before other
New England states. It was not until three decades hence in 1861 that New Hampshire adopted a similar act. New York State finally drafted “an act to prevent the mutilation of shade or ornamental trees” from the practice of hitching horses to planted arbors “around any school-house, church, or public building, or along any public highway” in 1875.\(^{36}\)

In another essay, “On Planting Shade Trees” Downing specifically argued for the creation of tree planting organizations. Because Americans did “not like to be over-governed, or compelled into doing even beautiful things,” local statutes would not successfully cultivate taste in rural settlements. “We therefore recommend,” Downing wrote, “as an example to all country towns, that most praiseworthy and successful mode of achieving this result adopted by the citizens of Northampton, Massachusetts….an *Ornamental Tree Society*.” Downing detailed how this organization advocated for “the public good” by planting street trees. The result was a village that was “the pride of its citizens” and “the delight of travellers [sic], who treasure it up on their hearts, as one does a picture drawn by poets, and colored by the light of some divine genius.” Downing recommended “this plan of Social Planting Reform, to every desolate, leafless, and repulsive town and village in the country.”\(^{37}\)

**Tree Planting Societies 1830s-1850s**

The Concord Ornamental Tree Society, which formed in the mid 1830s, is the earliest known tree planting society. Created to “set out trees in public squares, avenues, and roads,” the group’s work was also widely publicized. A story of the Concord Society’s founding appeared in local newspapers, then was re-told in the *New York Farmer* and *American Gardener’s Magazine*, and ultimately in J.C. Loudon’s
Gardener’s Magazine, an English publication based in London. Tree planting in America had received international attention!  

Theodore Dwight, a popular intellectual and writer in the early nineteenth century who Downing quotes in one of his essays, published Things as they are; or, Notes of a traveler through some of the middle and northern states in 1834, and then republished it in 1847 with the title Summer Tours. In his book, Dwight praises an association in New Haven that had formed in the early 1830s “for the promotion of taste in civic architecture, the laying out of grounds, &c.”  

By the 1840s and 1850s ornamental tree societies were quite common throughout New England and parts of upstate New York. The Daily Evening Transcript, a newspaper in Boston, mentions the May 1850 Chelsea Ornamental Tree Society’s work on “the borders of all the streets and avenues.” The Transcript also praised the efforts of the East Boston Ornamental Tree Society: “There is every inducement to make all the region surrounding Boston a paradise in the way of trees and shrubbery. Let the good work go forward year by year.” There is no mention of who runs these organizations, but the names of several Boston area private donors are mentioned. In Sheffield, a “Tree Bee” was organized by residents in 1846 which resulted in 1000 elms planted throughout the village, a story recounted at length in Thomas Campanella’s book on the New England elm tree. Period newspapers and journals reported on work by ornamental tree societies in New Hampshire, New York and Connecticut as well.  

Religious leaders also advocated for tree planting within villages; ornamenting a landscape was a means of moral reform. Reverend Lyman Beecher and his son Henry
Ward Beecher both gave sermons and wrote lectures directing their audiences to get together and plant trees along the roadsides. Minister Orville Dewey, who had spent considerable time with major figures in American romanticism including Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Cullen Bryant (a boyhood friend), Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand began the Elm Tree Association upon returning to his native Sheffield in 1852. Dewey’s group was charged with improving the beauty and community life of Sheffield through tree-planting and civic spirit, and though they did not call themselves a ‘village improvement society,’ they functioned as such, though not on the scale that the Laurel Hill Association of Stockbridge, formed one year later, would. The Elm Tree Association also did not last, and no archives survived.  

Conclusion

A new cultural interest in nature brought on by the larger philosophical movement of romanticism and the smaller American development of transcendentalism during the early decades of the nineteenth century corresponded with general nostalgia among the middle class for farm village life and the rise of landscape gardening aesthetics. In the process, rural space became a method for and subject of reform, two things that set the stage for the development of organized village improvement in 1850s New England.

Village improvement, when it began in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1853 and then matured into a national movement in the 1870s and 80s, ultimately occurred because American reformers had turned their attention to rural space as both a project for and means of improving America during a time of great economic, social, and territorial changes. Advocates of village improvement argued that rural settlements
were residential canvasses of landscape beauty, municipal and sanitary innovation, cultural amenities and social progress. Yet, the causes of organized village improvement are not easily stratified into a linear progression of ideas and practices in the years prior to the Civil War. Rather, village improvement manifested from several developments that occurred in small pieces simultaneously over the first several decades of the nineteenth century—cultural projects and indicators that were at once acts of independence and retreat (living separated in a home in the country), and expressions of shared communal values (living amidst a village of homes in the country, communally directing the development of shared space). The circumstances governing these seemingly contrary movements were: increasing faith in the importance of a rural residence to a family’s health and economic status; and proposed solutions to the insanitary and ugly qualities of America’s country settlements (particularly as urban citizens began to return to the countryside) that argued for communally-developed shared rural space, based on common taste in rural art, in order to ensure the social, cultural, and economic health of the nation. This was a rural landscape tied to an agrarian past but in momentum and moving aggressively toward the future. It was an evolving landscape idea that was simultaneously pastoral and urban.

How the theory of the rural matured into a theory of village improvement and national movement is the subject of the next chapter, but by the early 1870s after Donald G. Mitchell had published his *Rural Studies with Hints for Country Places* (1867) and Birdsey Grant Northrop began his campaign for rural improvement as inspired by what he witnessed in the “model town of Stockbridge,” the essential
ingredients of the village improvement movement were established. Cultivating shared communal values about rural life as Downing’s popular writings had articulated was central to village improvement’s theory as it flowered within a pastoral urbanist paradigm in the 1870s and early 80s.
Notes


6 For information on the invention of presses and the development of a larger literate class see Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965). Raymond Williams observes how artists and writers became more influential in society; they were guides to a cultured life, see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).


It is unknown if Downing visited Stockbridge; he often wrote of places he had not set foot in, but knew of through his acquaintances.


“Trees by the Roadside,” *New England Farmer* 13 (6 May 1835): 340. Currently the law reads “Whoever wilfully and maliciously or wantonly breaks glass in a building which is not his own, or whoever wilfully and maliciously breaks down, injures, mars or defaces a fence belonging to or enclosing land which is not his own, or wilfully and maliciously throws down or opens a gate, bars or fence, and leaves the same down or open, or maliciously and injuriously severs from the freehold of another any produce thereof or anything attached thereto, shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than six months or by a fine of not more than five hundred dollars.”

Chapter 266: Section 114. Trees and fences; malicious injury.

New York (State), and Montgomery H. Throop. *The Revised Statutes of the State of New York: As Altered by Subsequent Legislation: Together with the Other Statutory Provisions of a General and Permanent Nature, (Except the Code of Civil Procedure, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Penal Code.) Passed from the Year 1778 to February 1, 1889, and Now in Force; Arranged in Connection with the Same or Kindred Subjects in the Revised Statutes; to Which Are Added an Analysis of the Entire Work; References to Judicial Decision Upon the Different Enactments: Explanatory Notes: a Full and Complete Alphabetical Index; and an Indexed Table of the Statutes Contained in the Work.* (Albany, N.Y.: Banks, 1889), 2409.


Andrew Jackson Downing. “Trees in Towns and Villages” in *Rural Essays by A.J. Downing*, ed. George William Curtis (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1858), 306-307. Curiously, there is no record of an Ornamental Tree Society in Northampton in the 1840s, although there were spirited tree-planting efforts by local citizens at different times in the 1830s and 1840s. In a Masters thesis, completed at the University of Connecticut Storrs, on Northampton’s landscape improvement efforts, the author states, “No evidence whatsoever could be found for a group called the Ornamental Tree Society in Northampton. Such efforts were often under the guide of other organizations and it is very likely that the group Downing mentioned was in fact the Horticulture

38 *Gardener’s Magazine* 11 (61 April 1835): 207.

39 Theodore Dwight, *Things as They Are; or, Notes of a Traveler Through Some of the Middle and Northern States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1834), 76.


CHAPTER 3

THE VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT MOVEMENT

The pace of economic, social, and territorial changes afoot in American culture before the Civil War only increased in the decades following it. An abundance of raw materials, new and ever-expanding transportation and communication systems, enlarging labor class, technological innovations, diversifying market for domestically manufactured goods, and an emerging entrepreneurial class of businessmen saw enormous gains in America’s industrialization with each passing decade. Loans, tax incentives, land grants, tariff protections, and homesteading deals offered by the federal government assisted in the country’s economic development. This period also saw urban populations rapidly swell, mostly from immigration. Between 1860 and 1900, the nation’s cities grew by 40% and many of these folks crowded into tenements in ethnic enclaves or older inner city neighborhoods.

With urbanization came outbreaks of epidemic diseases, more and more associated with dense living conditions. Close quarters seemed responsible for all kinds of health problems, whether mental or physical—and in this period moral behavior was akin to emotional stability and group order. Civil unrest, disease, and filth were all in some way connected with increased urbanization and industrialization. Fresh air and light were generally accepted as antidotes to these problems, solutions that reformers saw attainable through proximity to greenery. Attention to the public health benefits of trees subsequently heightened concern among reformers about America’s depleting forests as vast areas of the American landscape saw the ax from industrial expansion. ¹
Reformers reacting to this American scene drew together, united under a general concern for the future progress of American society. Village improvement garnered particular interest during the 1870s and early 1880s, gathering support from a diverse group of intellectuals and charitable individuals looking to ensure the healthy development of rural settlements of all kinds. In July 1882, several of these men and women assembled at a resort on Greenwood Lake, New York to discuss sanitation and improvement in country areas, and subsequently created the National Association for Sanitary and Rural Improvement (NASRI). A catch-all set of concerns united them; at the meeting topics varied from sanitary household and municipal plumbing, dietary and nutritional guidance, arbor day advocacy and forest conservation, yard cleanliness, to educational reform in rural areas. Their official purpose was to “establish and extend local societies for sanitary and rural improvement, the issuance of tracts and other publications as a means of popular enlightenment, and the holding of annual conventions for discussion and conference.” The organization was short-lived, but did produce thirteen months of a periodical, *Indoors and Outdoors*, “devoted to town and country improvement, healthy homes and beautiful surroundings” that was printed in batches of 3000 to 4500 per issue. By 1884, however, the magazine and the organization were defunct.2

The two decades following the Civil War, however, saw the most diverse, active, and sustained national discussion about the rural community by intellectuals and reformers in American history. Although ostensibly united under an urban pastoralist paradigm that rural settlements should develop with and alongside the cities in the modern age, these individuals moved in subtly different reform circles and all
contributed differently to the rural improvement discussion, some veering closer to a conception of the residential village as a precious space unique from the process of urbanization. Each piece of the discussion helped sculpt the contours of the residential village ideal as a communal, private, domestic, romantic, rational, nostalgic, and forward-looking. All of these qualities remain in the legacy of the ideal as a planning concept. Birdsey Grant (B.G.) Northrop, a minister and educational administrator and the movement’s most active spokesperson, canvassed passionately about rural improvement’s potential gains in social reform. George E. Waring, the nineteenth century’s most famous civil engineer, the feminist Isabella Beecher Hooker, and lesser-known women’s reform activist H.M. Plunkett used village improvement as a vehicle for discussing domestic plumbing and sanitation. Forester Nathaniel Hillyer (N.H.) Egleston argued for the preservation of country life through organized improvement work. Park advocate Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. conversed with other supporters of rural improvement about the unique cultural value of the vernacular village landscape, echoing some of Egleston’s theory.

As discussed in the previous chapter, organized village improvement and the associated residential village ideal landscape emerged from a rich perception of the rural that developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To educated American reformers of the antebellum period, the countryside settlement was figuratively both individual retreat and communal shared space; emblematic of new ideas about rural aesthetics and taste; and mythically tied to an agrarian past but in
momentum and moving toward the future. It was a landscape that was simultaneously pastoral and urban.

During the two decades after the Civil War, these ideas carried through. Organized village improvement flourished within reform circles under the urban pastoralism worldview, largely because this paradigm encompassed broad interpretations of both the subject (rural settlement), and the methods of reform (multi-disciplinary). The “rural settlement” included sparsely populated farming communities in Kansas, new towns in California, the suburbs of Chicago, older towns in the process of suburbanization outside Philadelphia, and resort towns in Maine and elsewhere. This discussion was “multi-“ or “pre-disciplinary” in the sense that it drew equal attention from educational reform administrators, sanitary engineers, feminists advocating women’s knowledge of domestic plumbing and hygiene, foresters and arbor day supporters, and landscape park designers. Between the early 1870s and mid 1880s, the discussion of organized rural improvement went national, and brought the residential village ideal based in a pastoral cities paradigm to a countrywide audience. Yet by the 1890s, the movement began to lose momentum as reformers decamped into causes with narrower and more focused agendas. Discussion about rural places began to figure around the village as a precious space, separate from urban development, a middle landscape situated within a more purely pastoral, rather than urban pastoral, paradigm.

The arc of this narrative follows the work of several individuals writing and speaking in the 1870s and 80s. This chapter relays this story through a close examination of the ideas and canvassing tactics of these central leaders of the village
improvement movement set against the aforementioned backdrop of America’s industrial expansion.

**Social Reform: Birdsey Grant Northrop**

![Birdsey Grant Northrop](image)


The earliest known article written about village improvement described the Laurel Hill Association’s alteration of Stockbridge into a “model town” of rural art and rural taste. The author, Birdsey Grant (B.G.) Northrop lived in the Boston area during the 1850s and began visiting the western part of the state in the 1860s when he served as an Agent of the Massachusetts Board of Education. He frequently gave speeches at graduations of different schools in the Berkshires and participated in the locally-held Berkshire Teacher’s Institutes. Some members of this circle were actively involved in
the founding of the Laurel Hill Association, including the President of William College, Mark Hopkins, cousin to Mary Hopkins Goodrich, the woman credited with starting the organization. During the first week of August, B.G. Northrop, newly appointed Secretary of the Connecticut Board of Education, attended the 39th annual meeting of the American Institute of Instruction (AII), held in Pittsfield, Massachusetts located about 12 miles north of Stockbridge. The week following the AII annual meeting, B.G. Northrop visited Stockbridge and gave the keynote address at the 1868 Laurel Hill Anniversary Day festival. A little over four months after this engagement, Northrop published his first piece of writing on village improvement. The article was “How to Make a Town Beautiful” and appeared in the January 1869 issue of *Hearth and Home*, a new magazine edited by country-life aficionado Donald G. Mitchell.³

In this article, Northrop used the Laurel Hill Association and Stockbridge to illustrate arguments in favor of forming similar organizations in every country village in the States and Territories. The article was not a critique of the Laurel Hill Association; it was purely complimentary and promotional. Northrop explained that the organization had successfully improved the “sidewalks, streets, the public and private grounds” of the whole village. They had planted over 3500 trees. Stockbridge in 1869, he wrote, “stands in marked contrast with that of former times,” the alterations were so great. The group brought together people of different classes, religious and political beliefs in unison around a common objective of caring for the physical infrastructure of their community. In addition Northrop argued that besides its “nobler influence in cultivating the taste of the people and promoting public spirit and good fellowship,” the Laurel Hill Association had successfully brought pecuniary benefits to Stockbridge.
“Every house, every building lot, every acre of land in the village” had increased in market value since the LHA commenced its work. Inns, in the summers since trees and sidewalks were installed on Main Street, had been thronged with guests. Further, the town had begun to attract wealthy “men of influence from the city” who arrived seeking an idyllic country setting for a summer estate.

Northrop also explained how the LHA encouraged and monitored village behavior. Monetary prizes for planting trees accomplished extensive plantings in public ways, and rewards for anyone providing evidence that led to the conviction of vandals who had the senselessness to damage any of the LHA’s improvements, whether fences, trees, sidewalks or foot-bridges, kept problems at bay. He explained that women held a special place in the creation of these societies, for it was “a prominent lady of Stockbridge, then unmarried, to whose taste and efficiency the great and growing influence of this association is largely due.” Finally, and in summation, Northrop offered his readers a final incentive: “these efforts to beautify the town have promoted general culture, as well as taste and public spirit.” Northrop cited the civic gift of the library, free of cost for anyone to use, as evidence of general communal zeal for public betterment.

Northrop’s article effectively gave national parameters to what had been a local phenomenon. Before this article, the Laurel Hill Association and Stockbridge’s beauty were considered unique to a New England culture and landscape; after it was published, both the organization and the town were nationally-held models of progress that could and should be mimicked and reproduced. Soon after the appearance of Northrop’s article, the LHA began receiving requests from individuals in other states asking for
copies of the group’s constitution and information on how to start a similar
organization. Until he died, Northrop actively promoted village improvement through
the story of Stockbridge and the LHA. In 1895, just three years before he passed away,
he reiterated again in an article for *The Forum* his version of how Stockbridge had
started its society and how much it had changed the village.

A sketch of the Laurel Hill Association, of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the first
incorporated village-improvement society in the United States, is suggestive. It
was originated by Miss Mary Hopkins, now Mrs. J.Z. Goodrich. Her untiring
efforts to rouse the people resulted in a public meeting where the subject was
discussed and a society was organized. As a result, the Stockbridge of to-day
stands out in marked contrast with the Stockbridge of my boyhood. The main
street, irregularly laid out and unevenly graded, with deep pools of standing
water, with few trees and fewer sidewalks, the ‘green’ without trees or any
semblance of ornament, loaded wagons making deep ruts almost to the church
door, the cemetery with a broken-down wooden fence and full of brambles and
weeds—these all appear in my recollections of Stockbridge as it was in 1853.
Today all streets are graded and lined with shade-trees.  

Northrop used this same narrative to convince his readers of the fruitfulness of
village improvement in his 1880 book *Rural Improvement*, also published as a widely
circulated pamphlet. His articles and coverage of his ideas appeared regularly in
newspapers all over the country, from Los Angeles to Washington D.C. and New York
City. In 1891, the *New York Tribune* reissued some articles Northrop had written for
them as a pamphlet for eight cents a copy, the *New Haven Register* reporting that “it
may be profitably read in every village in Pennsylvania.”

In his writing, Northrop quoted a passage from Horace Bushnell, the prolific
author and minister of Hartford, Connecticut:

For it is not in great cities nor in the confined shops of trade, but principally in
agriculture, that the best stock or staple of men is grown. It is in the open air—
in communion with the sky, the earth, and all living things—that the largest
inspiration is drunk in, and the vital energies of a real man constructed.
Northrop believed American cities would only thrive with associated strong rural communities. Both food and other resources were obvious necessities, but Northrop also felt strongly that country life nurtured mental health for the human race in ways that cities alone could not.\(^8\) Cities were dens of diversion, excitement, material pleasures, and only incited ambition for “genteel employments.” The urban lifestyle did not merit hard work and only encouraged greedy behavior, something over which Northrop despaired. In his mind was the troubling economic recession of the 1870s. Urban centers had “brought ruin to multitudes and financial disaster to the nation.” He felt that one of the worst tendencies of the times was disparaging the country for the city.\(^9\)

Further, people who lived in cities were disassociated from nature; urbanites had few and infrequent opportunities to witness God’s essential creations, what Bushnell had described as “the sky, the earth, and all living things.” Such disconnection encouraged citizens to feel unattached—to place, to each other, to one’s nation, and to God. Northrop insisted that love of home solidified love of country. “Patriotism itself hinges on the domestic sentiments,” he wrote. “When one’s home becomes the Eden of taste and interest and joy, those healthful local ties are formed which bind him first and most to the spot he has embellished, and then to his town, his State and country.” The opposite was also true, for without local attachment, no man could be genuinely patriotic.\(^10\)

To Northrop, patriotism aligned with a strong domestic sensibility nurtured in the country. He repeatedly offered the cliché, “the hope of America is the homes of America” in lectures and writing. Cherishing one’s homestead and town was noble and
ennobling. The greatest men in world history placed immense value on their home and rural settlement. “Whoever cares not for his native town nor that of his adoption, has no heart in his bosom…. Patriotism and philanthropy never thrive in the soil which produces no local attachments.”

To emphasize his point, Northrop cited the lives of American founding fathers in his writing. He asked, “Would Jefferson have attained his eminence and power, had he been early dandled in the lap of affluence in a city like Paris?” No, Northrop insisted. Jefferson and Washington were farmers. The roots of America’s birth were in the founding fathers’ well-tilled soil.

Northrop also believed that uniting townspeople around a common concern for improvement would obliterate “caste jealousies” and that feuds, which distracted rural communities from human progress would disappear. Further, political differences would matter less and communities would govern more cooperatively. He wrote, “One of the grandest results of these associations, as it should ever be, is the promotion of fraternal feeling.”

Additionally, improvement projects could help a town maintain or even increase their population. Working together on a common goal and for the improvement of common spaces in a town bred “public spirit, local pride, and local attachments.” Progressive, educated, and well-to do residents would refrain from migrating to urban centers and “make the city seek the country again.” Increased social and cultural amenities would retain young residents as well.
Finally, the village improvement movement could induce national unity. “Such a movement calls universal attention to individual defects, and inspires a common pride. Beyond this, it develops a catholic, public spirit.” All could unite through these efforts, “spreading from village to village until it becomes national, men can forget they are partisans, either in politics or religion, and come together, as neighbors and friends to work alike for themselves and one another.”\(^{15}\)

Northrop’s writings were effective. He gained notoriety as an authority on village improvement, and his many fans in writing then reiterated this. In 1897, just before his death, Mary Caroline Robbins wrote a lengthy article for the *Atlantic Monthly* on “Village Improvement Societies.” Stockbridge and the Laurel Hill Association were discussed using similar details to Northrop’s narrative about the town. “This society transformed Stockbridge from a rough, shabby village, with a muddy main road full of ruts, a bare common, and a dreary cemetery all brambles and weeds, into the handsome orderly town now admired by visitors for its well-shaded streets, its smooth well-kept walks, and the important public buildings which adorn it.” She also admitted that she was personally “indebted to one of the apostles of the movement, Mr. B.G. Northrop, whose suggestions and writings have been very valuable.”\(^{16}\)

Northrop was generally regarded in the 1880s and 1890s as having the most influence over beautifying America’s towns and villages. Called the “father of village improvement” in several obituaries and biographical entries published after his death in 1898, Northrop was popularly known as “the founder of the organized movement for Village Improvement Societies.” In addition to writing, Northrop lectured and gave
presentations at conferences all over the country, adapting village improvement to varying agendas. Often his talks were covered in local newspapers around the country long after his appearance. For example, the *New Haven Register* covered his lecture, “The Influence of Village Improvement Societies in Securing and Improving Public Grounds” given at the Horticultural Congress in Chicago in 1892 a full year after his appearance.17

Northrop’s 1869 article in *Hearth and Home* was the first to both describe and promote village improvement societies modeled on the LHA, but his role in the development of the movement went far beyond this article or his pamphlets and books on rural improvement. Northrop personally canvassed these ideas by visiting small towns across the country. He is credited with starting virtually all the village improvement societies in Connecticut (50+ by 1878) and hundreds of others across the country. A trail of newspaper coverage announces his lectures and ideas on rural improvement in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Illinois, New Jersey, Idaho, Vermont, Maine, West Virginia, California, Kansas, Ohio, Wyoming, and Wisconsin. Other sources report that there were dozens of societies in California by the late 1890s, the first having started through his lectures in the southern part of the state. He reportedly promoted village improvement in forty states across the country during the late 1870s and 1880s (when there were only 42 states). “Village improvement will ever be associated in this land with the name of Hon. B.G. Northrop” writes a journalist in the *New Haven Evening Register* in 1891. The Laurel Hill Association, “the pioneer society of Stockbridge, Massachusetts which long ago made that town famous” was also widely recognized as “Dr. Northrop’s model.”18
Northrop’s approach was to travel to communities, give a free lecture on rural improvement, and then organize a society on the spot. He gave stirring and convincing speeches. “When he arrived at a place to lecture in the evening, before evening came he had ridden all about the town and noted with keen observation what the town lacked; and in his lecture he would point out to his audience these faults in their town, and tell them how things could be avoided and remedied.” Northrop offered a general format for a constitution modeled on the Laurel Hill Association’s document. He helped attendees gather subscriptions and pledges of membership. They elected officers and established a set of goals for the coming year.

Often, organizations felt indebted to Northrop and wrote him letters of thanks or invited him to come back and be an honored speaker at their anniversary day celebration. The president of the Holden, Massachusetts society writes:

Since you organized a Village Improvement Society for us in November, 1889, the good work has gone right forward, and we have expended, in the construction of concrete and gravel walks, setting out trees and other improvements, about $8000. The change in the appearance of our village is so great that former citizens returning to the old town express their surprise and pleasure. The intellectual wants of the community are supplied in part by a course of lectures each winter, winding up with a Village Improvement Society banquet.

Northrop’s obituaries emphasize his use of the Laurel Hill Association and Stockbridge as a pinnacle organization and ideal town. Despite this, over the years following his article in *Hearth and Home*, Northrop refined and broadened his ideas about rural improvement into a more comprehensive and socially democratic agenda. In the Stockbridge society he saw what was possible, that if townspeople united in a common effort to address the quality of both their private and public spaces, their community would prosper—culturally, intellectually, socially, financially, and
physically. Perhaps because the LHA and Stockbridge were popular and widely referenced, he continued to use the Laurel Hill Association as a model example of a village improvement society in his speeches. (And returned to Stockbridge twice in the 1870s to speak at Laurel Hill Anniversary Day.) However, by and large Northrop pushed for an agenda that went far beyond what the LHA undertook.

Some of these differences occurred simply because improvement needs varied from region to region and Northrop argued for ‘site-specific’ improvement association work. Hygiene, for example, only of marginal importance to the LHA, was one of Northrop’s central goals in the organizations he founded in West Virginia. But other differences were related to his beliefs about public education and democratic distribution of taste and art to all the citizens of a town, including the working class. He explained in a speech at the anniversary meeting of the West Ewing Improvement Association in New Jersey that he preferred the term “rural improvement” to “village improvement”: “I discard the word ‘village,’ for in towns where I am working, I want to carry out the idea that this business concerns everybody in the township and we cannot bring about the best results unless we benefit all sections and all classes…."

Writing in Indoors and Outdoors, the monthly publication of the National Association for Rural and Sanitary Improvement, Northrop argued the “pressing” need to promote improvement work in the South in particular to help “industrial lasses, both white and black.” The Laurel Hill Association did not take on the improvement of the entire Stockbridge township; their focus was on the village. The nearby villages of Glendale and Interlaken, where most of the working class lived and worked in mills and factories, never benefitted from the LHA during the nineteenth century.22
In terms of social reform, Northrop was confident that improvement, so tied to education, was a route to the successful development of rural black communities. In the late 1880s, a young black Texas legislator named Robert Lloyd Smith became acquainted with Northrop’s successful work in Litchfield, Connecticut and started the first known African American village improvement society in the country in the small all-black community of Oakland, also known as Freedmanstown, just outside San Antonio, Texas. Although the group started out with beautification, within ten years, they had larger social and economic reform goals aimed at combating poverty among black farmers. Under Smith’s guidance, this society became a regional organization re-named the Farmers’ Home Improvement Society (FHIS). By 1898, the group claimed 1,800; in 1909 its members were over 21,000 and spread over Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. They fought share-cropping, build schools to increase literacy, developed credit systems to help families own homes and farms, offered sickness and health benefits, and promoted crop diversification and improved farming methods. The group gradually declined in the 1920s, but in the first decades of the twentieth century, the FHIS was more responsible for elevating the status of African Americans in Texas than any other organization.23

Northrop also repeatedly pushed for women’s leadership in these societies, both in founding and in running them. He used the example of Mary Hopkins Goodrich’s spirited commitment in starting the Laurel Hill Association in many of his writings and speeches, although he omitted clarifying that men formed the leadership of the Stockbridge society. Northrop believed passionately in women’s education, particularly at the college level (he was on the Smith College’s first Board of Trustees). Village
improvement was a way for women to participate in education; they could develop their refined taste for cultivated nature and civic order, and at the same time employ their domestic prowess to promote it in the public realm.

Constitution and By-Laws

OF THE

Farmers' Improvement Society

PREAMBLE.

Believing that the people can be greatly benefitted, their condition improved and their standing elevated by closer attention to their business interests and the elevation of their home life, we have associated ourselves together for the furtherance of these objects in the manner hereinafter described, and do hereby publish the following as our DECLARATION OF PURPOSES

TO ENCOURAGE OUR MEMBERS:

1. To abolish the credit system completely, or as much as lies in our power. This object can be best accomplished by raising, as far as possible, all our supplies at home, and by purchasing what cannot be so raised for cash.

2. To discuss topics of interest to farmers, and thereby create, encourage and foster an intelligent and lively interest in improved methods of farming; to practice economy; to obtain such information as shall lead us to improve and diversify our crops. The better to accomplish this purpose, each local organization may offer prizes of money or other valuable considerations for the best improved field or garden crop, dairy products or live stock.

Northrop was equally passionate about forestry and was considered by many upon his death not only the “father of village improvement,” but also a founder of Arbor Day. In 1876, he “issued a circular upon centennial tree planting” offering “a prize of $200, to be awarded in $1 bills, to any teacher or pupil in the Connecticut schools” who planted or oversaw the planting of five trees during the late spring that year. The circular received national attention, covered as far as Chicago in the newspaper *The Inter Ocean*. In 1877, while Secretary of the Connecticut Board of Education, he was sent by that state to Germany and other European countries to study forestry and industrial schools there. Connecticut, deforested in the 18th century, wished to reclaim what they perceived to be their “waste lands” with extensive tree propagation. This was an agenda for tree planting that went far beyond street and yard ornamentation. After he retired from the State Board of Education in January 1883, he devoted his retirement years to lobbying for forestry programs and village improvement. In the early 1890s, he became involved in the American Forestry Society and chaired their Arbor Day Committee, whose sole purpose was to lobby for a national day of tree planting by schoolchildren.  

**Sanitation: George E. Waring, Isabella Beecher Hooker, and Harriette M. Plunkett**

Closely linked to the goals for social order were increasing standards for sanitation in rural communities; moral and physical health were ensured equally through improvements in hygiene. The century’s most famous sanitary engineer Col. George E. Waring, nationally known feminist Isabella Beecher Hooker, and author and
domestic cleanliness advocate Harriette M. Plunkett each actively promoted sanitation through rural improvement work.

**George E. Waring**

![George E. Waring, Jr.](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_E_Waring_Jr.jpg)

**Figure 24: Col. George E. Waring, Jr.**

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_E_Waring_Jr.jpg
In the early 1850s George E. Waring was working as a manager on Horace Greeley’s and Frederick Law Olmsted’s farms on Staten Island, two men who were intimately involved in the public discussion then raging about the need for a public park in New York. Reformers argued that the health, both moral and physical, of New Yorkers depended on the development of Central Park. By 1857, Waring was working for Olmsted as a drainage engineer on all of the agricultural areas of the park. After the Civil War, he worked on the Ogden farm near Newport, Rhode Island for another wealthy and influential family. During the 1870s, he began building town sewer systems in upstate New York, Newport, Rhode Island, and the Berkshires. During 1875-1876, he worked on a two-pipe sewer system for Lenox, Massachusetts, about 7 miles from Stockbridge. Soon, he was consulting with wealthy families on their summer home estates in Newport, RI and the Berkshires. By the mid-1880s, Waring was considered an international authority on sanitation. Between 1895-1898, he held the highly important position of Commissioner of Street Cleaning for New York City, revolutionizing the removal of waste from that city.25

Waring wrote, consulted, and lectured widely on sanitation in rural places during the 1870s and 80s, often crossing paths with Northrop and other leaders in the movement. Waring, like the others, cited and promoted the Laurel Hill Association and Stockbridge’s unparalleled level of progress.

For *Scribner’s Monthly* during the mid-1870s, he wrote a pair of articles on village improvement, the second more focused on sanitary work. These articles received great interest among readers. The magazine “received letters from every part of the country wishing for information [on village improvement societies]—the latest
from the interior of Texas….What the beginners want—literally by the thousands—is to
know just how to do it.”26 Waring republished his pieces from *Scribner’s Monthly* with
two additional essays on farm communities as a book in 1877 under the title *Village
Improvements and Farm Villages*. Within both the magazine and book editions, Waring
includes a copy of a constitution for a village improvement society, “suggested by the
regulations governing the Laurel Hill Association of Stockbridge.”27 It was verbatim
reprinting of the LHA’s constitution.

With a background in scientific farming and engineering, Waring offered
readers highly practical improvement advice. His was a how-to manual; his main
theoretical arguments were framed around general public health via improved
sanitation. His book was popularly received and reviewed in several periodicals
including *The Literary World*, the *North American Review*, *The Century*, and
*Appleton’s Journal*. Illness and epidemics had been linked to poor sanitation; anxiety
mounted among the public. Waring’s book detailed, with clearly drawn diagrams and
illustrations, how to install sidewalks, roadways, public sewers, and home sanitation
systems. He cautioned readers against park ornamentation without building extensive
fundamental infrastructure to guarantee a landscape’s success.28 He devoted whole
sections of the book to the physical layout of farming villages, with specific instructions
on how to organize a town within the standard government six-square-mile township.
His discussion of trees was minimal; he gave one paragraph of his 200-page book to the
subject. His only advice was to plant elm trees along roads, for there was “no tree that
can compare in dignity and grace.”29
Waring’s approach to village improvement was clearest in his published lectures. He made compelling arguments about the need for sanitary reform in small towns and rural areas, repeatedly emphasizing that the “few dollars” it would cost to install proper earth closets and drainage systems would insure family health. Science had demonstrated that “damp sites, and particularly damp cellars aggravate and to a large extent produce consumption and malarial disorders.” Further, he insinuated irresponsibility on the part of heads of families should they not install drainage systems. Such arguments to an already concerned public convinced many towns that they needed a sanitary engineer’s expertise, and often they hired him for the job.\(^{30}\)

Waring echoed the urge to secure American home life in the country and spun his own cultural ideas from this conviction in ways that were similar but not identical to Northrop’s, and before him, some of Downing’s beliefs. “What it is especially desirable that a village should appear to be is, a wholesome, cleanly, tidy, simple, modest collection of country homes with all its parts and appliances adapted to the pleasantest and most satisfactory living of its people.”\(^{31}\) For Waring, as with Downing, ornament without reason or utility did not reflect true beauty. Expensively decorated houses, adorned fences, paved roadways or the mathematical grading of estates were not where beauty and taste resided. Rather, country life offered “coziness, neatness, simplicity, and that general air of springing from all these, and from the real love of home.”\(^{32}\)

**Isabella Beecher Hooker and Harriette M. Plunkett**

Inspired by Catherine Beecher’s theories on women’s innate predisposition for domestic economy in her bestselling *Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the Use of*
Young Ladies at Home and at School (1841) and Florence Nightingale’s success saving lives by introducing basic hygiene to British army hospitals during the Crimean War (1854-56), American women began to claim sanitation as part of their unique feminine responsibility within home, and by extension, society. Beecher saw women’s role in society as strictly within the titles mother, housewife, and teacher; to her their influence in these narrow fields was broad. “She increasingly emphasized their sphere of influence, convincing them of the importance of domestic work to families and the nation.” Florence Nightingale had argued without equivocation that “the woman is superior in skill to the man in all points of sanitary domestic economy, and more particularly in cleanliness and tidiness.” Both women maintained that women’s reign over cleanliness was natural. Sanitarians and Boards of Health gained feminist reformers as their allies in adopting new standards of hygiene; plumbing became the terrain of savvy and competent housekeepers.33

Isabella Beecher Hooker, Catherine’s younger half-sister, began studying sanitation in the 1880s, lecturing on it nationally. One of her speeches, “Women’s Work in Sanitation” argued that women needed to educate themselves on the plumbing within their domiciles as a way of combating the general ignorance that gave wives and mothers so little control over the quality of their lives. To Hooker, a suffragist, learning about the infrastructure of the home was related to her larger mission to gain for women more competence and expertise in areas traditionally under the direction of men. Learning about sanitation was one way for women to shift the boundaries of women’s roles in a family unit and thus in society. Hooker saw women’s liberation in the breakdown of gender roles. Speaking to a predominantly male audience at a meeting of
the Secretary of the Connecticut Board of Agriculture she argued, “You ought to divide up the work better. You take the healthiest part of the work. It is really easier to turn up the soil than to wash and iron. You ought to change works. It is not fair for women to be kept in the house all the time, doing the hardest and most disagreeable kinds of work.” Women were “feeble” because socially it was expected that they stay inside. Fresh-air was a “family birthright.”

Hooker’s involvement in rural improvement was directly an outgrowth of her feminism as informed by deep misgivings she felt for the limited lifestyle of a wife and mother in her time. While her half-sister Catherine Beecher (unmarried and not a mother) gave guidance to thousands and thousands of American women about how to be domestic empresses coloring a romantic view of maternal duties, Hooker fought to dismantle those expectations. Hooker imagined and argued in her writings for a democratic society that publicly valued the unique knowledge and competencies gained from working in the home. Women learned to adjudicate at home, settling disputes among their children, and so had experience useful to the judicial system. She felt that women were adept at legislation because they spent so much time at home persuading and urging projects towards completion. Women needed the vote; domestic inequality was a indispensable prop for women’s disenfranchisement. “When the women have votes,” she said, “there will not be so much distinctively women’s work. It is only the political slave whose work is despised.”

Harriette Merrick (H.M.) Plunkett also vocally went against the grain of expectations associated with nineteenth century American women’s roles, however there is no record of Plunkett’s direct involvement with the suffrage movement. While
Isabella Beecher Hooker spoke predominantly about domestic sanitation and the reformation of women’s and men’s roles at home, Plunkett actively promoted women’s involvement in municipal sanitation as well as competence on the domestic front.

A native of Pittsfield, Massachusetts in the Berkshires, Plunkett knew the success of Stockbridge’s Laurel Hill Association and employed an exaggerated story of Mary Hopkins’ legendary leadership of the society to convince her readers and audience that women should be directly involved in public sanitation. At the 1882 meeting of the National Association for Rural and Sanitary Improvement, she submitted a paper that argued that women had already influenced “village adornment” work in Hopkins’ example and that Stockbridge’s appeal to foreign visitors was due to its women having applied their hand to the townscape. Whereas women accomplished “the spirit of beauty,” men would have applied “strict rules of geometry,” and produced a place of unremarkable quality.35

But, like Hooker, Plunkett believed women needed to understand the theory and installation of plumbing. Plunkett published a book *Women, Plumbers, and Doctors, or Household Sanitation* (1884) urging women to converse with plumbers and learn all they could about their household systems as a way of combating illness. In her words, “to the woman, whose destiny is to remain a large share of the time at home, whose divinely appointed mission is ‘to guide the house,’ a new sphere of usefulness and efficiency opens with the knowledge that in sanitary matters an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure.”36
Figure 25: Harriet M. Plunkett's diagram for a house properly plumbed. From Plunkett, H.M. *Women, Plumbers and Doctors; or, Household Sanitation.* (New York, D. Appleton and Co., 1885) 112.
Plunkett’s book gave women direction on diet, water cleanliness, house siting, organization of rooms and the materials within them, lighting, heating, ventilation and sewerage. She also devoted a whole chapter to “Sewer-Gas and Germs” building, over a series of sections, toward an argument for women’s involvement in public sanitation. “Who is our Neighbor?” she asked, “Sanitarily considered, he is the man who lives next to us…but he is also the man whose premises the breeze can sweep, and bear its particles to our lungs and blood, at whatever distance, or whichever point of the campus he abides….we have the direct interest of his house and grounds.” Sanitation, Plunkett, maintained, made everyone equally responsible for individual, family, and social health. Public sanitation, she concluded, extended naturally from a woman’s role caring for her family. “When all has been done that is possible to render the building healthy, it may be neutralized by filthy streets.”

**Villages & Village Life: Nathaniel Hillyer Egleston & Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.**

Although of very different training and perspective, Nathaniel Hillyer Egleston and Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. shared a third area of reform theory associated with village improvement: the perceived benefits of country life as a unique source of national culture. Both men were sympathetic to the ideas of their transcendentalist predecessors and had known and admired the work of Andrew Jackson Downing. From this perspective, Egleston and Olmsted looked at the village as a cultural landscape that should be highly appreciated, if not preserved. It was within this strain of the dialogue about rural improvement work that the village began to be framed as a separate space that could be removed from the forces at work in cities and industrializing areas. This ultimately distanced what was happening in cities and the development of the American
small town space. No longer tied to the phenomenon of modern urbanization progress, village improvement as a rural reform movement began to lose momentum.

**Nathaniel Hillyer Egleston**

Two years after Birdsey Grant Northrop’s 1869 article, Nathaniel Hillyer Egleston published “A New England Village” in *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*. This article, like Northrop’s, was specifically about Stockbridge’s improvement at the hands of the Laurel Hill Association. Eggleston described the general work of the LHA: “its object the beautifying of the town by causing art and taste to lend a helping hand to nature.” He described the well-maintained sidewalks, the shade trees, the tidiness of public spaces, and the group’s successful encouragement of “a spirit of taste” among townspeople. Egleston gave over the better part of a paragraph to the glories of the group’s Anniversary Days, detailing how these successful community functions run and how they might be duplicated elsewhere.

The secretary of the Association reads the record of its doings for the past year. The election of officers then takes place. An oration, and usually a poem, are then recited to the listening auditors. Afterward impromptu speeches are made by one another, and the good work is thus encouraged for another year. It is the great day of the year in this New England village.  

Egleston, unlike Northrop, spoke from intimate knowledge of both the Laurel Hill Association and Stockbridge; he was the minister of the Congregational Church in the village between 1860 and 1869, and a Vice President of the LHA for much of that time. In fact, he undoubtedly met Northrop when the latter appeared as a guest speaker at the 1868 Laurel Hill Anniversary Day festival. As Vice President, Egleston served on some powerful committees, including the one that named the streets. Life in Stockbridge made strong impressions on him about the value of improved country life.
Despite having lived in New Haven and Hartford, Connecticut, and worked in parishes in Brooklyn, New York, and Madison, Wisconsin, Egleston only ever wrote about Stockbridge.39

Egleston’s article was specific to life in Stockbridge; he referenced the settlement again in his highly influential 1878 book *Village and Village Life*. The book was well received and sold all its copies, many to libraries across the country. It was re-issued as a new and revised edition in 1884 under the title *The Home and Its Surroundings, or Villages and Village Life with Hints for Their Improvement*. Although the book’s purpose was to motivate citizenry to preserve country life, the acclaimed merits of the book were in its practical suggestions for beautification through organized community groups. A review of Egleston’s book in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* soon after the initial printing in 1878, remarks “The most interesting chapters of the book to our mind are those which treat of Village Improvement Societies, the Laurel Hill Association, Trees, and Tree-Planting, Fences and Hedges, and the Sanitary Aspects of Country Life.” Stockbridge is at the center of the journalist’s review. The author quotes Egleston:

> And so the process of constructing walks, improving roads, planting trees and hedges and stimulating the people generally to more tasteful care of their premises, has gone forward. Little by little, and in many nameless ways, the houses and barns, the door-yards and farms, have come to wear a look of neatness and intelligent care that makes the Stockbridge of to-day quite a different place from the Stockbridge of twenty, or even of ten, years ago.40

At the heart of Egleston’s agenda for the preservation of country life was an unshakeable faith in the improved village scene and the specific benefits of the Laurel Hill Association’s work. Unlike Northrop, Egleston’s rationale for improvement was more distinctly Downian; landscape aesthetics were the central ingredient and purpose.
Egleston admired and advocated sweeping lawns uninterrupted by fences, well-planted trees, and yard tidiness.\textsuperscript{41}

In his essays, Downing had highlighted on more than one occasion Stockbridge’s exemplary beauty among New England towns. When Egleston arrived in Stockbridge in 1860, the LHA had already planted over 500 trees and planted hedges using Downing’s \textit{Essays} as their guide. Egleston endorsed the LHA’s Downing approach in Stockbridge and sought to further the famous landscape gardener’s agenda. Egleston dedicated \textit{Villages and Village Life} “to the memory of the late Andrew Jackson Downing, whose writings have done so much for the improvement of our country life, and to inspire our people with a taste for rural improvements.”\textsuperscript{42}
CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAUREL HILL ASSOCIATION.

"Woodman, spare that tree!"—G. P. Morris.

A brief sketch of a single successful organization for the purpose of village improvement may make the subject more clear, and prove a better incitement to action in the right direction than much more that might be said in another and more general form. Most people are more ready to work from a pattern than to originate for themselves, even when the work to be done is simple. We give a few pages, therefore, to a sketch of the Laurel Hill Association of Stockbridge, Mass., which has become somewhat widely known, and has served as the model of several like associations. And if any one would see at a glance what steady and persistent work can do, though neither large numbers nor large capital is engaged in it, let him visit the hills of Berkshire, and, after looking down upon its most beautiful village, and passing along its clean and shaded streets, let him ask some of its inhabitants to describe to him the place as it was a score of years ago.

The Laurel Hill Association had a very simple and modest beginning, showing in this that such organiza-
Egleston’s ideas about country homes recall Downing’s writings on the subject. Egleston wished to see simple, comfortable, dignified and tasteful homes; showiness was as abhorred as shabbiness. However, he did go a bit farther than Downing and echoed some of Northrop’s ideas. “In village life let show and parade be discouraged, and let the endeavor be, on the basis of industry, frugality, and simplicity, to carry the general culture in intelligence, taste, morals, and virtue as high as possible.” Hard work, conscientious use of money for needed things, and an uncomplicated home life guaranteed both a cultured and ethical life. Further, Egleston argued that village homes were more genuine than city dwellings; unpretentious, within them one found “the home of mind and heart—everything plain and simple” and of “solid character.” Egleston believed such homes were “precious” to the nation. Through banding together on improvement projects, “village households would become, so to speak, members of a larger family—the village family—and a common interest and common feeling would characterize the place and regulate the style and tone of life, while yet leaving the freest play for individual tastes and feelings.”

Egleston gave lectures on village improvement in towns to help start societies, but soon after the first printing of his book he began to lobby more exclusively for forest conservation. Coverage of his whereabouts and projects after 1881 discuss his work in the Forestry Congress or as Chief of the Bureau of Forestry, the first governmental organization to propose national arbor conservation policy. He and Northrop worked together during the 1880s on these matters, presenting papers together at meetings and serving on the American Forestry Society’s Arbor Day Committee.
Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.

Frederick Law Olmsted did not write any major public treatises on village improvement. When asked by some citizens of Summit, New Jersey for guidance on village improvement, he suggested the use of books by colleagues and acquaintances: George E. Waring, author of the 1877 *Village Improvements and Farm Villages*; Donald E. Mitchell (discussed in Chapter 2 and author of the 1867 *Rural Studies with Hints for Country Places* and publisher of *Hearth and Home* magazine in which Northrop published his article on Stockbridge); and Nathaniel Egleston (author of the 1878/1884 *The Home and Its Surroundings, or Villages and Village Life with Hints for Their Improvement*).⁴⁶

Less concerned with the future of the remote village, Olmsted’s perspective was that of an urban parks advocate and environmental planner. While he arguably harbored a pastoral cities view when it came to greenery in the metropolis, he did not theorize about the development of American rural space in the same way as his improvement-advocate colleagues. Olmsted’s work on suburbs, while considered rural development in the eyes of people like Northrop and Waring, was not necessarily rural improvement to the landscape architect, who viewed the suburb as a domestic respite landscape for the urbanite. When given the opportunity to speak at length about organized village improvement, Olmsted’s writing became at once an advertisement for his profession’s expertise and a sentimental essay about not tampering with the “charming” New England village landscape. In this way, Olmsted began to express a more purely pastoral view of the American rural settlement, a perspective that eventually overtook the urban pastoralist view of earlier decades.⁴⁷
Olmsted bemoaned the ill qualified doing the work he believed belonged to his new profession. He spent much of his career trying to educate the powerful about the benefits of parks and environmental planning, and much of his writing about villages echoes these concerns. The more his audience knew about the complexity of designing parks and landscape infrastructure, from tree planting to the integration of sanitary systems and other modernizations, the more they would appreciate the hand of the expert. Thus, volunteer organizations should not be planning and implementing landscape and municipal works in their villages. As a Vice-President of the National Association for Sanitary and Rural Improvement (NASRI), he delivered a paper at their 1882 meeting “Trees in Streets and Parks” in which he argued that “Few who have not traveled with their attention specially given to the point can be aware how rarely trees are suitably selected, suitably placed, protected and cared for in our streets. There are not many towns that present a single example of a well-planted street, even of a well planted tree.” Olmsted maintained that parks were not scientific, but they required a professional’s involvement because they were as much a part of a settlement’s “sanitary apparatus” as aqueducts and sewers.48

In a lengthy unpublished letter/report to the president of the Summit, New Jersey Village Improvement Society from 1882, around the same time as the NASRI meeting, the landscape architect asked, “What then can village improvement be in distinction from the townward degradation of a village?” To improve a village by paving its roads, adding telegraphs, libraries, newspaper delivery, and ornamenting the common and burying ground would make a village “not a whit [more] charming, home like or neighborly.” In fact, the village will disappear. “You will not even have a sub-
urb, you will have only a small town. Add to and mix up with it all the contents of the finest garden and the largest conservatory in the world and you will only have got further & further away from the charming idea of a village.”

Some of Olmsted’s concern reflected his general frustration at the allure of ornamental planting, the obsession of gardeners rather than visionary park designers. The nineteenth century saw a revolution in horticulture, the use of botanic diversity in gardening, and specimen plantings. All of this put emphasis on the decorative use of plants; shrubs were objects of fancy, expense, and worldliness. Olmsted did not support the use of fashionable plantings, which he viewed as interruptive to the presentation of coherent scenery, and expressly at odds with the sanitary and restorative effect of a landscape scene upon the weary urbanite’s mind.

But it was through Olmsted’s discussion of the ornate hybrid flower versus the common wildflower that he expounded on the unique and admirable qualities of the cultural landscape of old villages he believed under threat when subject to improvement, particularly New England settlements that had become popular resort towns for the affluent. Fashion and wealth finding their way to villages educated even the local villagers to “look for the gratification of taste, to find beauty, and to respect art, in forms not of the simple and natural class; in forms not to be used by the mass domestically, but only as a holiday and costly luxury, and with deference to men standing as a class apart from the mass.” This was a travesty to Olmsted. In his eyes, village habits were a source of happiness and “national wealth” that should not be obscured by new tastes.
Conclusion

With the exception of Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., the environmental reformers discussed in this chapter were united under village improvement; to them it was an umbrella for a variety of concerns all having to do with the development of rural settlements in the United States as coincidental with urbanization and modernization. Their national discussion between the 1870s and mid 1880s brought the residential village ideal based in a pastoral cities paradigm to a countrywide audience. Yet by the 1890s, the movement began to lose momentum as reformers decamped into causes with narrower and more focused agendas and discussion about rural places began to figure the village as a precious space, separate from urban development, a middle landscape situated within a more purely pastoral rather than urban pastoral paradigm. Northrop was more and more a lone voice. George E. Waring assumed authority over sanitary engineering, honored with the post of New York Street-Cleaning Commissioner in 1894 under the newly elected Mayor William L. Strong. Isabella Beecher Hooker became more involved in the growing women’s leadership organizations devoted to suffrage and human rights, working to unite the American Women Suffrage Association and the National Women Suffrage Association, and drafting bills for the Connecticut legislature that attempted to push through several means of giving women the vote on issues pertaining to their livelihoods. Harriette M. Plunkett published only one more article, a 1901 piece entitled “The Evolution of Beautiful Stockbridge,” which re-framed the work of the LHA in the newer language of “municipal housekeeping,” titling Mary Hopkins Goodrich the earliest “public housekeeper.” Nathaniel Hillyer Egleston took up the cause of forest conservation, serving as Chief of the Bureau of Forestry between
1883-1886 and active member until 1898. Olmsted’s thoughts on the unique charm of village spaces was echoed by a new generation of reformers filling the void as these other leaders in rural reform retreated. Subsequently, the 1890s saw discussion redirected about rural settlements, characterizing them according to a pastoral paradigm where country villages operated separately and out of step with modernity and urbanism.²⁵²
Notes


2 The only known complete set of *Indoors and Outdoors* resides in the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland. For information on the organization, see copies of the magazine as well as articles that appeared in the *New York Times*, July 8, 1882, p. 3 and July 11, 1882, p. 8 that discuss the initial and only conference of the group. The proceedings from the assembly are reported in *The Sanitarian* (August 1882). For numbers on publication and names of officers see *Indoors and Outdoors* (January 1884).

3 B.G. Northrop graduated from Yale in 1841 and was ordained in the Congregational Church in 1847. From 1847-1857, he worked as Pastor of the Congregational Church in Saxonville, MA, a small village on the northern end of Framingham, MA. Between 1857-1866, Northrop was Agent of the Massachusetts Board of Education and in 1867 became Secretary of the Connecticut Board of Education. Williams College presented him with an honorary doctoral degree in 1872 and he died in 1898. These details of Northrop’s life are from two sources: “A Public Benefactor,” *Christian Advocate*, May 12, 1898. William Barry, *History of Framingham, Massachusetts* (James Munroe and Company: Boston, 1847), 131. Announcements and articles in *Pittsfield Sun* note Northrop’s presence in the Berkshires, particularly at educational events. See *Pittsfield Sun*, July 31, 1856; *Pittsfield Sun*, September 24, 1857; *Pittsfield Sun*, October 22, 1857; *Pittsfield Sun*, November 15, 1866; and *Pittsfield Sun*, August 13, 1868.


6 *New Haven Evening Register*, “Village Improvement,” May 15, 1891.


13 *New Haven Register*, July 12, 1880 and *New Haven Evening Register*, March 2, 1896.


22 *Wheeling Register*, “As Others See Us—A High Compliment to West Virginia’s Improvement,” July 4, 1883. *The West Ewing Improvement Association* (Trenton, NJ: MacCrellish and Quigley Steam Power Printers, 1880), 8. This is the “Proceedings of Anniversary Meeting, held in Ewing Church, Sept. 2d 1880, and other valuable matter.” B.G. Northrop and George Waring were the keynote speakers at this meeting. Birdseye Grant Northrop, “Rural Improvement,” *Indoors and Outdoors* (August 1883): 9-10.


30 *The West Ewing Improvement Association* (Trenton, NJ: MacCrellish and Quigley Steam Power Printers, 1880), 80. This is the “Proceedings of Anniversary Meeting, held in Ewing Church, September 2, 1880, and other valuable matter.” B.G. Northrop and George Waring were the keynote speakers at this meeting.


the country. The review discussed is from Chicago Daily Tribune, “Villages and
Village Life,” September 21, 1878.

41 Robert M. Fogelson discusses Egleston’s importance in the development of
American taste for lawns uninterrupted by fences and the suburban landscape aesthetic.
Robert M. Fogelson, Bourgeois Nightmares (New Haven: Yale University Press,
2007), 165-166.

42 Nathaniel Hillyer Egleston, Villages and Village Life with Hints for Their
Improvement (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1878), dedication page. The
LHA’s use of Downing’s writings for guidance in their early projects will be discussed
in Chapter 4.

43 Nathaniel Hillyer Egleston, Villages and Village Life with Hints for Their

44 Nathaniel Hillyer Egleston, Villages and Village Life with Hints for Their


46 LC 24:730, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of
Congress, Washington, D.C.

47 There is one published piece on village improvement that Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.
submitted as a posthumous leaflet, but it is unclear how much was written by the Sr.
Olmsted. Frederick Law Olmsted, “Village Improvement,” Massachusetts Civic
League Leaflets 5 (1905).

48 Frederick Law Olmsted, “Trees in Streets,” Indoors and Outdoors (November 1883):
8.

49 LC 24:663, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of
Congress, Washington, D.C.

50 Charles E. Beveridge and Paul Rocheleau, Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the

51 Frederick Law Olmsted, “Trees in Streets and Parks,” The Sanitarian (September
1882): 519.

52 Barbara Anne White, The Beecher Sisters (New Haven: Yale University Press,
CHAPTER 4

VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT PRACTICE IN STOCKBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS - FROM PLANNING TO PRESERVATION

The founding and activities of the Laurel Hill Association in Stockbridge, Massachusetts between the 1850s-1880s describe the local practice of the nation’s earliest longest running village improvement society. Although a local story, this narrative was aligned with the arc of the national movement discussion during the same period. Initially, the LHA operated within a pastoral cities paradigm, functioning as planning board, private company, and municipal works program. The Association’s unified ambitions and philosophical foundation, leadership structure, management, scope of municipal projects, operations through public/private cooperative practice all contributed to the group's successful reshaping of Stockbridge’s village scene from farming crossroads to idyllic country village. Simultaneously, the organization hosted formal cultural events through which they could promote a new resort-town identity for Stockbridge welcome to nineteenth century travelers. These events further helped solidify the group’s association with Stockbridge and legacy as the first and most successful village improvement society in the country. Throughout this period, the LHA’s practice echoed the theory developing on a national level that situated village improvement within an urban pastoral paradigm.

By the middle 1880s, however, Stockbridge’s scenic beauty had nurtured a visitor-based economy increasingly tied to wealthy summer residents. LHA members, as the authors of the town’s improvements, subsequently become its guardians, re-figuring the ambitions of village improvement practice under a more purely pastoral
worldview. When pressed to decide between economic development that would harm Stockbridge’s improved scene (and draw visitors away from the village) and promoting activity that would make the village more appealing to summer sojourners, the group overwhelmingly supported aesthetics over commerce. While on the national level, professions began to solidify, and reformers more and more saw the village as separate and precious, the Laurel Hill Association also increasingly approached Stockbridge’s landscape as a pre-industrial space needing protection from modernity. Local village improvement practice reflected a national trend that saw residential village life through a nostalgic haze.

Thus we see the founding of the Laurel Hill Association, the organization’s general structure and activities during its first three decades, and the shift in the LHA’s local practice from planning to preservation. This narrative echoes the arc of the national discussion about rural improvement, initially promoting the development of village spaces according to an ‘urban pastoralist’ worldview that saw the country settlement as past-oriented, but implementing modern technologies and contemporary ideas about planning, sanitation, horticulture, and cultural taste and then moving toward a view of the small town as a pastoral edenic retreat, a place that needed protection from modernity and the tempo of progress in urbanizing and industrializing areas. The Laurel Hill Association began as a planning agency, but by the 1880s, functioned more and more as a preservation league.
The Founding of the Laurel Hill Association

There are two slightly different versions of the publicly communicated and institutionalized story that describe the founding of the Laurel Hill Association, both placing credit with a native resident of Stockbridge, Miss Mary Gross Hopkins.

Mary Hopkins was the granddaughter of Electra Sergeant, the first child of Anglo-Saxon descent born in Stockbridge. She was the great-granddaughter of the missionary John Sergeant, considered the founder of Stockbridge, who came to the area in 1734 to convert natives to Christianity, and began the settlement that would become the town of Stockbridge. The more popular story, and the one that appears in the book about the Laurel Hill Association, written by a Stockbridge resident and published on the 100th anniversary of its founding, follows.

Mary Hopkins was visiting her grandmother’s and great-grandfather’s graves on a late summer day in 1853. Although it was a lovely New England day, she was struck by the unkempt state of Stockbridge, which she apparently saw with fresh eyes that particular day. The cemetery fence was so degraded that cows from the neighboring farms roamed freely, knocking down tombstones and eating grass upon the graves. Mary felt the cemetery was an affront to the living and to the dead. The miserable place needed a new fence, trees planted, the brambles weeded, the grass mown, and the installation of paths and a drive.¹

She decided to solicit public support for a project to bring beauty and order to the cemetery. She also decided, as she was apparently riding her horse into town to announce her idea, that the village needed to re-grade its main thoroughfare, plant trees along the roads, put in sidewalks, clean up and plant hedges in front yards, and install
hitching-posts so horses wouldn’t wander about. Her feeling was that the Berkshire hills were some of the loveliest country in New England, and yet her hometown of Stockbridge strangely did not reflect the beauty just beyond its village borders. Nearby, she knew that Sheffield had started an Elm Tree Association just the year before that was successfully planting trees. Up in Williamstown, her cousin Albert Hopkins had started a Landscape Gardening Society that was responsible for some park development. It was time for Stockbridge to take on the issue of village beautification, but not purely through planting trees and cleaning up the cemetery. Mary Hopkins’ idea was that the townspeople should beautify its entire central core, all the space within the town that the public could see. That afternoon she tacked up notices inviting all citizens of Stockbridge to assemble on Laurel Hill two days hence, “To take measures for the regular improvement of the Burying Ground, the streets, the walks, the public grounds and Laurel Hill.”

Another less-often told story was that in the summer of 1852, Mary Hopkins overheard a conversation between some summer visitors staying at the Stockbridge House, the local inn. These individuals made sharp comments about the untidiness and unhygienic condition of Stockbridge center, remarking that the village’s wretched state made it a particularly undesirable summer residence. After she’d overheard this exchange, she began to lobby for organized effort at beautification. After much agitation, and a year later, a meeting took place.

Very little is known of the personal life of Mary Hopkins, later Mary Hopkins Goodrich. She left no papers, married late in life, and had no children that might have written personal descriptions of their mother. Her energy for projects that traversed the
line between the domestic realm and public outreach can be verified in her involvement
to preserve Mount Vernon in the late 1850s. Hopkins Goodrich was identified in an
1859 Pittsfield Sun article as the fundraiser for Stockbridge, though she wasn’t a leader
in the early preservation movement. Other women are cited as the “Lady Manager for
Berkshire” or the “Vice-Regent for Massachusetts of the Ladies Mount Vernon
Association”, titles more in keeping with her LHA-narrative portrayal. Hopkins
Goodrich was not an outspoken or powerful public leader and did not set an example
for other women to participate actively in civic work in any way other than a behind-
the-scenes inspirational force.\(^4\)

The only project she spearheaded during her lifetime as a member of the LHA
was her work to preserve and put a memorial on the burial ground of the Housatonic
Indians, the Native American population that was in the area when her great-
great-grandfather, missionary John Sergeant, arrived and long-since removed to resettlement
reservations in Wisconsin. Working on this project for seven years, the project
demonstrates Hopkins Goodrich’s determination. The Laurel Hill Association would
not front the money for the project, burdened as they were with repairing sidewalks and
a fountain, so she led an effort to gain the $400 needed for her plans by individual
subscription. The project also displays her interest in preservation work, something she
showed earlier in her work with the Ladies Mount Vernon Association. These two
projects, if one wants to develop a sense of what she was passionate about, do not
suggest the broad goals of village improvement that the Laurel Hill Association
undertook, supposedly at her bidding and untiring efforts. And although these two
projects are marginally about visitor experience, they do not do much to substantiate the
lesser-told story that she agitated for beautification in Stockbridge because of a tourist’s negative reaction to her town.\(^5\)

According to the minutes of the LHA, Mary Hopkins Goodrich worked at a minimal level of involvement and deferential leadership in the organization. Other women’s names, in fact, appear more frequently in the first twenty years of records of meetings. Miss Mary Pomeroy, for example, was mentioned regularly in connection with her work on the Executive Committee.

However, E.W.B. Canning, the secretary for the organization from 1853-1890, save six years when he lived in Boston, wrote in the 1887 publication *History of Berkshire County, Massachusetts with Biographical Sketches of its Prominent Men*, that “the natural beauty of Stockbridge is conspicuous; but during the year 1853, Miss Mary G. Hopkins (now Mrs J.Z. Goodrich) conceived the plan of enhancing the gifts of Nature by the hands of Art, and of uniting every age, sex and occupation in the undertaking.” As the only writer that was present at the first meeting of the LHA, Canning was the most reliable source on the manner of its founding. He gave credit to Mary Hopkins Goodrich for the conception of the idea, but not for leading its founding.

An unauthored report from the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the LHA praises Hopkins Goodrich through mention of her husband. The orators that anniversary day were introduced by “J.Z. Goodrich, whose immortal honor it is to be the husband of the local genius and moving spirit, esprit du corps, it might be said, of the Laurel Hill Association.” The first meeting of the LHA also described Hopkins Goodrich’s role as formally reticent: while several men made speeches, she was not listed among them.

The Association minutes reported that the meeting was called to order by Stockbridge
attorney Jonathan E. Field. David Dudley Field, Mark Hopkins, Theodore Sedgwick, Edward Tompkins, John Z. Goodrich, Rev. Henry M. Field, Rev. Louis Dwight, and Charles Sedgwick were all listed as making speeches. Canning wrote later that “the scattered sons and daughters of the town in all sections of the land volunteered their aid, and with an outset of about $1400 in cash and a large amount of promised labor, the association was launched on its aesthetic career. Other sons of Stockbridge applauded the group’s efforts and contributed financial assistance.”6

The men who called the first LHA meeting to order were educated and prominent citizens and part-time residents of Stockbridge. One of them, John Z. Goodrich, had served in the Massachusetts General Court (state legislature) from 1848-1849 and was a Representative from Massachusetts in the U.S. Congress between 1851-1855. Goodrich was also the future husband of Mary Hopkins. These men were surely cognizant of the new statute passed by the Massachusetts General Court just three months prior that gave corporal rights to organizations of ten or more people assembling “for the purpose of encouraging agriculture, horticulture; improving and ornamenting the streets and public squares of any town or city by planting and cultivating ornamental trees therein and also otherwise improving the physical aspects of such city or town and furthering the recreation and enjoyment of the inhabitants thereof.” The statute went into effect May 10, 1853. The Laurel Hill Association was founded August 26 and officially warranted on September 3, 1853.7

By 1855, the group formally announced their mission and purpose to the town at their second Anniversary Day celebration:

It is intended that the Institution shall be a permanent affair, that the object for which the organization was instituted may be prosecuted, until every street shall
be graded ['perfected’ is originally printed, but is crossed out and replaced with ‘graded’], every side-walk shaded; every noxious weed eradicated; every water-course laid and perfected; every nook and corner beautified; in fine, until Art, combined with Nature, has rendered our town the most beautiful and attractive spot in our ancient Commonwealth.  

This paragraph demonstrates the group's redefined ambition from their first recorded purpose in 1853. Unlike many short-lived groups that preceded and followed the LHA, this group was not an ad hoc organization or appendage to a larger horticultural society. The statement above outlines long-term specific goals under a comprehensive and lofty objective. Shading sidewalks, eradicating “noxious” plant material, regulating drainage, and beautifying the transitions and details of their village scene would “render” the public space aesthetics of the town so much so it would gain regional recognition.  

Even beyond a practical desire to be known and admired by the nation, the statement further illustrates loft and ambition on the level of a Higher Purpose. It is not insignificant that “perfected” was used initially in the text to describe their vision of public ways in Stockbridge. New Englander’s had a long history of pursuing God’s affirmation going back to Puritans settlers, and bold confidence in this pursuit was unquestionably germane to regional culture. Even so, the organization was remarkably self-assured in its valiance. Art and Nature would be united in perfect harmony in their little village scene as it would be joined nowhere else in the land. Stockbridge would achieve perfection under their programming and care.  

**Village Improvement in Stockbridge: Planning**

The first three decades of the Laurel Hill Association were highly productive in terms of both physical and cultural development in Stockbridge. Between 1853 and the
early 1880s, decades before the Chicago Expo’s White City and the advent of professional city planning, the LHA wielded the kind of power of a strong city municipality. Their unified ambitions and philosophical foundation, leadership structure, management, scope of municipal work, operations through public/private cooperative practice all contributed to the group's successful reshaping of Stockbridge’s village scene from farming crossroads to idyllic country village. Simultaneously, the organization hosted formal cultural events through which they could promote a new resort-town identity for Stockbridge welcome to nineteenth century travelers. These events further helped solidify the group’s association with Stockbridge and legacy as the first and most successful village improvement society in the country.

Leadership and Management

The Management structure of the LHA was established within two weeks of the group’s initial assembly, articulated in Article III of the group’s constitution. There were a President, four Vice Presidents, Clerk, Treasurer, Corresponding Secretary, and a fifteen-member Executive Committee, “part of whom shall be ladies.” The reason for the four Vice Presidents was not explained anywhere, but a comprehensive examination of the various men who held the positions over the first several decades of the society illustrate that it may have been to assure broad representation of professionals and prominent individuals in the leadership. The first vice presidents were a judge, the Congregational minister, the Episcopalian minister, and a physician.

This structure was certainly important to the group’s organizational success and on the surface appears a fair and democratic representation (of the business and professional interests in town at least). However, upon closer inspection of who served
in these various positions over the course of the rest of the 1800s, it is clear that the leadership was more of a regime. Several of the leaders held office for thirty to forty years and those that served for shorter periods were succeeded by men of the same professional standing in society. For example, the ministers of the Episcopal Church and the Congregational Church regularly served as Vice Presidents. Almost without exception all the leaders were second generation residents, born into native Stockbridge families. These established families were not the upper class as one would eventually see in Stockbridge toward the end of the century during the Gilded Age, but they were well educated and considered wealthy in local terms. Further, it was the children of many of these initial leaders who later became upper class residents and returning summer sojourners in town, people who eventually worked tirelessly to put “aesthetics” ahead of “commerce.”

Figure 27: Sidewalks put in by LHA along Main Street, Stockbridge. Image from Clark, Susan M., and Simone Wilson. Red Lion Inn. 1989.
Interestingly, most executive members of this period died in office. Such lifelong commitment during these first few decades of the association ultimately served the interests of the organization well. With such a strong and lasting leadership in place, several long-term goals of the organization were uniformly pursued over the decades, even with the slowing of the LHA’s work during the Civil War. Like other examples of significant public space transformation, the LHA succeeded in transforming Stockbridge in a consistent manner. The uniformity of their leadership over the second half of the nineteenth century was likely the main reason the group was so effective in pursuing a spatial practice with such precision.

The scope of the group's overarching ambitions is mentioned above, but their management structure for attending to the townscape is also important for understanding their early and lasting success. At their second meeting, the LHA outlined its method for comprehensive alteration to the town. They established five standing district committees, usually chaired by a vice president or the President which included Committee #1, responsible for the sidewalk from the hotel to the depot; Committee #2, charged with improving the "public grounds at the brick [Congregational] church and walks through Main Street"; Committee #3, which would attend to the "area from Mrs. Dwight’s corner around the Academy to Hon. J.Z. Goodrich’s house"; Committee #4 responsible for the "park by [the] hotel, grounds in front of Episcopal Church and up the hill"; and Committee #5, which would work to improve the burying ground. These standing committees were composed of between three and eight individuals, usually Officers and Executive Committee members.
Special committees were also appointed on an ad hoc basis for carrying out specific improvement projects such as re-grading a road or laying watercourses.9

Dividing the town into districts was prescient; planning agencies in future decades would employ the same method for achieving global changes over their terrain. More impressive than this inventiveness, however, was how the group sought from the beginning to affect the environment of the entire village center and insist on the future maintenance of that scene through their organization. Placing an officer at the helm of each committee guaranteed that leaders would be community members committed to the task of improving the village scene through managing projects. Every leader and member of the association was directly involved.10

Municipal Work

The Laurel Hill Association undertook projects that went far beyond planting trees and flower beds in scale, cost, and scope. Their work between 1853 and the early 1880s fell into three categories: large scale civic building and civil engineering projects, appeals to the Town and State for legislative action, and physically minor, but culturally significant undertakings, such as naming the streets.

The Association oversaw three major building projects that clearly demonstrate their municipal charge over the town. These were the installation of running water to all the buildings in the central downtown village, the construction of the town's library, and the mounting of gas streetlamps along Main Street. All three of these civic features were highly unusual for a small town to have in the 1860s. Recall that during this period, as discussed in Chapter Two, most villages in the United States were quagmires
of filth and unsanitary practices—the local Selectmen's municipal projects were limited to the upkeep and construction of roads.

**Figure 28: Stockbridge Library**<div xmlns:cc="http://creativecommons.org/ns#" about="http://www.flickr.com/photos/danthewebmaster/2534411187/" rel="cc:attributionURL" href="http://www.flickr.com/photos/danthewebmaster/">http://www.flickr.com/photos/danthewebmaster/</a> / <a rel="license" href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/">CC BY-SA 2.0</a></div>

The LHA largely succeeded in these extensive and costly ventures because they secured large donations of both money and materials from residents, or friends of residents. Judge J.E. Field developed the town’s first Water Company in 1862. Field rallied seventeen subscribers, and then hired a civil engineer and a builder from Pittsfield, Massachusetts to lay over 40 pipes for fresh water, the total cost coming to some $9000. The library was also largely the work of a single member of the LHA, J.Z.
Goodrich. Goodrich donated money for the building after the LHA had received a bequest of $2000 for a town library from a late resident Nathan Jackson. In this case, the LHA took credit for the project, though the entire undertaking was less a community effort; the LHA thus often functioned as the conduit for donors of civic structures rather than the Town of Stockbridge. In fact, much of the success of the early years of the LHA is likely related to the leadership’s personal generosity, both in terms of time, political maneuvering of their friends and acquaintances, and funds.¹¹

For the installation of gas street lamps, the LHA secured a donation from a New York City resident who apparently summered in Stockbridge and admired the Association's work. George W. Brandon donated 30 oil lanterns to Stockbridge via the LHA in 1869. In later years, the group oversaw more streetlamp installations, eventually installing over 50 lanterns within the village center.¹²

The Association functioned as a municipal planning organization in other ways as well. From the start, they demonstrated their interest in acting not only as a developer, but also as enforcer, and often worked with the Town in this capacity. They posted warnings for field-drivers when cattle ran in the street, requesting they “do the duty imposed upon them by law” and devised rewards for information leading to the arrest of vandals. The society also increasingly lobbied to the Town, and sometimes the State, for either assistance or action on issues they had identified. These appeals came in the form of requests for basic municipal assistance such rubbish removal on Main Street, often offering to partially pay for the cost. Sometimes their lobbying capacity extended to requesting that the Town establish new local ordinances based on new state laws. For example, in 1867, the LHA appointed a member to go to the Town and
procure local adoption of a recent Massachusetts law calling for the protection of shade trees bordering highways. \(^{13}\)

**Figure 29:** Main Street, Stockbridge, after improvements, circa 1914. LHA was responsible for grading Main Street, putting in sidewalks, and planting elm trees.

The most ambitious advocacy the Association undertook during these first couple of decades, however, was their proposed law to the Massachusetts Legislature to adopt a weed ordinance in 1879. An LHA member had called attention to the State of New York's recent statute "concerning the nuisances from weeds, brambles, etc. on lands abutting upon public highways." The Association's Committee on Parks and Squares was given the charge of drafting a bill for a similar law for Massachusetts and lobbying for its passing at the next session of the Legislature. Although the statute was "killed -- apparently by the pressure of other, (though scarcely less important schemes
of reform)”, this example demonstrates the group's overarching interest in affecting monumental changes over the regional landscape.\textsuperscript{14}

The 1876 map of Stockbridge differs from earlier maps of the region in two significant ways. The first is that public park spaces are rendered in green, a sign that park spaces were becoming significant features of the town. The second is that the streets are named. Both are due to the Laurel Hill Association's planning efforts in town, but the latter demonstrates the breadth of power the Association had over the character, space, and identity of the town.

\textbf{Figure 30: 1876 Map of Stockbridge}
That a voluntary organization officially named the streets of a town demonstrates the remarkable municipal power of the LHA. Apparently, some of the roads were already known by the names the LHA 'selected', but for some, the names were completely new to the area. For example, a street that had been known as Hammer Street for generations, was renamed Elm Street. The major thoroughfare through town had been known as both Main Street and The Plain, a term used since the area was first settled by whites in the seventeenth century. Three individuals were on the committee that named the streets, all long-time residents of the area, and one who was a particularly active member of the Association. At a meeting in the spring of 1870, the small committee reported their proposal for street names, using narrative description to delineate the paths rather than maps or sketches, and the matter was voted on and the plan accepted. The streets were named: Main Street, Elm Street, South Street, Pine Street, Prospect Street, Shamrock Lane, Vine Street, East Street, Mill Street, and Church Street.¹⁵

These name changes reflect late nineteenth century ideas about urban pastoralism and a desire for public spaces of Stockbridge to have a good appearance. "Church Street" for example, was previously known as Poverty Lane. Hammer Street's rechristening into "Elm Street" and the committee’s choice to suppress the local term “The Plain” for Main Street suggest similar intentions.

The significance of the LHA's early and powerful municipal hand did not stop at their naming the streets. They also designed, commissioned, and installed the town's first set of street signs two years later.
Public/Private Practice

The LHA was also successful during the early decades of their existence because they approached city planning through an evolving and thus unfixed interpretation of public/private practice and cooperation. The Association was a private organization, but their purpose, as outlined earlier, had been public benefit and they functioned primarily as a municipal institution. Additionally, their terrain included all the spaces within the village center that the public experienced, both public property (streets, sidewalks and crossings, town common, cemetery) and private domains (dooryards, church grounds, rail station land). Their work was both a public/private venture by their own measures that involve private property in town, but also in how they worked with public officials. Finally, in their work with the town, they often involved the elected Selectmen in efforts that improved private properties, such as church yards adjacent to Main Street.

Very early on, the organization set a precedent for developing short-term comprehensive projects that required cooperation between private property owners and public officials. One of the few remaining working documents from the early years of the LHA, a report from the Side Walk Committee from Hotel to Depot, demonstrates both how the organization functioned as a planning organization and developed projects through public/private cooperation.

Written in September of 1853, the report outlined a "plan for a Path leading from the Village to the Station House." It is pure linear narrative with no accompanying visuals or references to maps/diagrams/sketches, yet it is unarguably specific and clear in its planning of this pedestrian route. Its tone is informal and assumes local and
intimate knowledge of both public ways and private properties, referring specifically to owners of abutting land by name, which suggests a grassroots communal approach to planning. "A Path 7 feet wide, leaving a margin of grass 1 foot wide next the fence be made from the Tavern to the corner of Hammer Street ['of Hammer Street' crossed out] opposite J.Z. Goodrich's (600 feet) that a crossing either of gravel or plank be made there..." The report is also comprehensive; it proposes not only where and how to install a sidewalk, but also makes recommendations for tree planting and footbridge building. "The Committee recommend the putting out of 4 or 5 trees near the Station House and the setting out of trees on each side of the road from Village to Station, about 20 feet apart." The footbridge, in fact, is where the committee outlines how it will work with the town. "The Committee...finding the cost of the foot-bridge would exceed 50 dollars they recommend this land in the hope that the town will join with the Association in carrying it out.” The group itself intends to bear the rest of the installation expenses, including the purchase of some needed abutting private property from a Mrs. Ashburner, referred to by name in the document.  

That a committee was formed to create a pleasant walk from the train station, which primarily was for passenger trains, to the only hotel in town underscores the group's early interest in making improvements that would have both the effect of improving experience for travelers and newcomers to the town as well as for the residents. It was a priority to make Stockbridge a pleasant place to arrive in and depart from, as if the town anticipated the immense rise in tourism it would experience in the coming decades. The group, by advocating for the visitor experience through planning
measures involving the town government and private citizens, established a town-wide interest in caring for the needs of tourists and summer residents.

There were many other instances of the organization's work through public/private cooperation, too many to list. However, a couple are worth noting by type because they demonstrate the breadth of the association's procedures for improvement. The first was through asking the town for appropriations to subsidize an Association project. These varied in size, anywhere from $10 requested for removing a fence and re-grading land in front of a church to $300 for a marble and iron fence to surround the cemetery. Interestingly, none of the leadership of the LHA served as town Selectman simultaneously or often ever. This is likely because of a perceived conflict of interest; the LHA executive committee did not want to ask for town appropriations from itself. A second reason is that the Association did not pursue improvement for the entire township, only the village center and the roads immediately leading to Main Street.

A final example of the group’s savvy cooperative work with the Town was through endeavors to protect the health, safety and welfare of town residents and visitors. Here the LHA acted as both an independent private community group, and a local planning agency. A member of the LHA, Dr. Knickerbocker, was concerned with some wetland areas near the railroad station, referring to them as “malarial ditches.” Knickerbocker was then voted to represent this concern to the Selectmen, who said they would address it. Apparently, they did not act quickly enough, because a month later, Knickerbocker was voted by the LHA to go directly to the state and confer with the Railroad Commissioner directly about the ditches, threatening to take them to court if
they didn’t seal the public health hazard. Threatening a lawsuit secured the Commission’s attention, and they returned a letter stating that as part of a new rail station construction, the ditches would be addressed. “Only the understanding that the erection of a new station house the ensuing year will be accompanied by the abatement of the offence in question, restrains farther complaint to a course whose decrees are imperative and effectual.”

In this instance, the LHA acted with a stronger arm than the Selectmen could. It may be that the Selectmen allowed the LHA to handle this issue because a community organization could be more effective, and it was potentially politically unviable for a town government office to threaten the Railroad Commission. It may appear that the Selectmen were simply powerless in town, but the events that followed this ordeal suggest the opposite. When just a few weeks later, the LHA approached the Selectmen asking them to put an article in the town warrant starting a Town Board of Health to be voted on by citizens at the Town Meeting, the Selectmen put a stop to the LHA’s public health efforts. In a conference with the LHA, the Selectmen explain that such an ordinance would never pass; that people in Stockbridge were not ready for a Board of Health. “In view of opposition likely to arise, and the immaturity of public opinion concerning the propriety of the measure, [the sanitary committee] had decided to defer farther action theron, and asked to be discharged.”

During the years of the Civil War, the LHA annual reports, serving as a record of town-wide community spirit and activism, included descriptions of all public and private monetary support for soldiers, the number of volunteers from Stockbridge, and
the clothing donations of churches and other aid societies in town. By August 10, 1864, the town collectively had donated nearly $40,000 for those fighting for the Union.\(^{19}\)

Another example of the organization's public/private character is in their repeated bequests from private citizens for use in public endeavors under the group’s official guidance. Sometimes these gifts were money, but often they were municipal art items or land. All the gifts encouraged an overlapping view of public and private interests. In 1880, Cyrus W. Field gave $100 to be used as a prize for “the greatest improvement of premises” for private dwellings in town. At the 25\(^{th}\) annual meeting, prideful remarks were made by the president about these private gifts.\(^{20}\)

The interest of our citizens in the objects of the LHA has been shared and enhanced by our summer residents, both natives and strangers. Thus Messrs Gourley and Albinola have presented fountains, Mr. Watson Pomeroy most of the outlay for our cemetery hedge and Hon DD Field the receiving vault in that enclosure, and is now doing yet more for village and town by the erection of a memorial Mission Tower with clock and chimes. Many others have made annual or occasional donations of money for general or specific purposes.\(^{21}\)

A large parcel of land was given by the Sedgwicks, part of which was used for the public high school built in the 1860s. A marble fountain was given by summer resident John H. Gourlie, a New Yorker who owned a cottage near Stockbridge. One of the largest gifts to the LHA for the town was from J.Z. Goodrich who donated the Association the capital funds to build the Stockbridge Library, which remains to this day a private institution. There was obviously general awareness and respect for how the LHA operated according to both public and private interests, and how it negotiated that terrain was well known within the first decade of the association's existence.\(^{22}\)
**Town Consciousness and Community Activism**

The success of the LHA was not simply in the physical changes it wrought upon Stockbridge between 1853 and the 1880s, the organization also built a culture of community activism centered around pride of place. In the Selectmen’s Town Report for the year 1884, it is noted that “Stockbridge has many attractions, not the least of which are its good roads and pleasant drives, which should be kept in good order.” Prior reports had consisted purely of lists of what roads and bridges had been repaired; they never included any narrative language praising their town’s features. But beginning in the 1880s, Selectmen’s reports repeatedly included statements that suggested increasing consciousness of Stockbridge’s unique character and attraction to outsiders.  

Town consciousness was related to both the physical character of Stockbridge and the village’s uniqueness in a national context, that despite being a small town, many famous people had walked in its streets, either as residents or visitors. Further, despite its size, it was a nationally recognized example of pastoral urbanism fostered through civic spirit. “Stockbridge is unique—the neatest, most orderly, and best kept town that I have ever seen in the country,” wrote a journalist for the *Boston Herald*. He remarked that the place instilled in its visitors an enthusiasm for the village’s character, pulling them into the maintenance and care of it, that after he had thrown a piece of paper in the street, “it was instantly apparent” because “it lay on the close cropped emerald stubble, and looked as if it could be seen for miles. I picked it up and carried it to the waste basket; there was no other way.” Another journalist, writing for the *New York Times* remarked that although all Berkshire town were “fresh and clean and wholesome,” Stockbridge was most obviously, “the model village.” This writer was similarly
impressed with the lack of rubbish in the streets of Stockbridge, and praised the unity of the town’s cleanliness. All the houses, no matter what the income level, were scrubbed and scoured, covered by vines, and embowered with cultivated flowers, shrubs, and trees. 

The refined and developed village landscape of the Laurel Hill Association made Stockbridge famous, and Stockbridge likewise received notoriety because it was the birthplace of what was perceived to be the first and most successful village improvement society in the nation. While the rest of New England was transforming into industrial towns, the village of Stockbridge gained more and more attention for its lack of factories and predominance of ordered and artistic foliage. It was both beautiful and a modern model of progress, community cohesion, sanitation and cleanliness.

Building Town Consciousness through Formal Events

In 1856, the LHA voted “that the ladies of the Association be requested to take into consideration the propriety of holding a festival on the day of the Anniversary with a view to raise funds for promoting the objects of the Association.” The celebration that year and the following year in 1857 were more Independence Day festivals for town residents than holidays devoted to celebrating the work of the Laurel Hill Association. The Anniversary Day of 1858, however, was more specifically about the LHA’s season of accomplishments and Stockbridge’s uniqueness.

Held on August 11 that year, the holiday was a tribute to “Stockbridge Boy,” Cyrus W. Field, second generation son of a local and highly respected family. Field was the focus of the celebration because only a week prior he had completed laying the Transatlantic Cable. The speakers at this Anniversary Day frequently alluded to this
accomplishment a “great event of the age,” and several “cheers were called for Cyrus W. Field, which were multiplied to 3 times three, and closed by the timely discharge of a cannon.”

Each year hence, the LHA hosted an annual formal banquet with speakers, often an individual of national renown, to celebrate the group’s birth and the beauty of Stockbridge. Typically in late August, Anniversary Days were open public annual meetings where the accomplishments of the season/year were boasted in detail. Residents, summer sojourners, and other visitors, including people summering in nearby towns, all attended Anniversary Days.

On their 10th birthday, the Secretary read from the annual report. “Nothing short of a picture taken at the time would convince you that the village of ’53 was the same as Stockbridge of ’64” he exclaimed. Main Street was a muddy mess of “irregularly laid out and unevenly graded” terrain with standing water all spring. “Gulleys, the repository of all the village rubbish collected during the year, adorned it on either side near the Brick Church Green.” What fences there were, were broken, allowing animals to stroll unbarred through church lands, the green common, and the cemetery. There were few street trees “and the walks were cared for by but few of the householders.”

The secretary continued:

But a new order of things now prevails. Main Street has been regularly graded and properly drained, the walks are kept clean and in walkable trim, and alongside of all fine shade trees are growing. The ‘green’ is well-fenced and great pains have been taken to start the trees. The cemetery has been surrounded by a substantial stone and iron fence within which grows a splendid hedge of Norway Spruce. The corner opposite the Hotel, too which was formerly decorated by a large white stone, has through the agency of the Association come into the possession of the Episcopal Society, and with its neat little park thickly studded with seedling elms forms one of the most attractive spots on the street. And not alone to the Main Street has the work been confined. The side
streets have received their due attention and one can walk now in any direction
even to the railroad station without fear of being set afloat on his pathway.27

At the 21st Anniversary Day celebration, those gathered formally reflected on
the effectiveness of their organization, whether the Laurel Hill Association had met “the
prophetic utterances made on the day of its birth.” They asserted that at its birth, the
hope was that the LHA “would conduce greatly to the enjoyment of its citizens in
cultivating a love of the beautiful in nature, and educating the rising generation in the
principles of correct taste, operating as a constant practice-school of aesthetics.” They
had wanted their activity to “induce a feeling of laudable pride and increase the patriotic
sentiment, by making sons and daughters of our town proud of their birth-place, and
jealous of its good name throughout the land.” Further, “it was asserted that the mutual
aid in promoting the aims of the Association would beget a unity of social and moral
interest – a community of feeling highly productive of goods to all of its citizens.”

Their contribution (and Stockbridge’s) to the industrial age, as they saw it in
1874, was in their manufacturing communal spirit and civic responsibility. Along these
lines, the report also articulates the economic value of the Laurel Hill Association’s
work to the town. “It was asserted that the external beautifying of the place would
enhance the value of real estate, and that the outlay of money for this purpose would
prove a more profitable instrument than the same amount in Bank or Railroad stocks, or
the best bond and mortgage securities.” Echoing Downing from the beginning, the
LHA was as much about real estate appreciation as it was about civic pride; in their
reports to residents and visitors, they emphasized both emotional and economic reasons
for their existence, encouraging donations and continued support from individuals with 
either goal on their minds.

Following these reminiscences of the group’s original assertions, the report 
proclaimed success. “From our present standpoint and in light of 21 years’ experience, 
we fearlessly assert that these predictions have, item by item, been fully verified and 
that the LHA has won for Stockbridge the reputation of a model town for beauty 
throughout the land.”

Added to these impressive before and after verbal portraits of Stockbridge’s 
changed public spaces, communal spirit and real estate valuations, were more 
aggrandizing illustrations that characterized both the LHA and Stockbridge as 
international players in progressive landscape stewardship and urban development, 
further underscoring the group’s allegiance to a pastoral urbanism vision, a “developed” 
and forward looking rural space. In 1868, the LHA announced their approval of local 
gentlemen setting hedges around their properties, something that would “in a few years 
have added to its pleasing features the, till recently, novel one produced by this 
charming mode of enclosure, which adds such beauty to the English landscape and so 
delightfully entrances of attractions of the environs of Boston.” The LHA also 
compared its work to some of the greatest city planners in history. The 1869 annual 
report included this reflection: “On the tomb of Sir Christopher Wren, the architect of 
St. Paul’s in London is inscribed: ‘Stranger, if thou woulds’t see his monument, look 
around!’ The Laurel Hill Association must be judged by its doings, and although not 
deprecating candid criticisms, while welcoming friendly suggestions is willing that 
these should write its commentary.”
Through Anniversary Days, the LHA invented a local holiday to celebrate their work, the spirit of improvement as they defined it, and Stockbridge’s character as they had shaped it. Anniversary Days institutionalized town consciousness and community activism in ways that secured a shared sense of Stockbridge’s physical identity and the necessary community spirit to protect and maintain it.

**The Gilded Age in Stockbridge and a New Theory of Improvement: Preservation**

By 1880, Stockbridge had become well known for not only the beauty of its village landscape, but also its homes of “genius, taste, culture, and virtue.” The estate homes of native families were well regarded for their heritage and well-kept appearances, and were frequently let to summer sojourners who did not wish to stay at the Stockbridge House (now Red Lion Inn). Between 1880 and the first decade of the twentieth century, many of these tenants began to purchase land in and around the village center to build summer homes of their own. Between 1876 and 1904, summer residents became the major landholders in the village, owning nearly 75% of the farmland and forest within a one-mile radius of Main Street.30

Beginning in the late 1880s, announcements of visiting individuals and families from the cities appeared regularly in the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe*. Social and sporting events, weddings, and other celebrations received space in these columns as well. Farmland that seemed as if it was going to be left derelict was suddenly the new property of wealthy visitors from cities. “The advent of the ‘summer boarder’ has caused the ‘desert’ of the last decade to bloom as a rose garden,” writes a journalist for the *St. Albans Daily Messenger*, “The abandoned farm house has become a ‘summer
cottage,’ whose picturesqueness delights the trained eye of the artists….blessed be the summer visitor in the highways and byways of rural Massachusetts!” Reflecting back to the year 1886, Nathalie Sedgwick recalled with a mix of sadness and pride that the “outside was slowly creeping into the village. Summer people were buying places…down the street the big family of Joseph H. Choate was going to build on a hill…the Mathew Arnolds took the house where the Musgraves used to give us summer on the lawn.” These new homes were also estates, but generally larger and more opulent than the older family homes of the region. There was also increasing land speculation, a sign of increased interest in the region. In 1887, for example, a land company purchased 1100 acres around the local lake, Stockbridge Bowl, just north of the village center. Their plan was to improve the property and sell it off in large parcels for purchasers to build into grand residential estates. In 1903, the Boston Daily Globe ran an article entitled, “Much Building. Millionaire Belt of Berkshires Busy.”

New home construction meant hundreds of jobs for young men in the area. These large rural domiciles also required very large staffs to care not only for the residents, but also the buildings, vehicles, gardens, and associated farm- and pasture-land. Each “cottage” (as these estates were called by the owners) employed on average eight people in the house: butler, cook, lady’s maid, footman, parlor maid, chambermaid, laundress, and kitchen maid. Larger houses had even more extensive inside staff. The job of one employee at Elm Court was to wind the clocks daily.

After the Midwest gained control over the agribusiness and New England farms began to die, locals were increasingly faced with working in mills or industrial plants. Thus, the rural residence service industry offered another form of livelihood. “Why did
I go into the service? Well, what were the choices? there were the mills or service.”

For young women, new to the workforce in the late nineteenth century, life as a servant offered a safer, healthier and often better compensated form of employment. In Massachusetts domestic servants were on average paid $9.08 per week, whereas textile hands at the time earned $7.15 and saleswomen a mere $6.21. The difference in living standards for the less affluent classes over the course of a year was enormous. Further, domestic workers also generally lived with employers and so did not have expenses such as food, shelter, transportation, utilities, and clothing. They ate what their masters ate, and so generally had access to healthier nourishment. Their housing was also cleaner and more pleasant, so both their lodgings and place of employment were less exposed to disease and they faced little chance of harm or accident in their daily lives.\(^3^3\)

For the care of estate land, houses employed a superintendent and then anywhere from two to fifty men depending on the size of the grounds and greenhouses. The gardens and farm areas supplied the household with produce, fresh flowers and, if animals were kept, dairy and meat products. Because these were working farms, they did not close up shop after the summer families left. Staff continued milking cows, slaughtering animals and collecting eggs throughout the winter. Produce was gathered from the fields into November, and then in greenhouses into the spring. Many families, such as the Choates and Whites, had their Stockbridge staff make regular shipments of perishables from their farms to them in New York via the Housatonic Railroad. “I can remember being at the depot every day for the 7:26 A.M. train to New York. Ready to load flowers, fruit, and vegetables for the city house,” says Eugene Jappron, who worked at Elm Court in Lenox, and later Wheatleigh in Stockbridge.\(^3^4\)
The downside of the service industry was that it offered little to no personal freedom, and offered virtually no opportunities for advancement in their occupation. They were isolated, both industrially and socially. Thus while Stockbridge’s refined village aesthetics had by the late nineteenth century fostered a resort-economy that offered a plethora of jobs for those of the lower and middle class in need of work, it had also created a great deal of dead-end jobs, and self-sufficient homesteads that did not necessarily require the goods and services of shops in town. Locals had few opportunities for sole proprietorship that did not directly appeal to the interests of summer residents. Other economies that flourished in other regions in New England, such as a mercantile market, were unable to fully manifest in Stockbridge.  

The next section of this chapter recounts the story of the development of the Stockbridge Casino, a private club built in the mid 1880s on Main Street in the center of the village. The narrative reveals the shift in the LHA’s sense of purpose as planners from the 1850s, who implemented major municipal projects to develop the town to preservationists in the 1880s, when the association supported measures that prevented working class people from living on and starting what were perceived as unseemly businesses. In line with the national discussion about villages and village life, the Laurel Hill Association articulated a new local theory of improvement that identified Stockbridge’s main merits, purpose, and clientele according to a pastoral worldview rather than an urban pastoral paradigm. Aesthetics mattered more than commerce to upper-class part-time residents, so those characteristics had to be protected at all costs. Without using the language of zoning (to come decades later to Stockbridge), the Stockbridge Casino Company with the support of the LHA, articulated a theory of
planning that advocated for protection of the town’s unique aesthetic character through extraordinary means. The pastoral village of Stockbridge, Massachusetts was a landscape of large estates comprised of residences on large well-clipped lawns with no weeds, ample street trees, raked gravel pedestrian walks, and an overall air of tidiness and refinement.

The Casino

Between 1853 and 1881, the Laurel Hill Association was under the leadership of primarily one man: Dr. Lucius S. Adams, the local physician who cared for most everyone in town. Adams was comfortable financially, but not wealthy and he lived in the town year-round. The next long-running president was Henry D. Sedgwick II who led the LHA from 1881-1904. Sedgwick was grandson of Theodore Sedgwick, a lawyer, federalist judge, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and leader of loyalists during Shay’s Rebellion in 1787. Henry D. Sedgwick II’s aunt, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, was a best-selling author. After Henry D. Sedgwick was president (died in office), his son, Alexander Sedgwick was president until 1925 except for some years during World War I. The LHA was in the hands of Stockbridge native part-year residents for this entire period and would continue to be so until the 1940s.36

Like his aunt and his grandfather, Henry D. Sedgwick II traveled extensively. He had returned to Stockbridge in the late 1870s upon retiring from his law career, but frequently was away from the Berkshires for extended periods. It was Sedgwick that led the first effort by the LHA to protect the integrity of Main Street’s aesthetics as the organization had defined them between the 1850s and the 1880s.
In the spring 1884, a couple of townsmen, a gravestone cutter named Charles Rathburn and a mason Nelson Weeks, began selling small 30 x 15 meter parcels of land, subdivided from a large parcel of land which abutted Main Street and extended north.

The small lots were priced at $200 to $400 each, inexpensive enough for working class residents to buy. Prior to this time, few working class people could afford to live in the village. Most all lower-income residents, including Rathburn and Weeks, lived on Church St., called Poverty Lane before the LHA renamed it in 1870. A lane was constructed and these lots are still the smallest parcels off Main Street today. The Laurel Hill Association made plans to name the street Sergeant Street, after the town’s founding missionary. In April 1884 word spread that Rathburn and Weeks had received some bids for the lots that fronted Main Street, parcels that were just across from the Sedgwick estate. The interested parties were a blacksmith, a livery and stable operator and a mortician.37
This was cause for alarm to the Sedgwick family and other property owners along Main Street. A group of residents headed by H.D. Sedgwick mobilized to purchase the property through collected subscriptions. By July the group had collected nearly $5000.00, far more than was needed to purchase the two small plots. Their intention was to develop the property, not simply buy it, and prevent unwanted businesses.

On July 11, 1884 Sedgwick held the first official meeting of the newly formed Stockbridge Casino Company at his house. They elected a Board of Directors and officers. H.D. Sedgwick was elected President; Ferdinand Hoffman, whose estate was parcel to be subdivided into 30m and 15m lots.
at the corner of Sergeant and Main Streets was elected Vice President; and William E. Doane, who owned property on Main Street opposite and just west of Rathburn and Week’s parcel was elected Treasurer and Clerk. Other leaders of the Company included James D. Hague of New York City, a regular summer resident, Joseph Hodges Choate, who was making arrangements to build a summer home up the hill from the site; and Prescott Hall Butler, whose father Charles E. Butler had practiced law with Choate and owned a large summer estate in town. Their plan was to build a structure for social gathering, open only to Casino Company subscribers and their guests. About a year after this initial meeting, on August 5, 1885 the property was deeded to Prescott Hall Butler, who was to hold it in legal trust. The architecture firm that was building Choate’s summer home, McKim Mead and White, were chosen to build the Casino and a contract was negotiated with a builder in April 1887. The building opened in 1888 with a drafted set of “rules of admission of subscribers and visitors.” Tennis courts, billiard tables, a small stage for theater and music productions, and rooms for gathering to dance, play cards, and chat comprised the bulk of the program.  

Figure 32: Stockbridge Casino, designed by McKim Mead White. Image from Clark, Susan M., and Simone Wilson. Red Lion Inn. 1989.
Figure 33: Rathburn and Weeks parcel subdivided along Sargeant Street with Casino at corner on Main Street

The LHA minutes do not reveal any official role in the founding of the Stockbridge Casino Company. However, Sedgwick, Hoffman, the Butlers, Choate and several others listed on the roll of initial subscribers in the Company were active members of the Laurel Hill Association, most notably Sedgwick, who served as president of both organizations simultaneously. In a 1901 article published in *New England Magazine* on “The Evolution of Beautiful Stockbridge,” the author credits the LHA with saving the village streets from “unaesthetic features” on several occasions. She specifically compliments the Association for keeping “offensive structures” off Main Street and “building instead the pretty Casino.”

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In the LHA’s annual report for 1885, read aloud on Anniversary Day about a month after the deed for the Casino property was recorded is a lengthy discussion about “an incident of recent occurrence” involving the purchase of “a lot on Main Street…by clubbed subscription of several residents and property holders.” The “incident” had suggested a “conflict between commerce and aesthetics” and stirred strong opinions.

Stockbridge was at a particularly unique and respected level of beauty in the eyes of the LHA, something that had established “comfort and quiet amidst tasteful surroundings,” that had come to be desired by “far the greater portion” of Stockbridge citizens and that was “expected by those who make their summer sojourn.” In light of these facts, the group felt that “it would seem not only reasonable but imperative, that whenever the element of beauty, generously bestowed by nature and successfully cultivated by art through many years of labor, shall come in conflict with business, the latter – (unless a positive necessity) should unhesitatingly give way to the former.”

LHA President Sedgwick and the others involved in the founding of the Stockbridge Casino had framed their concerns over unwanted development along Main Street within the larger discussion of “commerce” versus “aesthetics.” Stockbridge, to them, was an idyllic place of respite and refinement. Blacksmith shops, funeral homes, and liveries, businesses that would have contributed to the town’s year-round merchant-based economy, did not belong in the village center along Main Street because the LHA’s members believed that the village’s primary identity was as a summer resort. Promoting a working class economy would nudge Stockbridge center toward the opposite of a resort: an industrial town. The minutes discuss the pitfalls of a “manufacturing establishment” moving into the village of Stockbridge.
What possible pecuniary benefit offered to our town would secure its consent that a large and populous manufacturing establishment of any kind be located along one of our streets, and the beautiful tree-growth of years be felled to give it room? Should a different feeling ever become ascendant here, then adieu to the Stockbridge who’s praises are now household words all over the land.41

In the context of a region suffering from dying farms and growing industrial centers, this statement reflected larger concerns about securing the future of Stockbridge center as a non-industrial pastoral village landscape. Before the purchase of the casino property, the LHA did not engage in or publicly approve of any actions in the community that put the interests of summer residents and visitors to Stockbridge ahead of the interests of other town citizens.

Summer residents, whether returning children of prominent native families or seasonal sojourners who regularly came to the Berkshires, had often been the community’s most generous donors to the town’s many amenities sponsored or maintained by the LHA. These families had given fountains and street lamps, money for civic structures such as the library, paid for improvements to the town’s water supply, built roads and bridges off their estates, and provided subscriptions for the purchase of mowers and other municipal machinery for the LHA and Town, among many other things. These contributions were essential elements to Stockbridge’s beauty and charm to all residents. The LHA’s stated mission in the 1850s had been explicit about this: “It was asserted that the mutual aid in promoting the aims of the Association would beget a unity of social and moral interest – a community of feeling highly productive of goods to all of its citizens.”42

The group’s approach to village improvement had subtly become less democratic over time as Stockbridge became the summer home of more and upper class seasonal residents from cities. In 1876, for example, some benches the Association had
installed on Main Street had attracted some “rowdy” loafers and “gentlemen who have known this village for many years say that they have this summer heard more profanity, vulgarity and noise in the streets than ever before.” Concerned that this behavior might “very soon render it an undesirable place,” and negatively affect property values, the LHA discusses pressuring the town for a “lock-up and a vigilant police armed with the summary power of the law.”

It was not that the group openly proclaimed allegiance to the interests of summer residents. Their work during these years, which was increasingly in the form of maintenance of the street trees, fountains, sidewalks, and flower beds they had sponsored in their first two decades, did benefit everyone in town, whether wealthy or poor, part-time or year-round. But in the late 1870s and 1880s there were more and more incidents when the group acted on behalf of summer resident interests. When the Town was planning to install a watering trough in the village for farmers who brought their wagons in for the day, the LHA went to the Selectmen and pressured them against it. At another meeting, a committee was formed to “arrange for the improvement of the approaches to Ice Glen, for the benefit, mainly, of visiting strangers and sojourners among us.” Special compliments are paid to the “residents from abroad among us” at the 1877 Anniversary Day celebration for having erected “abodes of taste and refinement.” The president and other leaders felt that they were “under especial obligations for the aid of their examples of aesthetic beauty in the arrangement and keeping of their premises; thus enhancing the reputation of our town with the generosity—if not of citizens, yet of cosmopolitans.” Thus, the impact of citizens was considered nil with respect to the aesthetics of the townscape.
In travel literature published in the 1860s and early 70s, the LHA had been consistently described as an improvement organization, its primary objective being the “beautifying of the town by causing art and taste to lend a helping hand to nature.” In the 1883 edition of *New England: A Handbook for Travellers*, the LHA is described as a society “devoted to preserving, protecting, and increasing the beauty of the village and its environs.” The sponsoring of the Casino refined the purpose of that more recent objective in the direction of acts that would protect property values and Stockbridge’s reputation as a model resort for the upper classes, effectively discouraging any other kind of trade economy from developing.45

When Sedgwick’s group purchased this Main Street property, they unofficially and casually instituted what now would be called exclusionary zoning. They prevented working class people from living on and starting what were perceived as unseemly businesses on Main Street, and they clarified for the town a set of priorities for future development based on features prevalent in the immediate context: large estates comprised of residences on large well-clipped lawns with no weeds, ample street trees, raked gravel pedestrian walks, and an overall air of tidiness and refinement. The LHA, approving of this activity, articulated a new theory of improvement that identified Stockbridge’s main merits, purpose, and clientele. Aesthetics mattered more than commerce to upper-class part-time residents, so those characteristics had to be protected at all costs. Without using the language of zoning (to come decades later to Stockbridge), the Stockbridge Casino Company with the support of the LHA, articulated a new theory of planning that advocated for protection of the town’s unique
aesthetic character through extraordinary means and, further, condoned the social control of space.

**Conclusion**

This chapter recounts the genesis of the Laurel Hill Association, the organization’s general structure and activities during its first three decades, and the shift in the LHA’s local practice from planning to preservation. This narrative echoes the arc of the national discussion about rural improvement, initially promoting the development of village spaces according to an urban pastoralist worldview that saw the country settlement as past-oriented, but implementing modern technologies and contemporary ideas about planning, sanitation, horticulture, and cultural taste, and then moving toward a view of the small town as a pastoral edenic retreat, a place that needed protection from modernity and the tempo of progress in urbanizing and industrializing areas. The Laurel Hill Association began as a planning agency, but by the 1880s, functioned more and more as a preservation league.

Although this dissertation’s coverage of the LHA ends in the 1880s, Association members continued to engage in acts of social control through their efforts to preserve Stockbridge’s picturesque townscape and ensure its continued appeal to upper class summer residents during the last years of the nineteenth and first several decades of the twentieth century in similar ways to the actions of the Stockbridge Casino Company. These acts sought not to memorialize or preserve town events, nor to save the material culture of important historical figures. The preservation work of the LHA, operating within a pastoral worldview, sought more and more in the twentieth century to protect the picturesque place Stockbridge had become by the 1890s—physically, socially, and
economically. Controlling potential changes to the built environment of the village center was the group’s primary means of keeping out unwanted structures, people, and economies that were not about selling the imagery of the place to a small elite population of summer residents. These building and planning practices were not always officially sponsored by the LHA, but members were the predominant leaders in all efforts to protect and preserve Stockbridge in its late nineteenth century form. Village improvement as a practice, although it had started out as progressive municipal planning in the 1850s and 60s, was by the 1880s essentially preservation activity, a model of practice that the LHA has continued to this day.
Notes

1 This story is summarized from the book by Margaret French Cresson, *The Laurel Hill Association* (Pittsfield, MA: Eagle Printing and Binding Co., 1953).


4 *The Pittsfield Sun*, February 3, 1859, 2.

5 Laurel Hill Association Records, Volume 1, p. 148. This is an original set of bound handwritten minutes.

6 Untitled typed document dated Stockbridge, Wednesday, August 28, 1878 in a file of Pre-1900 Annual Reports, Laurel Hill Association Archives, Stockbridge Library Historical Room, Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Laurel Hill Association Records, Volume 1, p. 109. This is an original set of bound handwritten minutes. [221 Vol II]. Berkshire Genealogist Indexing Committee, and Berkshire Family History Association, *Index to History of Berkshire County, Massachusetts: With Sketches of Its Prominent Men, Published by J.B. Beers*, 1885 (Pittsfield, MA: Berkshire Family History Association, 1995). E.W.B. Canning, Secretary of the LHA for most of the nineteenth century years, wrote the entry for Stockbridge in the *Index*.


8 Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 33. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

9 Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, pp. 11-12. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

10 Although not within the scope of this dissertation, it is interesting that there was never discussion during these years of a powerless majority or an uninterested membership with this leadership structure, problems that would arise in the twentieth century after this management structure was reworked into a Board of Trustees.
Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, pp.11-13. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 23. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, pp. 25, 17. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, pp.45, 48. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 24. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

The committee report is included in a collection of miscellaneous papers in the Laurel Hill Archive, Stockbridge Library Historical Room, Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Report made at September 12, 1853 meeting. Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 11. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records, Volume 2, p. 221. This is an original set of bound handwritten minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 55. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, pp. 11-12. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 51. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 144. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 12. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.


25. Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 6. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

26. Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 8. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

27. Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 13. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

28. Laurel Hill Association Records, Volume 2, pp. 73-74. This is an original set of bound handwritten minutes.

29. Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, pp. 20, 23. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.


38 *Minutes of the Stockbridge Casino Company*, July 11, 1884, p. 35. The balance recorded is $4714.00. List and location of property owners from: F.W. Beers, County Atlas of Berkshire, Massachusetts, “Plan of Stockbridge,” (New York, 1876), 82-83. For verification of names of summer residents see NYT articles from this period, notably *New York Times*, “Arrivals at Stockbridge: Settling Down for the Summer—Opening of the Casino,” June 7, 1896. C. Grant, Deed of Land from Charles Rathburn and Nelson Weeks to Prescott Hall Butler, Pittsfield Massachusetts Registry of Deeds, August 5, 1885. This information is on two documents housed in the Casino Company Records, Stockbridge Library Historical Room, Stockbridge, MA. These are: The Stockbridge Casino Company to George Knowles, AGREEMENT FOR BUILDING, April 1887. “ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT, made this tenth day of May in the year one thousand eight hundred and eighty seven BETWEEN The Stockbridge Casino Company...and George Knowles of the town of Stockbridge". George Knowles was compensated $7300 for building the Casino according to plans commissioned by McKim, Mead, and White architecture firm, New York, including all mason, carpenter work, and plumbing by August 15, 1887. Minutes of the Stockbridge Casino Company, July 11, 1884, p. 31.


Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, p. 61. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.


Laurel Hill Association Records 1853-1929, Volume I, pp. 38, 57, 40. This is a typed booklet of abstracts and excerpts of text from the handwritten bound minutes.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The basic narrative arc of village improvement follows a number of reform movements aimed at rural space over several decades, beginning with landscape gardening through sanitation and up to the professionalization of city planning and associated country life movement. The general trend was away from rural improvement work that was broadly conceived and multi-disciplinary, directed at the development of rural space because it was an urbanizing and modernizing process not unlike contemporary cities, toward preservation planning with the goal of preventing the downfall of rural areas. Guided by the feared disappearance of American agricultural heritage, this preservation work often involved bringing limited amounts of technology to the countryside. This trend was inline with an associated shift from planning as a series of fine-grained locally led practices to planning as a grandiose comprehensive vision characteristic of the professionalization of planning. The Stockbridge story, although not precisely reflective of the detailed nuances of this trend, reflects the overall arc from multi-disciplinary municipal activity to preservation.

The history of village improvement as a national discussion ended with the rural settlement’s figural retreat from an active dialogue with urbanity; the village, small town, and farming community had reverted into a pre-industrial ideal, a purely pastoral image that drew on the yeoman myth. By the end of the 1890s, organized village improvement as a rural project was over; it was subsumed by ‘civic improvement,’ expert-driven and focused on cities. At the same time, the Country Life movement, an
early twentieth century movement aimed at fueling agriculture and farm preservation, reigned over American rural space initiatives. Conceptually, the American rural settlement during this post-village improvement movement period was temporally and spatially separated from urbanization and modernity. Rural life was either utopian because it was simple, pre-industrial, tied to the earth, and charming—or it was dystopian because country ways were simple, dull, and provincial, divorced from cultural progression. The twentieth century inherited these visions of the American rural settlement, never regaining the active dialogue of the mid-nineteenth century decades, when rural space was married to urbanization in rapid future-directed momentum. Stockbridge, the birthplace of the longest running organized village improvement organization in the country, gained a new citizen in the 1950s, Norman Rockwell, that would disseminate the village’s preserved nineteenth century imagery in new popular form, cementing the town’s association with the small town ideal.

**Post-Village Improvement: Civic Improvement, the Professionalization of Planning and the Country Life Movement**

In the months following Birdsey Grant Northrop’s death in 1898, a series of articles on village improvement written or edited by Jessie M. Good, a forty-three year old florist in Springfield, Ohio appeared in the periodical *How to Grow Flowers*. The publisher of the magazine encouraged Good’s enthusiasm for village improvement and sponsored a convention on the topic in October 1900. That same year, the magazine was re-titled *Home and Flowers* and re-released several of Good’s articles on improvement work and societies in a published pamphlet called *Village Improvement: Examples of the Work Accomplished by Improvement Associations*. Included in this
pamphlet were long features of successful societies and detailed explanations of the ways the groups had carried out their projects. The Laurel Hill Association’s work upon Stockbridge was the first in the series, but the several others covered successes in Thomasville, Georgia; Rochester, New York; Petaluma, California; Wellesley, Massachusetts; and Wyoming, Ohio. Projects ranged from municipal trash collection to beautified city streets to the building of ladies’ waiting rooms or “Comfort Clubs.” Included were many photographs of improved settings, something unseen in the newspaper articles and periodical articles on the subject in the early 1880s.¹

The combination of this conference and a regular series of articles on improvement in a publication with a circulation of 125,000 launched a national conversation about improvement on a scale far greater than anything Northrop, Egleston, Waring and those involved with the National Association for Sanitary and Rural Improvement had been able to achieve through their ad hoc lecture circuits, un-coordinated writings on the subject, and fleeting magazines. The conference generated an official body to oversee the movement, the National League of Improvement Associations, elected a board of directors, and outlined countrywide objectives.²

The proceedings of the convention were printed in the November 1900 Home and Flowers magazine, the group’s newsletter. Speeches made at the convention as well as updates and Board reports printed over the subsequent months provided a broad definition of improvement work to attendees and subscribers. All “organizations interested in the permanent improvement and beautifying of American homes and their surroundings whether in country, village or city.” Frank Chapin Bray, the editor of the highly influential middle class magazine The Chautauquan, described the League as an
umbrella organization for civic leagues, park and outdoor art associations, leagues for social service, societies for the promotion of agriculture, trustees of public reservations, forestry commissions, international horticulture unions, landscape gardening professionals, and cottage gardening advocates. He also delivered a history of improvement work, which he said “dated from 1852” (which was incorrect—the LHA was started in 1853) with the development of the first village improvement association in the United States, but were rooted more deeply in events of the preceding decade.  

Bray did not discuss Northrop or Egleston, or their best-selling books, in his speech. He talked about Waring, but only in connection with the engineer’s street cleaning administration in New York City; Waring’s famous writings on village improvement went unnoted. Stockbridge and the Laurel Hill Association were also absent from the speech. Rather, Bray described the 1893 Chicago Worlds Fair as the instigator of the “first great impulse for public beauty in the United States.” College campus design had also been a “wonderful influence.” Not surprisingly, Bray noted that the Chautauqua movement, an outdoor institution “with home culture as its basis” counted many improvement workers among its members. Finally, Bray explained that some industrial and social developments had had great influence on the movement, among them the bicycle, the automobile, the street railway, and amateur photography. The first three were essential to the movement, Bray noted, because they brought people from cities into the country to build homes, and helped develop an interest in outdoor sports. Middle class amateur photography had inspired people to compare their pictures to those with higher “artistic standards.”

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The differences between the early village improvement movement of the 1870s and early 1880s and the civic improvement mobilization of 1900—city-centered and expert-driven—were underscored at the second annual convention of the League. Held in Buffalo in the days following the Pan-American Exposition in mid-August 1901, the convention drew together leaders in the American Park and Outdoor Art Association, the Architecture League of America, the League of American Wheelmen, and the burgeoning movement in housing reform. The Architecture League re-named itself the American League for Civic Improvement and instituted a commercial membership for landscape gardeners, manufacturers, architects, contractors, real estate dealers and other businessmen who might benefit from association with the League. Jessie M. Good prepared manuals entitled “The Work of Civic Improvement” and “The How of Civic Improvement” from which organizations could draw ideas and inspiration. The group sold these publications and others including Charles Mulford Robinson’s *The Improvement of Towns and Cities*, an author who in the years that followed became a leader in the education of professional city planners. Also available by request were packaged lectures illustrated with lantern slides that communities could order and ask to be delivered by a League board member.5

By 1904, the American League for Civic Improvement had joined with the American Park and Outdoor Art Association and edited their name to the American Civic Association. Within a decade of the Buffalo convention, the national discussion on civic improvement, which focused on cities, increasingly relied on women “municipal housekeepers” to spread the word and spark a metropolitan community’s interest. In 1935, the American Civic Association merged with the National Conference
on City Planning to form the American Planning and Civic Association. Rural village life was increasingly absent from the frenzy of national discussion among progressives, sanitation boards, and the nascent design professions. Any discussion of improvement was filtered through a “civic improvement” lens—city centered and expert driven—rather than an urban pastoral dialectic. This had the effect of segregating efforts of rural improvement, pushing them away from progressive reform initiatives occurring in cities. The development of rural communities was increasingly about finding ways to preserve country life.  

The Country Life Movement

Since the 1870s, United States census records had shown that farmers were an absolute minority of the country’s gainfully employed. By 1910, two-thirds of the nation’s population lived in urban settings. To young middle class urbanites with rural family roots, the fact that only one-third of the population was working the land was of grave concern. Progressives who got involved in the Country Life Movement understood that changes in transportation and the expansion of industry had caused this decline, but many also believed that rural life needed only to be made more attractive and efficient to reverse the country-to-city migration trend.

Further segregating rural improvement from city life, the country life movement, fueled by “rural nostalgia,” promoted improvements to farming technology not because farming needed modernity, but because there was a sense that without efficiency agricultural ways would disappear entirely in the twentieth century. According to historian William L. Bowers, the state and federal departments of agriculture, intellectuals at land grant colleges, rural school reformers, church people, and urban
groups that had “economic interest in agricultural affairs or altruistic and ‘social gospel’ motivations,” believed that farmers were the best members of society. A leader in the movement Kenyon Butterfield of the Massachusetts State College of Agriculture argued that rural inhabitants were “frank, virile, direct, clean, independent” and unmotivated by greed. Those that made their livelihoods by tilling the earth were America’s hardest working people, the most patriotic, sincere, and law-abiding. Those who tilled the earth worked the hardest, were the most sincere and law-abiding and patriotic. “The 53,820,223 persons classed by the 1930 census as rural, produce practically all of our domestic food supply, send leaders and other workers into every walk of life, and are a major factor in the preservation of our national ideals” wrote Wayne C. Nason in a Farmers’ Bulletin from 1925 entitled Rural Planning—The Village. Although reformers in the Country Life movement differed in their immediate objectives, they were united around fostering programs that preserved the ideals and values of rural society in the midst of a complex urbanizing world. The problem was that farmers were isolated; if they had telephones, better roads, reliable mail delivery, and education, they would flourish and America’s agricultural heritage would be saved. Reverence for and the sustenance of the yeoman myth was at the root of their efforts.7

By the 1910s and 20s, rural improvement had been re-defined according to theory advanced by city planning professionals and country life movement proponents. Motivated by a desire to preserve country life, reformers like Frank Waugh in his 1914 book Rural Improvement: The Principles of Civic Art Applied to Rural Conditions, Including Village Improvement and the Betterment of the Open Country; Frank L. McVey, author of The Making of a Town (1913); and Parris T. Farwell, who wrote
Village Improvement (1913) for the Farmer’s Practical Library series, guided readers concerned with country life in the United States in the latest theories of planning.8

Thus the last years of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century positioned the rural more and more on its own shelf, isolated and operating distinctly from urbanization temporally and spatially. Cultural texts echoed this figural separation, depicting rural life as either utopian because it was simple, pre-industrial, tied to the earth, and charming, or as dystopian because it was simple, dull, and provincial, and divorced from cultural progress and momentum.

Norman Rockwell’s Stockbridge

Norman Rockwell moved to Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1953, exactly one century after the Laurel Hill Association set to work making the village center into one of the most beautiful rural settlements in the country. Rockwell’s painting Stockbridge Main Street at Christmas (1967) presented Stockbridge as a physical and cultural symbol of the American small town to both the town and nation. Nationally, the image went out to the six million subscribers of McCall’s, and was purchased as a print by tens of thousands more people. Figuratively, it was the town where Rockwell’s innocent slice of American life, depicted in thousands of paintings and drawings reproduced in magazines, advertisements, calendars and other popular culture media during the previous decades, had taken place. When the print of the mural appeared on newsstands and in people’s mailboxes in December 1967, town residents gathered for Rockwell to sign their copies. Former visitors wrote to him and thanked him for bringing back memories of time they had spent in Stockbridge, “looking at the very
scene [he] so vividly portrayed.” The painting was widely appreciated and quickly became part of the town’s collective consciousness.9

Figure 34: Norman Rockwell, *Stockbridge Main Street at Christmas, “Home for Christmas,” McCall's, Dec. 1967.* ©Norman Rockwell Licensing Co.

Rockwell’s mural equated Stockbridge, the community ethos, with Stockbridge, the townscape. The village’s late nineteenth century physical infrastructure along Main Street—the particular arrangement of buildings and trees—was inseparable from the identity of the town. Most importantly, the painting reinforced a nineteenth century townscape in play: this was a place that favored pedestrians. Main Street in Stockbridge was where community occurred.

Even though the painting was created between 1958 and 1967, a period when traffic in Stockbridge was at the highest it had ever been and pedestrian life suffered, the mural depicts the village center as a space where pedestrians rule. There are several cars parked along the road, but only one driving down Main Street. One almost expects to see a horse-drawn sleigh within the frame. In contrast to vehicular traffic, there are over one hundred adults and children, eight of whom are in the street and six of those are children playing in the snow roadbed. There are no street or parking signs on view. There is no asphalt or traffic or anything else that might make a pedestrian feel that their mode of travel is outdated or in retreat. The sidewalks are not lit with electric streetlamps, but instead are illuminated from glowing store windows. The light itself
doesn’t look electric or artificial; it resembles the warm bright light of a fireplace hearth. The painting reinforced Stockbridge’s favor for the town’s golden days in the 1880s—before cars, trucks, road signs, and electric streetlamps appeared on Main Street. In short, the mural reinforced the preservationist theory of village improvement embraced during the 1880s when the Laurel Hill Association had opted to support “aesthetics” over “commerce.”

Thus the history of planning, if it includes the history of rural settlement and rural space, is intimately entwined in the development of the small town ideal. The legacy of the village improvement era—two decades of focused discussion on American small town culture followed by a conceptual turn that refigured the rural community within a purely pastoral paradigm that was inherently nostalgic and preservationist—is the stagnant and separate pre-industrial village that Rockwell captured in his painting.

Although village improvement has been presented in histories of planning and the American landscape as a prequel to professional city planning and the City Beautiful, extensive archives demonstrate a much richer and more complex story of rural improvement that spans the second half of the nineteenth century. Before the small town was enshrined as an ideal, it was a space of innovative progressive reform—physical, social, and economic. National leaders in allied movements in sanitation, women’s rights, and park planning shared an interest in seeing the rural settlement develop with the same vigor and momentum as the most progressive urban areas in the country. Finally, the rich narrative of village improvement argues that there is a long
and complex history of the sanitized and orderly aesthetics of the small town ideal. The center of small towns like Stockbridge, captured and idealized in popular culture imagery by cultural producers like Norman Rockwell and then verified by tourists who travel to see the painter’s townscape model, was planned, worked and reworked and then preserved. In short, “great” small towns didn’t just happen—they were developed through extensive public/private municipal projects and then preserved so that they might be admired by both citizens and visitors.
Notes

1 Jessie M. Good, Village Improvement: Examples of the Work Accomplished by Improvement Associations [Extracts From a Series of Articles Published in HOW TO GROW FLOWERS, Springfield, Ohio.] This pamphlet is undated and resides in box 20, in the Charles Mulford Robinson Collection at the Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.

2 The number 125,000 for the circulation of Home and Flowers is from footnote #54 in Jon Peterson, The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840-1917 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 367.


5 “Plans for a Year of Active Work,” Home and Flowers (October, 1901): 12.

6 For a detailed history of how the National League of Improvement Associations and the development of the city beautiful movement and professional city planning, see Jon Peterson, “Chapter Five: The Origins of the City Beautiful,” The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840-1917 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).


8 Frank A. Waugh, Rural Improvement; the Principles of Civic Art Applied to Rural Conditions Including Village Improvement and the Betterment of the Open Country (New York: Orange Judd Co., 1914), 7; Frank Le Rond McVey, The Making of a Town (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 1913); Parris Thaxter Farwell, Village Improvement (New York: Sturgis & Walton company, 1913). Incidentally, Farwell was a minister in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in the 1880s, during which time he served for several years as a Vice President of the Laurel Hill Association. In the 1913 edition of his book, he is identified as Chairman of the Village Improvement Committee of the Massachusetts Civic League.

9 From James Chandler, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, February 17, 1968. In October 2009, the Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts explained that the Museum began tracking sales of Rockwell painting prints in the late 1990s. Prints and objects with image of Stockbridge Main Street at Christmas are sold both in the Norman
Rockwell Museum and through the museum’s online store. In September, 2008 the numbers were: Main Street Prints 14,650; Main Street Prints framed - 4,919; Mini Main Street Prints framed 3,765; Main Street cards individual 7,610; Main Street card packs 9,270; Main Street Magnets 33,199. Museum store manager told me that the top five images the Museum store sold since 1998 are *Golden Rule, Marriage License, The Gossips, Main Street at Christmas, Freedom From Want*. 
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