

Looking for History in “Boring” Places: Suburban Communities and American Life

Michael P. Marino
The College of New Jersey

IN HER COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS of the topic, Anita Danker defines local history as “the study of the past as played out in individual communities, regions, and states.” She further argues that the incorporation of local history into a curriculum can help engage students by providing a local context to promote understanding of abstract historical events. As she notes, local history can show students “how the town or city in which their school is situated was touched or affected by the course of the nation’s defining moments.”¹ Her book *Multicultural Social Studies: Using Local History in the Classroom* provides a number of case studies to illustrate how teachers can incorporate local history into their own classrooms. These case studies focus on interesting things happening in interesting places. For example, one chapter addresses the Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts, another examines the birth of country music in Nashville, a third discusses the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Rhode Island. This focus on the exceptional is also found in William Leuchtenburg’s book *American Places: Encounters with History*, a volume whose chapters mainly address locations such as Gettysburg, Monticello, Graceland, the Grand Canyon, and Princeton University’s Nassau Hall.² This focus on distinctive places and exceptional events is a worthwhile and important way to connect local issues to wider historical themes. It is also a pedagogical premise that can engage and interest students. However, this emphasis on exceptional events (or “regular” peoples’ interactions with

exceptional events) means that many towns and communities invariably get left out of the story. What can be said about the histories of places that have no famous buildings, where no famous people lived, or where no famous events occurred?

The purpose of this article is to provide further insight into how local history can enhance a history curriculum. However, rather than focus on the exceptional, it will use things found in suburban communities to show how suburbs can inform wider understanding of American history and culture. It is intended to help teachers in suburban areas use their own communities as a basis for historical study and analysis, even though no battles, protests, or famous events may have occurred in these places. While suburbs are often derided for their banality and lack of distinctiveness, history can be found within them, and this history is vital to understanding life in modern America.

The importance of suburbs is significant because the census of 1990 revealed a profound demographic truth—more people now live in suburbs than in cities and rural areas combined.³ Most American adolescents live, attend school, and come of age in suburbs. Using these communities as historical resources can help these students better understand the scope of American history and place their lives in historical context. The use of this local connection in classrooms also promotes, as Robert Stevens argues, a “Deweyan” approach that personalizes the curriculum and allows students to see how their own lives relate to distant historical events.⁴ Furthermore, Douglas Selwyn contends that much of history is “hidden” and that different aspects of historical knowledge are often suppressed, ignored, or deemed insignificant.⁵ Local history can act as a vehicle through which this hidden history can be accessed, helping students better understand how their lives have been shaped by historical events. Local history also allows historical understanding (and history teaching) to move away from politicians, battles, and diplomacy towards social and cultural history as well as the history of everyday life. This helps broaden a curriculum to include perspectives and stories often not touched upon in history classes. The discussion here will focus on seemingly mundane aspects of suburban life, such as houses, cars, and roads, to show how these communities can serve as entry points for wider understandings about American history, culture, and society. The first section of this article addresses the issue of housing; the second section discusses road and highways; and the third section depicts the changing nature of suburban demographics to illustrate how America’s population and living patterns have evolved over time. Instructional ideas and lesson plans are included for each of these sections to assist teachers in thinking about ways to incorporate the history of suburbs into history classes.

Life in the Suburbs: Housing

The most distinctive and identifiable aspect of suburban life is the house, and suburban communities are mainly characterized by the homes within them. The traditional suburban home would seemingly offer little of interest to historians or students of history. Rather, it has mainly served as a metaphor for the dull and tedious nature of suburban life.⁶ Many books about suburbs, for example, feature aerial photographs of suburban communities and use the repetitive similarity of the landscape to make a subtle critique about life in these neighborhoods and the people that would choose to live in them. The humble suburban home—mundane as it may look to passersby—nonetheless acts as a medium through which much can be learned about life in America after World War II. The discussion here focuses on two particular examples of suburban architecture, the “Cape Cod” and the “Ranch.” These two types of homes were the most widespread architectural styles found in early post-WWII suburbs (constituting the two types built in the first Levittown, for example) and serve as a way to understand the ideology and motivations that produced suburbanization.⁷ Moreover, although these styles are by today’s standards somewhat dated, they have nonetheless established principles that undergird suburban housing to this day.

Cape Cod houses (see **Figure 1**) are distinguished by their angular roofs and graceful, symmetrical lines. Derived from architecture found in colonial New England (early examples date to the late seventeenth century), the name and style combine traditional American simplicity with the charm and comfort of a summer beach house.⁸ The Cape Cod design was revived in the late 1930s when architect Royal Barry Willis won a contest (against noted architect Frank Lloyd Wright) to design the perfect middle-class American home.⁹ This style resonated with Americans and became extremely popular; Cape Cods were a main type of architecture used in Levittown, for example, where 6,000 units were constructed. An extremely popular design, Cape Cod houses can be found throughout America. As one architectural historian notes, “it remains the quintessential image of the American home.”¹⁰ Given its ubiquity, a case could be made that the Cape Cod design represents one of the most historically significant styles of architecture in American history.

In contrast to the Cape Cods of New England, the Ranch house (see **Figure 2**) is intended to evoke life in the California countryside—a simple design nestled comfortably and unobtrusively into the surrounding landscape. Described as a “shoebox with a roof,” its one distinguishing feature is the large “picture window” in front, intended to turn the outside world into a changing panorama for those inside.¹¹



Figure 1: Curbside exterior view of Cape Cod houses.

These homes represent classic models of 1950s suburban architecture, and although non-descript and often excoriated by critics and commentators, they nonetheless offer insight into American history and American life. Perhaps the most significant theme that can be extracted from classic suburban homes is the fact that they were the product of specific and dedicated government activity. To study the history of a suburb is to gain understanding of how the American government has shaped Americans' lives in real and tangible ways. It could be argued, for example, that the most important event to occur in the United States since World War II was the massive demographic shift that occurred as a result of movement away from cities and towards suburbs. Such a process would never have happened without the actions of the United States government, and the study of suburbanization helps provide understanding of the role government has played in American history and how government action can affect the lives of its citizens.

The issue of property (and ownership of it) has been fundamental in defining American history. The American Revolution and the Civil War were both largely the result of disputes over property rights, and the U.S. government has consistently sought to create conditions to facilitate and



Figure 2: Curbside exterior view of Ranch house.

promote land ownership. Possession of property is also a core value of America's republican ideals, as reflected in the writings and beliefs of founding fathers such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. During the Great Depression, homeownership was stressed as a fundamental right of all Americans, and several New Deal legislative acts and programs were created to assist in the purchase of homes. Although these programs are not as well known as prominent New Deal measures such as social security, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), and the construction of public works, they nonetheless had a lasting and transformative impact on American history.

Prior to the Great Depression, bank lending rules and the manner in which loans were structured prevented many Americans from purchasing homes. A significant down payment was required, and loans needed to be paid off in a relatively short period of time (usually ten years). New Deal programs such as the Home Owners Loan Corporation (1933) and the National Housing Act (1934) dramatically altered the rules of home buying, however. These measures lowered the required down payment needed to purchase a home (to 3%) and lengthened a mortgage's repayment period—extending it to a maximum of thirty years. The

National Housing Act also created a government agency, the Federal Housing Authority, which guaranteed and underwrote mortgages issued by banks; this encouraged lending and lowered interest rates. As a result, homeownership became a realistic possibility for millions of (largely white) Americans who could not have purchased a home otherwise.¹² Like many New Deal programs, these benefits were intended mainly for white Americans, and preference was given to white homebuyers. The FHA would only underwrite mortgages for homes bought in white neighborhoods, for example. This helped begin a process that turned the United States into a rigidly segregated society, divided by race and class. The social consequences of these government actions became evident in the 1950s and 1960s, as cities became populated by poor minorities while suburbs were almost exclusively white enclaves.

Though little new home construction occurred during the Great Depression and World War II, a system was established that allowed the suburban boom of the 1950s to occur. These government actions also produced a substantial ripple effect by expanding the banking, insurance, construction, and retail industries, reshaping America's economic life in the process. As a result, the policies begun during the New Deal played a major role in reshaping and reordering American life. A suburban home is more than just shelter and a way to satisfy a basic human need. Rather, it is the product of a long historical legacy and offers evidence of how government action has transformed the lives of generations of Americans.

Although the American government worked to create conditions that would promote homeownership, houses still needed to be constructed and made available to buyers. The challenge was to build homes that were affordable for a large number of people, given that the median American household income in 1950 was approximately \$4,000 (roughly \$37,000 today). Traditionally, suburban homes were custom built by an owner or built in small lots by a contractor. The novelty of post-WWII suburbs was the way they were mass-produced in large numbers using innovative construction techniques. The similarity and monotony of suburban architecture was not the result of some degenerative strain in the American psyche, but rather a way to minimize costs to keep the purchase price within reach of a majority of buyers. Builders such as the Levitt family were able to achieve for homes what Henry Ford did for automobiles by minimizing expenses and maximizing production, making them affordable for people of limited means.¹³ This was accomplished by using assembly line construction methods, eliminating the need for a basement (an expensive and time-consuming room to build), controlling the cost of raw materials such as lumber and concrete, and employing cheaper unskilled labor.

The end result of these innovations was that homes could be purchased so cheaply that it was more expensive to rent an apartment in a city than it was to buy a house in the suburbs. The suburban home provides evidence of the role that innovation and ingenuity have played in American life and how technology has shaped American history and culture. The means through which these houses were made affordable gives the suburban home an important place in the pantheon of inventions that have shaped the lives of Americans. As one author notes, "Levittown was the Model T of the built environment."¹⁴ To study a suburban home is to understand a transformative moment in American history and the ways that technological innovation can produce important historical changes. Indeed, alongside the automobile, the humble, yet affordable 1950s suburban home is perhaps the greatest American invention of the twentieth century.

The architecture, design, and physical layout of a typical suburban home also help facilitate understanding of wider themes and ideas associated with American culture. Earlier, it was noted that the distinguishing feature of a Ranch-style home was the large picture window prominently displayed at the front of the house. While intended as a feature for those living in the house, a large window such as this also lets passersby look into the house and see what is inside (which is why most picture windows are barricaded with walls of curtains). Each suburban home can become, in essence, a theater offering viewers a glimpse into the lives that exist within them.¹⁵ More than a simple piece of architecture, a suburban home is also a portal into American life and culture. In some ways, suburbs are less about homes than they are about the lives of the people who live within them. The term "suburban lifestyle" connotes specific ideals, beliefs, and assumptions that are distinctively American, and to study a suburban home is to understand values central to the American experience.

If a suburban home is a form of theater, the residents of the house must all play certain roles. In suburban folklore and history (if not necessarily in reality), these roles are rigidly defined. For one, the cast is small, by rule a family of a husband, a wife, and generally one to three children. This separates the post-WWII suburban experience from the older residential patterns of urban life, where aunts, uncles, grandparents, and extended family all lived in close proximity to one another, often in the same house. The scale and design of prototypical 1950s architecture prevented such living arrangements, however, creating communities of small nuclear families. Each resident in such a house and family was expected to perform certain tasks and assume certain predetermined roles. In theory, the father worked and supported the household, while the mother cared for the house and raised the children.¹⁶ Children, in turn, got to be children and enjoy their childhoods without the pressure of work; post-WWII prosperity

allowed the house to be supported without their assistance, and unlike earlier generations, they did not need to toil alongside their father in a coal mine or mother in a garment factory.

The design of these homes also helped reinforce these predetermined familial and gender roles. Walking into a 1950s suburban home, the kitchen was typically on the left, with the living room on the right, and the bedrooms in the rear.¹⁷ Locating certain rooms in front of the house conveyed their importance and focused the “action” of the house in these areas. Various design factors also helped keep residents inside the house and in their predetermined roles. The front lawn acted as a green wall of sorts, isolating the house from all around it. Whereas older homes had stoops or porches in the front, forcing residents of a community to commingle during hot nights and leisure time, in a 1950s suburb, activity happened in the backyard, a preserve isolated and walled off from outsiders.¹⁸ Household technologies that became widespread after World War II such as the television and air conditioner also helped keep families indoors and isolated from the surrounding community.¹⁹ Nor was there much to do in a suburb. While a father returning from work in Brooklyn had a myriad of leisure options to keep him away from the house, a father living in a suburb had nowhere to go and was forced to spend time at home.²⁰

The suburban house thus became a vehicle that forced Americans to live and behave in certain ways and adhere to predetermined roles. The design of suburban homes and the nature of family life within them came to represent values and characteristics that are distinctly American. During the first wave of post-WWII suburbanization, the suburban home became a potent Cold War weapon, used to acclaim the benefits of capitalism and the triumph of the American system. Suburban homes and families also presented an image of a domestic utopia that helped encourage and maintain American democratic values. Buying a home and raising a family promoted social responsibility and civic virtue, focusing peoples’ creative energies towards the maintenance of a home and care of children and away from more radical pursuits.²¹

The 1950s suburban home serves as a means through which much can be learned about American history, society, and culture. For one, it illustrates the effect that government action can play in shaping the lives of its citizens. It also illustrates the impact that key historical events (such as the New Deal) have had on the lives of everyday people. The suburban home also serves as a symbol that illustrates a number of themes central to understanding American history. The suburban home and the methods used to construct it demonstrate the impact that technology and innovation have had on American history. Indeed, one can place the suburban home

on a continuum of epochal American inventions that have together shaped the lives of generations of people. During the 1950s, the suburban home also represented an idealized vision of American life, and the architecture and design of suburban homes and communities helped promote this ideal. This vision continues to occupy an important place in American society, as buying a house and starting a family continues to serve as a benchmark of success. The study of a suburban home can help illustrate a cultural imperative that has defined America since World War II.

Life in the Suburbs: Roads and Highways

If houses constitute the dominant characteristic of a suburb, then roads and the cars that travel on them are only slightly less important. Indeed, the two have a symbiotic relationship, as suburbs could not exist without automobiles, roads, and highways and ownership of a car is a fundamental prerequisite for life in a suburban community. Much of the criticism of suburbs is predicated on this fact, and attacks on suburbs often focus on the cars so necessary to connect them to the outside world. It is argued, for example, that cars are dangerous, take up vast amounts of space, consume scarce resources, create pollution, and—because of the expenses they generate—represent a net loss for society as a whole, requiring a massive amount of resources to maintain the infrastructure that supports them.²²

Like suburban houses, suburban roads would seem to offer little in way of wider historical understanding. A closer look reveals their significance, however. For one, there is the obvious contrast between the street pattern in many American cities, which follows a rigid, geometrical pattern of perpendicular streets, with that found in suburbs, which usually consists of streets that gently curve and twist (called “curvilinear” in developer parlance), cul-de-sacs, and roads that go nowhere. The term “subdivision” is, in fact, a product of this phenomenon, as many suburban communities exist as isolated developments built off a single main road. Of these two types of road design, the gridded street pattern of cities offers certain advantages. Gridded streets are easy to negotiate and provide a sense of orientation and direction; they also help non-native speakers find their way, an important concern in communities with large immigrant populations. Suburban roads, conversely, are frustrating and confusing, and even with a map, it is difficult to know where one is going. As one study of suburban architecture notes, “unrelenting curves create an environment that is utterly disorienting.”²³ These curvilinear, directionless roads serve several purposes, however. For one, they promote isolation and discourage strangers from passing through a community. Much as individual suburban homes serve an isolating function, so too do the roads that connect them

to the outside world. Given how frustrating it is to navigate curving roads, only those who live in a particular place and who know where they are going will drive on them. Strangers will stay away. If suburban homes promote isolation among individual households, suburban roads accomplish the same effect for communities and subdivisions. Planners and architects have also discovered that people tend to dislike walking on curvilinear roads and that these thoroughfares exist largely to move cars from place to place. This further reinforces the often anonymous character of suburban life, and attests to the reciprocal relationship between automobiles and suburban homes. Like suburban houses, suburban roads promote a specific lifestyle and force those who live in them to live a certain way. They again testify to the nature, style, and character of suburban living—isolated, remote, and dependent on cars.

Life in suburbs is, in fact, largely about cars and America's historical obsession with this form of transportation. This fact is most evident in the rash of highway building that occurred across twentieth-century American history. These highways illustrate a number of historical themes and ideas significant to wider understandings of American history and culture. Highways served as conduits into the suburban towns, speeding development and accelerating movement into areas that were hitherto remote and inaccessible. As a result, they not only changed the way Americans live, but also shaped their eating habits, widened their entertainment options, expanded the retail industry, and helped speed the decline of urban and town centers.²⁴

Like suburban homes, highways also illustrate how the government has shaped American history and the lives of its citizens. The highway system that stretches across the United States could have been built only through government intervention and largesse on a massive scale. The motivations of various levels of government (federal, state, and local) to produce this highway system reveal a number of important historical themes and concepts. To study the history of highways, for example, promotes deeper understanding of the Cold War (due to the government's desire to disperse America's population during this period), labor history (because of the need to provide jobs for the building trades), and the way America's government operates (due to the massive lobbying of the government by various industries to pass highway legislation, as well as the use of tactics such as eminent domain).

The study of highways also promotes understanding of the dramatic demographic and economic realities that shaped American society after the Second World War. Not only did highways foster suburbanization, but their construction began the slow process of decline in many American cities. Highways, for example, made it easy to relocate industries and

manufacturing away from cities in the northeast and Midwest to the south and southwest.²⁵ When built through cities, highways also tended to eviscerate the neighborhoods in their path, further accelerating urban decline and flight to the suburbs.²⁶ This movement of people and business precipitated a migratory shift that has dramatically altered America's demographic composition and its political and economic life.

Finally, and most significantly, suburban roads and highways have turned the United States into a nation dependent on cars. First begun in the 1920s, by 1960, the transformation of America into a society built around the automobile was complete. During the 1950s, when gas cost 18 cents a gallon (approximately \$1.61 today) and the automobile was viewed a symbol of status and prosperity, creating a society centered on automobiles seemed logical. The modern United States is, in fact, a nation whose very existence is predicated on the widespread availability of cheap gas. As a result, generations of Americans have lived their lives around the consequences of this fact.²⁷ The expense of cars, gas and maintenance, the inconvenience of traffic, and the need to drive as a function of everyday life is a reality nearly every American must face, and this reality clearly illustrates how historical events and processes shape life in the present day and how decisions made in the past influence life in the present.

Life in Suburbs: People and Populations

Suburbs are not only about homes and roads. Ultimately, and most importantly, they are about people, and studying how people live and function within these communities is a last important illustration of how suburbs can produce deeper understandings of American history. It has been noted that the suburbanization of America that occurred after World War II produced dramatic demographic, economic, and cultural changes. Understanding the causes and consequences of this migration to the suburbs is central to understanding life in modern America and how and why American society has evolved in the way it has. Indeed, the impact of suburban migration on American life may be the most significant issue to arise out of the nation's history in the second half of the twentieth century.

The post-WWII period of suburbanization produced a fundamental racial reordering of American society. Due to a varied series of push-pull factors, urban white ethnic residents were drawn to suburban communities. Cities, in turn, became populated by poorer residents of Latino and African-American descent. Cities suffered due to the subsequent decline in tax revenue, the strain on social services, and the concurrent loss of blue-collar manufacturing jobs that typically provided employment for new arrivals. As a result, many American cities entered a long period

of decline and became increasingly segregated by race and class from the suburbs surrounding them. Even mighty New York City entered an economic downturn in the late 1950s, as its unemployment rate began to tick upward and it shed manufacturing jobs in large numbers.²⁸ By the early 1970s, the city was borrowing money simply to pay interest on previous debts incurred. Although New York recovered from this crisis, many cities have not, and understanding the causes of urban decline and the consequences of suburban migration are vital for understanding the nature of life in modern America.

American communities are in a constant state of flux, however, and rarely do they stay the same for long. Although it is easy to think of suburbs and cities representing two diametrically opposed ways of life, the reality is not so obvious in the modern era. Studies of suburbs have shown that they have evolved significantly from their days as preserves for white urban refugees. For example, many suburban communities have become increasingly diverse and more “urban” in their demographic composition and character. Many suburbs (often called “ethno-burbs”) also now have a distinct ethnic profile, making them similar to the urban enclaves of the past.²⁹ Moreover, the push-pull factors that lured white residents to the suburbs after World War II clearly still hold sway, and suburbs still attract people looking for better schools, the ability to own a home, and a quieter, more peaceful life.

Although suburbs are colloquially assumed to be prosperous and peaceful, in recent years, many suburban communities have experienced symptoms of decline that have traditionally impacted American urban areas. As one study notes, “suburbs as poor as any city neighborhood have emerged to disrupt the myth of suburban success.”³⁰ In some cases, this is simply a function of geography, as suburbs that directly border cities often begin to experience many of the problems (such as crime, poverty, and housing deterioration) that impact cities. These suburbs are called “inner ring” suburbs and they are generally older communities, first settled in the years after World War II. Many of these suburbs have taken on the characteristics of depressed urban areas, and historian John Teaforde refers to them as “suburban ghettos” that “exhibit all the symptoms of social disaster.”³¹ Researchers refer to this phenomenon as the “suburban life cycle” and suggest that as housing in a suburb ages, the community will experience deterioration, culminating in a “thinning out” of the population and a subsequent decline in tax base and services. Eventually, a suburb may reach a “crisis point” in which various factors combine to place a community in severe difficulty.³² Today, suburban communities vary considerably from one another; they are not monolithic in their character, nor is the idea of a suburb easy to characterize with broad, sweeping observations.

Older realities about these suburban communities still remain, however. Many suburbs are still segregated (especially by class) and it is not uncommon for extremely wealthy suburban areas to exist in close proximity to poor urban ones, or for a poor suburb to border a wealthy one. The study of suburbs and their demographics can provide knowledge of how issues such as segregation and separation of wealth still impact American society. Moreover, the study of suburbs and the people that live in them also reveals the complexity of American life and how historical forces have shaped the lives of the American people.

Conclusion

Suburban communities are often viewed as innocuous and uninteresting (or worse), especially when compared with the rich histories and historical legacies found in cities. This would seemingly render suburbs as unimportant and not conducive to deeper historical investigation. The analysis here has sought to dispute this notion by showing how suburbs can serve as entry points for learning about issues and themes vital to American history. Incorporating suburban history into a curriculum is integral since America has become a suburban nation and most American students now live and grow up in suburbs. Using suburbs as a historical resource allows the places where students live to be connected to American history and to illustrate how their lives have been shaped by historical forces. Even the most innocuous and seemingly “boring” suburban town is shaped by these factors, and examination of them connects a community to important historical themes and concepts. Some of these themes and concepts address the political dimensions of American history; this is found, for example, in the legislation that facilitated home construction, home buying, and highway building. These government actions can, in turn, be connected to key events in American history such as the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the New Deal. The study of suburbs also lends itself to deeper understanding of American cultural and social history. Suburban homes and roads have produced a distinctly American character, one shaped by the design and style of its housing and the role and importance of its roads. Suburbs also promote appreciation of the steadily evolving nature of American society. Such analysis helps students understand that communities rarely stay the same for long, and that factors such as immigration and segregation have shaped the places in which they live. This understanding, in turn, promotes deeper appreciation of the nature of historical chronology and how history is not merely a dull abstraction drawn from textbooks, but rather a vital process that is the product of a myriad of distinct processes, changes, and events.

Notes

1. Anita C. Danker, *Multicultural Social Studies: Using Local History in the Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), 112.
2. William E. Leuchtenburg, *American Places: Encounters with History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
3. Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-1900* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 10.
4. Robert L. Stevens, *Homespun: Teaching Local History in Grades 6-12* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001), xiii.
5. Douglas Selwyn, *Following the Threads: Bringing Inquiry Research into the Classroom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 133.
6. An analysis of the critiques of suburbs would create a lengthy discussion in its own right. For a survey of portrayals of suburbs in films and novels, see Robert Beuka, *Suburban Nation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004). Well-known critiques of suburbs written in the post-WWII era include Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformation, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961); and William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).
7. These two models were featured in the original Long Island Levittown, for example.
8. G. E. Kidder Smith and Marshall B. Davidson, *A Pictorial History of Architecture in America* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1976), 39.
9. Richard Guy Wilson, *The Colonial Revival House* (New York: Henry Abrams, 2004), 179.
10. Allan Greenberg, *The Architecture of Democracy: American Architecture and the Legacy of the Revolution* (New York: Rizzoli International, 2006), 37.
11. For the Ranch house, see Clifford E. Clark, "Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), especially 178-179.
12. The influence of the federal government in the housing market is discussed in many places, most notably Chapter 11 of Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Also Alexander Garvin, *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't*, second ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), 196; Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 123-127.
13. For a discussion of the Levitts' building techniques and the comparison to Henry Ford, see Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 120.
14. Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took over America and How We Can Take It Back* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 227.
15. On the suburban home as a form of theater, see Lynn Spigel, "From Theater to Space Ship: Metaphors of Suburban Domesticity in Postwar America," in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (New York: Routledge, 1997).
16. Research indicates that gender roles in practice were less rigid than popular memory would indicate. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994).
17. For how suburban interior architecture shaped American domestic life, see Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown*

(Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 70; Clark, "Ranch-House Suburbia," 179.

18. Suburban lawns are discussed in Robert Messia, "Lawns as Artifacts: The Evolution of Social and Environmental Implications of Suburban Residential Land Use," in *Suburban Sprawl: Culture, Theory and Politics*, eds. Matthew J. Lindstrom and Hugh Bartling (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2003).

19. For the influence of the air conditioner, see Raymond Arsenault, "The End of the Long Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture," in *Searching for the Sunbelt: Historical Perspectives on a Region*, ed. Raymond A. Mohl (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993).

20. For this point, see Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream*, 70.

21. For the cultural and political significance of suburbs, see Chapter 7 of Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Also see Chapter 8 of Robert Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

22. For the negative impact of automobiles and their relationship to suburbia, see Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000); Anthony Flint, *This Land: The Battle over Sprawl and the Future of America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Douglas E. Morris, *It's a Sprawl World After All* (Gabriola Island, Canada: New World Publishers, 2003).

23. Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck, *Suburban Nation*, 34.

24. For malls and the decline of cities, see Lizbeth Cohen, "From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America," *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (October 1996). For fast food, see Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 263-265.

25. These points are drawn from Owen Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highway System* (New York: Penguin, 1999); Mark H. Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-1989* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

26. See Robert A. Caro's discussion of the impact of the Cross Bronx Expressway on the neighborhood of East Tremont in Chapter 37 of *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).

27. A discussion of this can be found in Kay, *Asphalt Nation*.

28. See Chapter 10 of Joshua B. Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor since World War II* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

29. See Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 12-13. A profile of an ethnic suburb in California can be found in Timothy B. Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994). A discussion of the experiences of recent immigrants on Long Island can be found in Sarah J. Mahler, *American Dreaming: Immigrant Life on the Margins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

30. Bernadette Hanlon, *Once the American Dream: Inner-Ring Suburbs of the Metropolitan United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010), 15.

31. Jon Teaford, *The American Suburb: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 46.

32. William H. Lucy and David L. Phillips, "Suburban Decline: The Next Urban Crisis," *Issues in Science and Technology* 17, no. 1 (September 2000).

Appendix A

Activity #1: Images of the Suburbs

The lesson promotes inquiry learning and historical thinking, and can be accomplished within a single class period. Note that this lesson can either work as a jigsaw or as a carousel activity. As a jigsaw, students should be successively placed in two groups; in the first group, students become “experts” in a particular historical resource related to suburbs. In the second group, the student experts work together to write an informal “history” of suburbs based on the materials they have analyzed. As a carousel, students work together to analyze each historical resource, moving together from source to source. They then collaboratively write the history noted above.

The resources used for this activity are listed below. Note that teachers may want to provide a graphic organizer and/or guiding questions to assist their students in making accurate conclusions.

Resource	Possible Guiding Question(s)	Conclusion
1) Advertisements from the late 1940s for Levittown, PA. <i>Found at: http://statemuseumpa.org/levittown/one/f.html</i>	What arguments do the advertisements use to convince people to move the suburbs?	Suburbs were aggressively marketed to veterans and city residents at attractive prices.
2) Photographs of Levittown during construction and from the air. <i>Found at: http://tiger.uic.edu/~pbhales/Levittown/building.html</i>	What are some characteristics of a suburban community? Why do the houses on a suburban street look the same?	Suburbs were built using assembly line techniques to lower costs and speed production.
3) YouTube clip (“Crisis in Levittown”) of Levittown residents outraged at an African-American family moving into the neighborhood. <i>Found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrJMez9vkrw</i>	Why are Levittown residents concerned about an African-American family moving into the neighborhood?	Suburbs were originally conceived as distinctly white neighborhoods.
4) Lyrics to songs about the suburbs. Examples include “Sprawl II” by Arcade Fire, “Jesus of Suburbia” by Green Day, and “In My Garage” by Weezer.* <i>Found at: www.azlyrics.com</i>	What vision of suburbs emerges in American popular culture?	Suburbs are often viewed as boring and stultifying, especially by young people.

5) Definitions of two federal laws: The National Housing Act of 1934 and Title I of the National Housing Act of 1949. Found at: http://fraser.stlouisfed.org/docs/historical/martin/54_01_19340627.pdf and http://61674785.nhd.weebly.com/the-housing-act-of-1949.html	How did the federal government create a framework to help Americans purchase homes?	The U.S. government took an active role in promoting the growth of suburbs.
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* Experience indicates that students are motivated to a greater extent by these contemporary songs than by Malvina Reynolds’ 1963 song, “Little Boxes,” which is often used when suburbanization is taught.

Appendix B

Activity #2: Suburban Architecture

This activity is based on the “CSI approach” discussed by Yohuru Williams in his book, *Teaching U.S. History Beyond the Textbook* (Corwin, 2009), and is designed to help students access some of the themes associated with the study of suburban housing. The CSI method calls for students to take on the role of detectives. Students are first given various types of evidence and must then create an account or recreation of what happened at a specific moment in time.

For this exercise, students should be given different types of materials that speak to the character and ideology of suburban culture. Some examples of this evidence are included below. These are photos and floor plans of Cape Cod and Ranch houses (see Images #1 and #2 below for exteriors; #3 and #4 for interiors), and photos of a 1950s kitchen and living room, the key rooms in the house (see images at <http://www.pinterest.com/dccalhoun/1950s-interiors/>). Additional evidence can be provided in the form of advertisements from the era, which also reinforce gender roles (see images at <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/household-ads-1950s>) and the era’s obsession with automobile transportation (see images at <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/cars-ads-1950s>). Finally, YouTube clips of 1950s television commercials can also be used for their portrayals of 1950s domesticity (see, for example, the Coke commercial at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVPByTYILks>).

Students should be given this evidence and asked to create an account of what life was like in the 1950s. Some hints can be provided for “clues” that are less obvious. For example, the positions of the rooms in the floor plans of the 1950s homes show how their architecture helped promote a certain kind of family life. In the Cape Cod house, for example, the living room and kitchen are placed in the front of the house, while the single-floor Ranch house contains relatively small bedrooms, but a much larger living room. Different kinds of motivators can also be used to introduce this activity. For example, students can be told that they have been transported back to a 1950s suburb and their explorations of the area yielded the evidence that they now have before them.



Image 1: Exterior of Cape Cod houses



Image 2: Exterior of a Ranch house

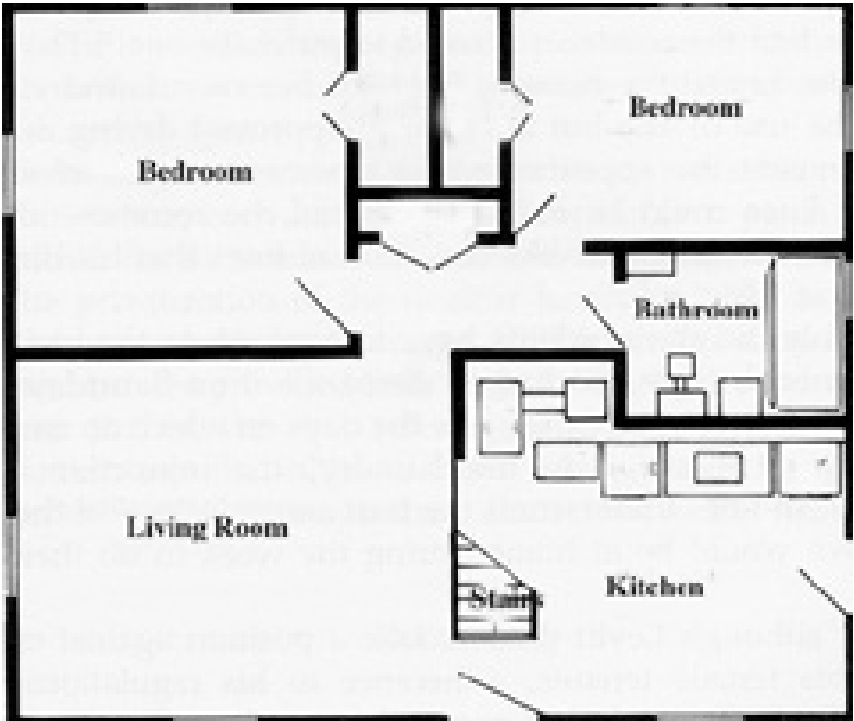


Image 3: Interior floorplan of a Cape Cod house

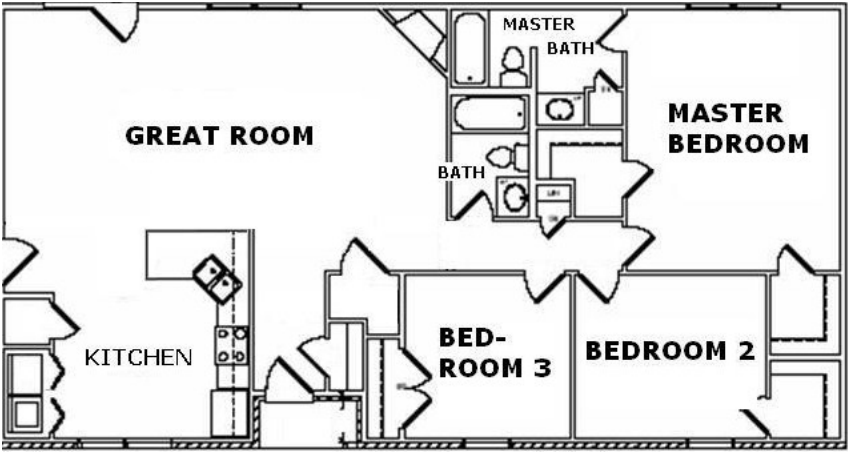
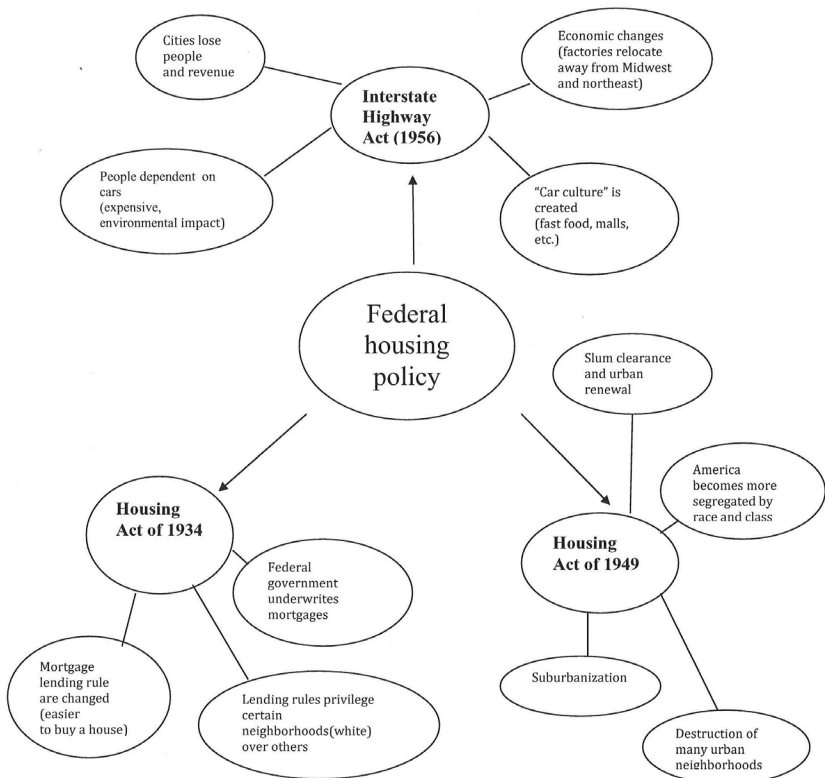


Image 4: Interior floorplan of a Ranch house

Appendix C

Activity #3: Government and the Suburbs

This activity can work in two ways. The main idea that undergirds it is that the government has played an active role in creating suburbs, and has therefore established a lifestyle that most Americans must today accept and aspire to. Students should be given a semantic map and asked to consider the consequences of various government actions related to suburbanization. Students can be provided with all the conclusions (listed below) and tasked with sequencing them properly, or they can be given some of the clues and use them to create their own conclusions and interpretations. A filled in map might look like this:



Appendix D

Activity #4: Student Life in the Suburbs

Students should be presented with some type of instrument to record their actions and movements during the week of the school year. They should be told to record all the things they did during a given week and (most importantly) how they got to the various places they went. The purpose of the assignment is to illustrate how adolescents who live in suburbs are wholly dependent on their parents and that their lives are shaped by cars and roads. Additionally, once the record keeping has been completed, students can be asked to consider the consequences of this dependency. Research suggests, for example, that children who grow up in suburbs become less capable as adults because they developed no self reliance or independence in their teen years.

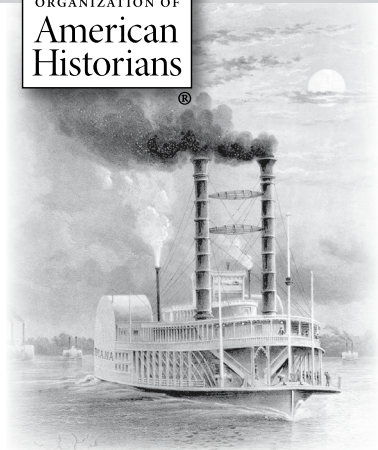
Appendix E

Activity #5: Transportation in the Suburbs

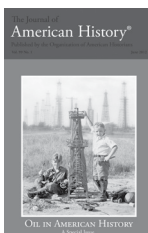
The purpose of this activity is to show students how roads shape their lives. Students should be given between five and ten destinations at varying distances from their community. They should then work collaboratively to determine the most effective route to the various destinations. Ideally, these routes should suggest that their community is dependent on certain key roads and highways. Once these are identified, student groups should research the origins of these thoroughfares.



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