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Anne E. Krulikowski
West Chester University, AKRULIKOWSKI@WCUPA.EDU

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"A Workingman’s Paradise"

The Evolution of an Unplanned Suburban Landscape

Anne E. Krulikowski

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, land speculators laid out numerous unplanned suburban subdivisions in outlying wards of large industrial North American cities, including a group of nineteen such subdivisions in lower Southwest Philadelphia. With few restrictions on building and land use, individual families created businesses, dwellings, and yards to meet their own needs; thus, these subdivisions were characterized by significant variations in access to modern services and in the size, style, and quality of dwellings. Residents took great pride in their neighborhoods but also valued the surviving natural landscape preserved by undeveloped blocks and lots.

Historians of suburbia have tended to focus on the most visible manifestations of North American suburban life, variations of planned suburbs. Scholars have framed corresponding research agendas while overlooking the great variety of suburbs shaped by a large continent with diverse regional geographic environments, economies, and demographic patterns. A little-explored example of American suburban life once existed in lower Southwest Philadelphia, the southernmost section of the city west of the Schuylkill River (fig. 1). In November 1885, the Philadelphia Record carried advertisements for building lots in "Elmwood" and "Clear-View," the first two residential tracts subdivided on former farmland in lower Southwest Philadelphia. By World War I, land speculators operating on shoestring budgets had transformed the agricultural landscape of long-persisting farm families into nineteen unplanned residential subdivisions containing approximately 11,500 building lots—at least on registered subdivision plans (fig. 2). By 1930, almost 3,000 families had purchased or built family dwellings. Churches, schools, small retail shops, baseball fields, and fraternal halls created a neighborhood by providing the commercial, social, and civic spaces that connected families to one another.¹

This suburban landscape never was developed completely. Years of depression and war together...
with other factors brought building almost to a standstill. Hundreds of unsold lots, scattered houses surrounded by large gardens, and surviving market, dairy, and even a few pig farms created an improbable semirural community within the municipal boundaries of one of the largest cities in the United States. In the 1940s, this underdeveloped vicinity caught the attention of the newly established Philadelphia City Planning Commission, which envisioned a modern, office-tower Philadelphia swept clean of its decaying industrial economy. Within the context of this overall vision, Southwest Philadelphia seemed the perfect location for light industry, highways, and expanded airport facilities. The Eastwick Urban Redevelopment Project of the 1960s, the largest ever funded by the federal government, demolished a broad swath of this vicinity. A once-thriving neighborhood with even greater potential was erased from the landscape of Philadelphia and rendered invisible to the eyes of later historians. Residents of the new housing units pay little attention to the fifty or so surviving but scattered dwellings, which speak of a different world that inexplicably lingers within their own. These remnants of the old neighborhood offer an intriguing glimpse of a landscape commonly found in many North American cities—the unplanned suburb.²

A Different Kind of Suburb

More than a century ago, sociologists identified subdivisions such as those in Southwest Philadelphia

as a type of suburb. Unplanned suburbs generally grew up in outlying urban wards or adjacent to the municipal boundaries of industrial cities. Land speculators purchased farm tracts and subdivided them into building lots. Families with modest budgets who could not afford speculatively built housing in more urbanized areas of the city—as well as those who sought an alternative to more urbanized wards—found that the lack of building codes or poor code enforcement in these vicinities offered them latitude to build a home and achieve some economic independence. With few restrictions on building and land use, such tracts evolved in a haphazard fashion as families frequently built their own dwellings and often made do without municipal services for many years. Unplanned subdivisions lacked the aesthetic coherence of suburbs designed by landscape architects, whose work and vision also created a cultural ideal. Thus, many contemporary observers and later historians did not recognize unplanned subdivisions as "suburbs."³

Historians are latecomers to suburban studies. The founding study initiated by Sam Bass Warner in 1962 examined carefully planned suburbs for an upper- and middle-class market. This first generation of suburban historians generally shared the

cultural attitudes of post–World War II critics of contemporary suburbanization and were motivated to understand the origins of suburban development. Looking back to the mid-nineteenth century, these historians also accepted the work and ideas of landscape designers and architects such as Andrew Jackson Downing, Alexander Jackson Davis, and Frederick Law Olmsted as typifying American suburban development. Thus, historians focused on the work of these men and the suburbs that exhibited the aesthetic and cultural values these professionals advocated. Studied suburbs have been located primarily in the industrial Northeast and Midwest of the United States. Tracing suburban development along important streetcar, trolley, and railroad lines, most first-generation historians focused on the period between the Civil War and the 1920s, when those transportation technologies saw peak use. The 1920s automobile suburbs laid the basis for the suburban sprawl of the post–World War II era. Kenneth Jackson and Robert Fishman, two historians who attempted to provide a broader picture of suburban development, initiated a debate regarding the nature of post–World War II residential development, but studies generally focused on individual suburbs at a particular time in their development—usually the period of their creation and very early existence.

This made sense. Well-known landscape designers and architects fashioned suburbs as works of art, imposing a unified landscape aesthetic and carefully regulating building and land use. Their achievements were orderly and peaceful neighborhoods that encompassed large dwellings in identifiable styles surrounded by spacious yards with trees. As a testament to careful planning and maintenance, Riverside, Forest Hills, Llewellyn Park, Chestnut Hill, and many others still exist as leafy and protected residential environments. They can be visited, photographed, and studied. Architects and planners kept detailed records of their projects, which were also written about in architectural and planning journals. The scholarly focus on design, architecture, planning, and the dissemination of cultural values was shaped by this documentation as well as by the suburban artifacts themselves.

Laying claim to a “new” suburban history, a second generation of suburban historians has assertively redirected the focus of suburban studies. In something of a manifesto for research, Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue have argued that the “suburban ascendency” of the post–World War II era is the proper focus for suburban studies. Kruse and Sugrue emphasize that suburbs became home to the majority of Americans between 1945 and 1990, which made the suburbs the most prominent (and most politically powerful) landscape during the second half of the twentieth century. Even more important, recent scholars have found suburbia to be complicated by a diverse population in terms of class and race, factors not recognized by previous historians who accepted the criticisms of postwar cultural critics that suburbs were homogeneous and conformist. New suburban historians have posed provocative questions about the post–World War II metropolitan political economy to examine the growth and impact of conservatism on American politics and culture. Their central focus on the origins of present-day conservative politics, however, limits their perspective (primarily) to the second half of the twentieth century and to regions of the country in which the political Right is especially visible today: mainly the South and California, as well as the Midwest. Like earlier suburban historians, new suburbanists have also chosen to focus on a very visible manifestation of the American suburban experience, one that tends to reinforce the perception that the suburbs happened mainly after World War II.


Individual case studies of unplanned suburbs, like those in Southwest Philadelphia, with a significant history before World War II offer the opportunity to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of North American suburban development. Several historians and geographers have provided careful studies demonstrating the importance and variety of unplanned suburbs in North America. In his work on unplanned African American suburbs, Andrew Wiese has shown that the suburban ideal was not limited to white Americans. Wiese has analyzed a variety of African American suburbs in different geographical regions of the country in which residents pursued their own vision of a suburban house and neighborhood over the course of the twentieth century. Geographer Richard Harris has done the most work on unplanned, largely self-built suburbs and has developed new perspectives and methods for studying such landscapes. On the basis of his extensive study of Toronto’s unplanned suburbs and several similar areas in the United States, Harris has concluded that such suburbs, largely inherited by the industrial working class, were common landscapes before World War II, possibly more prevalent than planned suburbs. He has also suggested that it was before World War II when they most differed from planned suburbs. Southwest Philadelphia subdivisions also offer some intriguing variations to Harris’s findings for suburban Toronto, a city that, like Philadelphia, took pride in being a “city of homes.” Tracing the creation and evolution of the lower Southwest Philadelphia subdivisions provides insight about suburban development within municipal boundaries, the identity and activities of subdivisions, the ways in which registered subdivision plans differed from those of planned suburbs, the types of financing arrangements available to lot purchasers and house builders, the quality of self-built dwellings, and the many ways in which residents themselves shaped the landscape and created neighborhoods.

“You Cannot Lose Money”: Land Speculation and Subdivision

The particular group of investors who created the Southwest Philadelphia subdivisions, the timing and location of their activities, their limited budget, and their financial goals determined both the quality of the initial subdivision and the character of future development. Southwest Philadelphia was first subdivided during a period of frantic land speculation that occurred throughout the metropolitan region and elsewhere in the country from the mid-1880s to the onset of the 1893 depression and thereafter in short bursts until World War I. This fever hastened the conversion of farmland in and surrounding the city to residential, commercial, and industrial uses by subdividing the parcels into more marketable commodities: building lots. The number of lots coming onto the market during this period of speculation exceeded the demand from future home builders and very small-scale speculators investing in one or a few lots, so that many in Southwest Philadelphia (and throughout the metropolitan region) remained unsold. Investors sold as many lots as they could and then disappeared. Home builders were left to construct dwellings haphazardly among hundreds of unsold and unused lots. Civic associations would have to lobby utility companies and city hall for services. Eventually, thousands of unclaimed, unused, and untaxable lots would be regarded as a drain on municipal finances. On the plus side, the rapid conversion of farmland into inexpensive building lots made the dream of a family dwelling surrounded by a plot of ground a reality for the growing population of native-born and immigrant working-class families.

In the late nineteenth century, the City of Philadelphia offered tremendous opportunities for land development and even more for irresponsible land

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speculation. The Annexation Act of 1854 had brought the entire 129 square miles of Philadelphia County—including the two townships west of the Schuylkill River—under the jurisdiction of the municipal government. As late as 1880, just prior to the great land boom, the urbanized area of Philadelphia (the Center City business district and surrounding wards encompassing commercial, industrial, and residential use) covered only about sixteen square miles. Aside from scattered mill and industrial sites, most of the “city” was active farmland. With recognition to the variety of land use within the municipal boundaries, a three-tier tax rate was established: farm, suburban, and city. In the 1880s and 1890s, the amount of farmland was rapidly reduced as numerous farm tracts in outlying wards were subdivided into building lots and were revalued at suburban rates.9

Philadelphia newspapers recorded escalating real estate activity. The construction and sale of tens of thousands of dwellings built in the wards adjacent to Center City during the 1880s certainly contributed to the growing prominence of real estate matters in Philadelphia papers. The bulk of expanded coverage, however, was due to the even greater number of building lots offered for sale in outlying city wards, adjacent counties, and even farther afield. Speculation in Philadelphia was part of a national land spree. Cottage lots in New Jersey beach towns, subdivisions in Florida, and investment lots in the Dakota and Washington Territories were offered to optimistic Philadelphia speculators. One Chicago land company warned Philadelphians, “At the rate they have been going, the Public Domains will all be gone in 5 years.”10

Closer to home, Philadelphia residents could find investment opportunities in almost every section of the city. When the Pennsylvania Railroad extended its Germantown line farther westward to Chestnut Hill, a real estate boom hit that section of the city. “The whole of Germantown is for sale,” reported a resident in the spring of 1887. Property values in the Germantown and Chestnut Hill areas doubled and even trebled in just one year, with the effect that “nearly every one who has any land upon which dwellings are not already erected is offering it for sale.” Company executive Henry Houston had convinced the Pennsylvania Railroad to extend service to Chestnut Hill because he had purchased 3,000 acres there on which to create a suburb. Together, he and architects G. W. and W. D. Hewitt designed a resort hotel, a country club, a cricket club, and an Episcopal church as civic anchors for the future community. Despite the importance of such features to well-planned suburbs, Robert Fishman perceptively noted in his own discussion of Chestnut Hill that the “distinguishing” mark of such suburbs was not the presence of individual public buildings or the style and quality of private dwellings but the landscape considered as a unified whole: “the pattern of tree shaded streets, broad open lawns, substantial houses set back from the sidewalks.” Houston intended to profit, but he had the economic resources to purchase well-situated land and hire established architects to carefully lay out his suburb. For Houston, this was a solid investment rather than a speculative venture.11

In contrast, speculators whose activities were paced to take advantage of the land frenzy subdivided farms in Southwest Philadelphia. As the level of speculation increased by the mid-1880s, even outlying wards without transportation were regarded as possible opportunities for profitable speculation. Here, pure speculation rather than unified landscape design or solid investment defined the scope of activity. One group of speculators active in Southwest Philadelphia issued the same warning found in many such advertisements: “DON’T COME IN AND GO OUT OF THIS BIG WORLD WITHOUT OWNING A PART OF IT.”12 When these men purchased the Erwig family farm and created the Elmwood subdivision plan, no curving lanes or parks decreased the total number of 50-by-100-foot building lots the surveyor was able to carve into this plot of land (fig. 3). This subdivision “plan” did not represent an attempt to create a lasting community through careful design; each numbered lot represented one increment toward the total profit these men hoped to gain from their speculative venture. These investors were lucky enough to purchase a farm on Tonicum Avenue (see fig. 2, center right), which was one of the two main thoroughfares in lower Southwest Philadelphia.

9 The Annexation Act itself was partly a speculative venture supported by large West Philadelphia landholders who hoped to increase the value of land they wanted to sell. The Philadelphia Record (hereafter PR) reported details on tax rates four times each year. For more discussion of the change in land use and the demise of farming within the city, see Anne Krulikowski, “‘Farms Don’t Pay’: The Transformation of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Landscape, 1880–1930,” Pennsylvania History 72, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 194–217.

10 “Philadelphia Is Fast Growing,” Sunday Press, April 6, 1890, 1; “Free Homes,” PR, April 14, 1888. Unless a page number is given, all PR citations refer to advertisements on the real estate page(s) from the dates cited.

11 “Germantown for Sale,” PR, April 25, 1887, 1; Fishman, Bourgeois Utopias, 145–46.

Fig. 3. Subdivision plan, Elmwood Mutual Land and Improvement Company, 1885. (Historical Society of Pennsylvania.)
Adjacent farm properties and Church Creek (see fig. 2, right) surrounded most of the subdivision. The surveyor was clearly instructed to create as many lots as possible. After working out the many regular blocks, he then drew oddly shaped lots on the fringes where he was forced to accommodate the physical landscape. Another choice would have been to create a buffer zone, but this would have reduced the potential number of lots for sale.

Most individuals who hoped to profit from converting farmland to building lots should properly be classified as "subdividers" rather than developers like Henry Houston. The term indicates the general extent of their activities: they raised capital, purchased farms in outlying Philadelphia wards, registered a subdivision plan with the city, and proceeded to advertise building lots in Philadelphia newspapers. A few acted independently, but most formed temporary business partnerships usually called "land associations" or "land companies." The very temporary life span of these business partnerships, which left almost no documentation of their activities, indicates the purely speculative, profit-driven nature of much of the land-conversion activity. After the usual closing-out sales (which did not mean that all the lots were sold), the business partnership was ended, and an association or land company no longer advertised or sold building lots. Association members sought new opportunities, sometimes forming new partnerships with former competitors.

Before the land boom, these men had pursued a variety of occupations, including cigar store proprietor, artificial limb maker, and organ maker assistant. A few were local residents who must have observed successful building lot sales in the local vicinity. John Phillips, manager of the Suffolk Park Race Track on Island Road (which, along with two taverns, was the only nonagricultural business in the vicinity), probably saw enough sales in the three earliest subdivisions to motivate him to pay $15,500 for the eighty-two-acre racetrack site in 1886. He and two partners formed the Cherbourg Park Real Estate Company, subdivided the site, and began selling building lots in a tract they named Cherbourg Park. As competition to sell building lots increased, subdivision advertisements often ran the length of one or two full newspaper columns. Cherbourg Park investors were more restrained. In fact, their ads are almost startlingly brief. Perhaps to make up for their bare-bones text, these advertisers were among the earliest to include an "eye-catching" illustration in the Philadelphia Record (fig. 4). As competition increased, illustrations became another strategy to draw readers' attention to advertisements. They were most commonly employed by corporate subdividers, however, and were not usually included in advertisements directed to a very modest housing market.

One local farmer also got in on the action. Irishman Bernard Owens owned a farm at the junction of Island Road and Tinicum Avenue and in 1880 was successful enough to employ the four farmhands who boarded in his household. Several years later, Owens purchased two nearby farms and created the Homeseekers and Orchard Park subdivisions. In common with many other speculators in this neighborhood, he had already achieved the moderate level of success that enabled him to accumulate or borrow a correspondingly moderate amount of capital. Apparently of an entrepreneurial bent, he took a risk that seems to have paid off: by the turn of the century he had transformed his own farm into a popular racetrack and hotel.

The brief but evidently successful real estate and "building" career of George Laycock, subdivider of the Suffolk Park and West Suffolk Park tracts in lower Southwest most clearly indicates that Southwest building lots were a speculative venture for men with limited capital who anticipated selling to even smaller-scale investors speculating in individual building lots or to those planning to build modest homes. Over the course of almost a decade, Laycock invested in several different ventures, which he regularly publicized in lengthy and detailed advertisements, leaving the most informative record of his activities than any other lower

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13 Many of these organizations called themselves "associations" rather than companies and used the rhetoric of workingmen's cooperative associations, but they were land companies as defined by Alexander von Hoffman—"groups of shareholders who came together for a particular development project"—in "Weaving the Urban Fabric: Nineteenth-Century Patterns of Residential Real Estate Development in Outer Boston," *Journal of Urban History* 22, no. 2 (January 1996): 215. See also Alexander von Hoffman, *Local Attachments: The Making of an American Urban Neighborhood, 1850 to 1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
Southwest speculative. He first appeared in Southwest in the 1860 census as the fifteen-year-old son of an English immigrant stonemason; twenty years later he was a horse dealer who also owned a livery stable in the borough of West Philadelphia. After a post-Centennial slump, West Philadelphia became one of the fastest developing areas of the city. Perhaps Laycock’s livery stable brought news his way, for he jumped into the land boom in its earliest stage, hoping to amass quick wealth. He repeatedly exhorted potential building lot purchasers to emulate John Jacob Astor, but Laycock himself clearly yearned for the financier’s great real estate success: “The great bulk of the wealth of John Jacob Astor was acquired by investing in Building Lots on the outskirts of New York City... who nevertheless lived to see a comparatively small investment within a few years grow to a sum so fabulous that compared with which the wealth of Midas was but a feather on the ocean.”

Laycock participated in the boom in every way he could: in Southwest, he subdivided two tracts himself, purchased groups of lots in other local subdivisions that he offered for sale, and purchased farms that he resold to other speculators for subdivision; elsewhere in West Philadelphia, he financed projects of speculative housing, offered commercial properties for sale, and handled rental properties for owners. His activities extended to adjacent counties, where he purchased farms for resale to farmers. His success is evident from details that appear in his advertisements. Like the more successful investors and realtors, he had a Center City office, was the first Philadelphia realtor to list a telephone number in the Record, and was the first to advertise a branch office. He engaged in a flurry of real estate activity until 1889. In that year, he notified the public that he was ready to retire from the real estate business.

Laycock’s limited speculative activities in lower Southwest Philadelphia—purchasing farms and marketing building lots to the public—reflect his knowledgeable judgment that this locality held the promise of only limited profit. He was an apparently successful speculator who undertook a range of real estate ventures in three different areas of the city.
west of the Schuylkill River. A comparison of these various endeavors shows that he had (or could raise) funds to speculate in substantial projects and that he understood the gradations of the housing and real estate market. During the same years in which he subdivided and sold his two lower Southwest subdivisions, he financed the building of three groups of speculatively built dwellings—about seventy-five houses at three different levels in the housing market—all of which must have required a substantial investment or the ability to acquire substantial credit. He provided detailed and lengthy advertisements describing variations in the architectural style and details, in the number of rooms and floor plans, and in the level of interior finish and workmanship; the presence or absence of porches, yards, sidewalks, and trees; and details about the surrounding neighborhoods for these three different projects. The priciest dwellings were located on a nine-acre property he had purchased in the borough of West Philadelphia (possibly during the land slump following the Centennial): these thirty dwellings were “situated immediately opposite boat houses on Schuylkill, combining a grand panorama in front, overlooking city to the east and extensive and varied view of the Park to the west.” They ranged from $5,500 to $12,000 for initial sales, which must have been successful, for he soon increased the range by $3,000. The two other building projects were located in upper Southwest Philadelphia, an area in which blocks of row and semidetached houses of various sizes were being constructed. Laycock’s projects included two groups of semidetached dwellings in different locations, with marked differences in size, amenities, and price.16

Laycock identified himself as a builder in his house advertisements, but his background provides no evidence that he had any experience in the building trades. More likely, he was what one writer in the Sunday Press described as a new kind of “shrewd businessman.” The profits to be made from the increasing construction activity of the 1880s had encouraged investors to contract with builders for groups of houses, which the investor then sold to home buyers or to those desiring to invest in rental properties. During the 1880s, the construction of inexpensive homes was so profitable that several “builders” (i.e., investors) who were in

16 “Geo. Laycock, Owner,” PR, September 11, 1886; “For Sale, West Philadelphia,” PR, October 16, 1886; “A Big Rise in West Philadelphia Land,” PR, April 1, 1890; “Rapid Transit,” PR, March 26, 1887; and “Beautiful Suburban Homes,” PR, April 23, 1887. Marsh notes that houses in upper-middle- and upper-class Overbrook Farms generally ranged between $7,000 and $18,000 (Suburban Lives, 94).

the business fewer than ten years retired as millionaires. Laycock was probably one of these “shrewd businessmen” who invested in the increasing profits to be gained from residential construction. This seems to have been much more profitable for him than the lower Southwest building lots. His comparatively modest activities in lower Southwest indicate the judgment of a knowledgeable investor that lower Southwest offered limited opportunity for profit. Overall, he operated on a larger and seemingly more successful scale than any other lower Southwest speculator about whom information has been obtained, but he was, like the others, a temporary speculator who hoped to benefit financially from the land boom.17

Only one subdivider operating in lower Southwest Philadelphia was more than a temporary land speculator: John Scott, the self-described “one-man power” behind the Clearview subdivision, one of the earliest in the vicinity. His venture in lower Southwest was only one in a longtime career in conveyancing and real estate. Real estate seems to have been a Scott family profession: Scott’s brother, with whom he shared his Center City office, created several subdivisions in adjacent Delaware County. Scott himself also subdivided several other tracts in Philadelphia and adjacent Bucks County, including one near the popular Willow Grove Trolley Park. His subdivision plan for “the Town of Clear-View” and his response to the needs of early subdivision residents were unique in Southwest (fig. 5). Overall, there is not much to distinguish the Clearview plan from that of Elmwood. There are, however, a few details that reveal that Scott was less a speculator—although he certainly hoped to profit from lot sales—and perhaps a bit of a “community builder,” in the words of Marc Weiss.18 As in Elmwood, blocks and lots are regularly repeated except where

18 The names “Clear-View” and “Home-Seekers” evolved into “Clearview” and “Homeseekers” by 1900. To eliminate any confusion for readers, the subdivision will be designated as “Clearview” and “Homeseekers” throughout this article. The original names “Clear-View” and “Home-Seekers” will be used only in quotations and when referring to official subdivision plan names. The crucial work on the development of the modern real estate profession is Marc A. Weiss’s The Rise of the Community Builders: The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). Several larger studies of particular localities include detailed discussions of subdivision and real estate practices. The following have been especially pertinent to my own research: Ann Durkin Keating, Building Chicago: Suburban Developers and the Creation of a Divided Metropolis (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), esp. chap. 4; Michael Doucet and John Weaver, Housing the North American City (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), esp. chaps. 1 and 2; and von Hoffman, “Weaving the Urban Fabric” and Local Attachments, esp. chap. 2.
THE TOWN OF CLEAR-VIEW,

Located at Foshall or Clear-View Station, Philadelphia Wilmington and Baltimore R. R., 50th Ward, Philadelphia.

Extending from 15th Street westward on Raisin, Elwood Grove, Dick and Lynn avenues, three square miles of Darby Road, one and one-half square miles of each line of Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore R. R.

A tract of land about one-fourth size of the old Philadelphia City, and beautifully situated, to bring made into a Town—the TOWN OF CLEAR-VIEW.

1. CONVENIENCE.— As to Broad and Market by teams or shown in this plan. 2. MILEAGE.— As shown on this plan, the street is high, and located on a lofty bank, so that houses are all very well situated.

3. STREET.— As shown on this plan. The Arrounds is 35 and 50 feet; the Streets, 25 feet wide. To compare the cost of the service, check your cost to 50 feet. 4. SCHOOLS.— The schools of the Clear-View are 100 feet, and are the best in the vicinity. 5. BUILDING NUISANCES.— The buildings of the Clear-View are 100 feet, and the streets are all paved with stone. 6. SCHOOLS.— The schools of the Clear-View are 100 feet, and the streets are all paved with stone. 7. BUILDING NUISANCES.— The buildings of the Clear-View are 100 feet, and the streets are all paved with stone.

3 Agents on Land. JOHN H. SCOTT, Owner.

Fig. 5. Subdivision plan, Town of Clear-View, 1885. (Lois Schaub; copy on file in the Seventh Survey District, Department of Streets, City of Philadelphia.)
surrounding farms and Darby Creek forced the surveyor to create oddly sized lots. Here, though, Scott reserved two full blocks for a “grove,” a feature not found in any other lower Southwest subdivision. Significantly, he called his subdivision “the Town of Clear-View,” emphasizing the future community that would be established. The emphasis on community and his attempt to plan for it by providing the suburban amenity of community space for future residents distinguishes the Clear-view plan from all the other tracts in the vicinity. Scott does not seem to have had more capital than the other speculators, so he offered only one “suburban” amenity and a brief phrase on the plan that suggested a future community. These two features also indicate that even a subdivider operating on limited budget understood some of the cultural values of planned subdivisions, which might be why he so frequently compared Clearview to Bryn Mawr on the Main Line.

“Where the cows were grazing yesterday”: The No-Frills Subdivision Plan

Subdivision plans provide ample evidence that lower Southwest subdivisions were in fact “unplanned” suburbs. This is not the contradiction it might at first seem to be. In the city of Philadelphia, speculators hired a surveyor to lay out streets and numbered building lots on the former farm tract; this plan was then registered with the city to record the change in land use. Once surveyors drew up a subdivision plan in line with the goals of the tract landowners, sellers advertised lots for sale. For planned subdivisions, both the plan and the advertisements placed individual building lots within a physical context of amenities and improvements, which added greater economic and emotional value to the plot of ground. In contrast, information included in Southwest subdivision plans and advertisements—and, just as importantly, the features not included—suggest that, despite some flowery descriptions, speculators provided little more than building lots for sale.

Building lot advertisements, when considered along with subdivision plans, are an essential source of information about the initial development of these subdivisions, both in terms of what exactly was being sold and to whom it was being marketed. True, speculators apparently had no problem filling up newspaper space—even one or more full columns—with fanciful language and exaggerated claims. Despite much fairy-tale phrasing, though, advertisements do provide accurate information about lot numbers and sizes, lot values, amenities (i.e., the lack thereof), and the rate of lot sales and home building in each subdivision. The context of individual advertisements provides one key to deciphering false claims and identifying significant information. Hopeful lot purchasers would have read advertisements for lower Southwest subdivisions within the context of all the other ads found on the real estate pages. This juxtaposition invited and indeed emphasized comparisons. The revelatory honesty of lower Southwest subdividers is much more striking than their rather obvious embellishments. It was meant to be so. If advertisers were to profit, they had to reach the appropriate market for the lots they were selling. Attempts to grossly mislead potential lot buyers would have been ineffective anyway: organized site excursions allowed prospective purchasers to view lots and the general landscape before signing a contract.

Furthermore, Southwest subdividers were competing with one another for sales, but more significantly they were in a sense working together in a larger competition against speculators active in other city wards. These speculators had to convince prospective lot buyers that the lower Southwest section of Philadelphia was the best location to build a home in the city. Thus, subdivision ads frequently provided information about neighboring tracts and the general vicinity, corroborating information found in ads run by local competitors. Within their original context, then, subdivision advertisements yield much accurate information about these unplanned subdivisions.

Most instructively, Southwest subdivision advertisements at their most flowery and boastful fall short of those run by corporate developers, which fall into the middle tier of suburban subdivision activities during this era. To compare Southwest subdivisions to the relatively few North American suburbs as well planned as Philadelphia’s Chestnut Hill and Overbrook Farms, the upper tier of planned suburban development, would be meaningless. Scott did frequently compare his Clearview subdivisions to Bryn Mawr on the Main Line, but, as shown below, his description of Clearview “amenities” emphasized that his subdivision was in no respect similar to Bryn Mawr. Instead, the suburbs created by corporations like the Pennsylvania Railroad and Wood, Harmon, and Company, a business that described itself as the largest suburban developer in the world, represented a level of suburban development that can be contrasted usefully with the Southwest subdivisions to demonstrate just how unplanned the latter
were. Well-organized and well-financed corporations like “the Road” and Wood, Harmon, and Company generally assembled huge tracts adjacent to the city. This was suburban investment on a very large scale: corporate developers often advertised between 3,000 and 5,000 building lots in one subdivision. The carefully designed community landscape such as that of Chestnut Hill described by Robert Fishman was not the goal here. These corporations did, however, offer to a middle-class and even skilled working-class market building lots accommodating relatively spacious yards and set within a physical context of paved streets and sidewalks, sewerage, electric street lighting, public transportation to Philadelphia, and sometimes even a park or two. Such a comparison more conclusively designates lower Southwest subdivisions as “unplanned” because they lacked even basic utilities that were becoming common in metropolitan areas. Tracing building and “improvement” activity over the typical two- to three-year span of advertisements for each subdivision makes this contrast evident.¹⁹

Speculators created and registered subdivision plans before writing and placing building lot advertisements in Philadelphia newspapers, but a brief discussion of the advertisements should come before an analysis of the plans. In a sense, the ideas and information expressed in the advertisements preceded the plans themselves because the sites were chosen and surveyed with a specific buying market in mind. Amid descriptions of garden paradises, lower Southwest subdividers pointedly addressed a target market with quite limited financial means. These subdividers were gambling on selling cheap and in some ways undesirable building lots to those who could barely afford them during a time of increasing labor discontent and unrest. Arguably, speculators did not really intend that their descriptions of a bucolic landscape, which mirrored the ads that were “spangled with violets” during this era, but even he reveals his awareness of the more practical concerns of lot buyers. His highly descriptive ads depicted the fairy-tale garden paradise that was Clearview: “a picture of spring loveliness, majestic oaks, fresh budding fruit trees with dainty peach-blow blossoms; babbling rills, crystal springs and shady nooks, lots dressed in sparkling green buttoned with daisies and studded with violets.” He evidently took pains over his compositions. When this description reappeared in the Record a few days later, the phrase “studded with violets” had been altered to the more poetic “spangled with violets.” Scott was notable as the only subdivider in the entire metropolitan region to regularly compose verse for his subdivision advertisements:

Clear-View! Clear-View!
Fresh as a daisy; sparkling and new;
Loved by the many, passed by the few;
The home of the happy, the good, and the true.
Sing a Song of Clear-View, that pretty countric towne;
A handsomer or better one has never yet been found.
Its people are so pleasant, and so happy that they sing;
The homes that we love so much here are suited for a King.

For readers who might not have gotten the message that Clearview was more than just the typical garden spot, Scott asserted that Clearview was a “bit of paradise clipped off and dropped near Paschal Station, twenty-seventh ward,” comically combining

a vision of paradise with prosaic political designations. Prospective home builders, though, had prosaic concerns; combining both ideas reminded readers once again that Clearview was not just a vision but would be an actual neighborhood. The fact that such lavish benefits could be obtained, "yet the [horribly polluted] Schuylkill is in sight," was what transformed an ideal paradise into a Philadelphia suburb.20

Scott’s simple line drawing of “Charming Clear-View” displayed his vision of the future community he wanted to create and at the same time revealed the actual landscape that could be achieved with limited finances (fig. 6). This illustration, the first to appear in subdivision advertisements carried by the Philadelphia Record, depicts several relatively substantial dwellings grouped around the two traditional institutions of community, a church and a school. The buildings are undutifully grouped in a way that would not occur in a planned subdivision, hinting at the haphazard evolution of the landscape that would indeed take place. Yet, as the presence of church and school suggest, Scott understood that even prospective home builders on the most limited budgets expected to acquire a building lot and dwelling within a context of neighborhood institutions. When families purchased a lot and built a home, they also expected to go to church, to send their children to school, and to have access to employment. When they purchased a building lot in “Charming Clear-View,” they would be purchasing the opportunity to achieve these things as well.

The other Southwest subdividers made more practical claims. They depicted land and home ownership primarily as security against economic troubles and as a better investment than saving accounts: "In this day of Grasping Trusts and Grinding Monopolies it should be a most comforting thought to the laboring man, and the man in moderate circumstances, that he can, at almost his own terms and upon a long time, purchase from the Cherbourg Park Real Estate Company." Such appeals addressed the same anxieties of contemporary workers that featured as front page news. The Improved Mutual Land Association declared, "If workingmen would devote their attention and small savings to an enterprise like this... they would soon place themselves above the fear of labor agitations or long strikes." On a weekly and sometimes a daily basis, current events became the subject of building lot advertisements and emphasized the precarious nature of employment in the industrial economy. Building lot advertisers worked hard to convince families with “very small” or “very limited” savings that they could indeed afford to purchase real estate. If their arguments were not convincing, the installment payment plans offered by every subdivider might have been decisive factors.21

To a degree, subdivision advertisers accurately portrayed the lower Southwest landscape as a “garden spot.” The 1880 census recorded the agricultural landscape that existed just a few years before speculators purchased the first few farms for conversion. When the earliest subdivisions were marketed in the 1880s and 1890s this vicinity was still largely rural. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Philadelphia histories suggest the beauty of the wildflowers, shrubs, and trees throughout the vicinity and the richness of the marsh environment; several famous botanists, nurserymen, and ornithologists lived in the northern part of the preconsolidation area.

20 Advertisement, PR, May 8, 1886, and many other ads through the remainder of the year. With 3,000 building lots, Clear-View was of comparable size to a corporate-financed subdivision. The size of this tract alone would suggest that, without corporate financing, few physical improvements would be undertaken.

21 “In this day of Grasping Trusts,” PR, June 21, 1890; “The Advantages of Cooperation,” PR, June 4, 1886. For details of financing arrangements, see Kruikowski, “EVERY MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD SHOULD OWN A LOT,” in “Workingman’s Paradise,” chap. 4. Almost all builders and land speculators in the Philadelphia region offered payment plans for those purchasing building lots or houses. No interest was added to installment payments for lots, but most speculators offered a discount to cash purchasers, so, in effect, those paying in installments did pay more than those paying cash.
towship. Farming was practically the only occupation in the area; after the Civil War several market farmers provided flowers for the urban market. Features more problematic for residential and commercial development, though, were the adjacent Tinicum Marsh and the extensive network of creeks crisscrossing the vicinity, which had once been made up of separate small islands. Clearview, as its name implies, was located on the highest ground in the area and, although bounded by a creek, was the only subdivision with no creeks actually running through many of the building lots. The entire vicinity south of Island Road, however, was the lowest elevation in the city, roughly at sea level. This feature alone clearly marks these subdivisions as a different type of subdivision entirely from carefully planned ones such as Overbrook Farms and Chestnut Hill, the latter of which was sited on the highest land in the city. This is not an incidental point. A late 1940s study of housing values in Philadelphia concluded that altitude above sea level more than any other factor correlated to average dwelling value in each zone of the city considered.22

The absence of public transportation in Southwest Philadelphia is another key indication that prospective home builders sacrificed to acquire a family dwelling. The founding books of suburban studies generally use transportation technology to identify chronological phases in suburban development, but such a chronology does not recognize the type of suburban development that occurred in lower Southwest Philadelphia. Southwest was separated from the development just south of Market Street in West Philadelphia by several miles of farmland. There was no public transportation through the vicinity until the mid-1890s, when a railroad company reactivated the discontinued Baltimore, Wilmington, and Philadelphia line that at mid-century had been laid through lower Southwest up through the borough of West Philadelphia. Both the dashed line on the Clearview plan, marked “Proposed Line of Rail Road Extension,” and the “Clear-View Station” depicted were figments of Scott’s imagination, never possibilities. The railroad also appears in the “Charming Clear-View” advertisement (fig. 6), but Scott had some scruples because he also included the existing Woodland Avenue horse cars, although the advertisement does not indicate that the line stopped about one mile north of the lower Southwest subdivisions.

Other original surviving plans for these lower Southwest Philadelphia subdivisions did not even bother to suggest the possibility of public transportation. When investors ran Sunday excursions to these sites, they had to make arrangements for wagons from Woodland Avenue. Early neighborhood residents would have to walk a long way over unpaved roads and muddy fields to get to transportation that would take them to Delaware County, West Philadelphia, or across the Schuylkill River to other areas of the city.23

Subdivision plans were generally headed by a name that gave an identity to each discrete tract laid out among other developing tracts and surviving farms. Like Scott’s Clearview, all the lower Southwest subdivisions laid out before 1900 were given names that conjure up stereotypical suburban associations—Elmwood, Orchard Park, Cherbourg Park, Bell Road Park, and George Laycock’s Suffolk Park and West Suffolk Park. All these tracts were sited on the highest ground and were the most successful in terms of total lot sales and home-building activities. By the 1920s, these subdivisions represented the center of the general neighborhood known as “the Meadows.” The later twelve subdivisions laid out between 1900 and World War I represented undisguised gambling: low-lying marshy tracts were subdivided after the speculation frenzy had run its course. These were designated simply as tracts (e.g., the Lincoln Land Company tract), appear to have been little advertised, and were the least successful in terms of lot sales. That they were the location of some home-building activity (even some small-scale speculative building) testifies to the desire of families with practically no financial means to own a dwelling set in a yard.

Despite the fact that these lower Southwest tracts were separated by several miles of fairly rural land from the more urbanized vicinity around Market Street in the borough of West Philadelphia, surveyors were clearly instructed to carve as many lots as possible out of the tracts. A few well-established


diagonal roads (like Island Road and Tonicum Avenue) were incorporated into the plans, but, as much as possible, surveyors imposed the Philadelphia street grid on the landscape. There were no curving and winding byways. In Clearview, for instance, the three main streets were aligned with and given the names of already existing streets in the northern part of the ward, which were extended slowly southward. Numbered streets were also continued south from Market Street. Ninety-sixth Street appears on several tract plans, but Ninetieth Street was about as far south as houses were built. Several tracts did not line up with the approaching grid, so investors did name, rather than number, many streets. Even John Scott’s poetic imagination seems to have failed him here, for many streets in Clearview were given simple letter designations, such as “A,” “B,” and “C.” Subdividers sometimes named streets after the farm families who had previously owned the tracts but seem to have preferred memorializing themselves.

The grid made possible the typical Philadelphia block of 40 lots, each measuring 25 by 100 feet—usually referred to as a “city lot”—as the standard. Southwest subdivisions, however, were laid out between farms and a network of meandering creeks, so irregularly shaped blocks and lots were almost as numerous as those more carefully squared off. Elmwood offered uniform 50-by-100-foot lots, the largest standard lot size of any subdivision, but lots measuring 100 by 100 feet or even 100 by 200 feet were not uncommon in that tract. In the Improved Mutual tract, almost half the lots measured 200 by 400 feet. Such large lot sizes were a concession surveyors made to the topography in order to turn this low-lying landscape into a marketable commodity. By the late nineteenth century, creators of planned subdivisions carefully provided the uniform lot sizes that attracted a homogeneous group of purchasers, which is what the middle-class market seemed to want by that time. Uniform lot sizes and relatively similar housing stock simplified real estate appraisal. In lower Southwest, topography prevented uniform lot sizes, which might have caused large-scale investors who targeted a market more concerned with consistent real estate values to bypass this vicinity.

Lack of public transportation and topography reduced the value of these building lots, so that even the many relatively large lots sold for less than the average subdivision lot in other outlying Philadelphia wards. Building lots throughout the Philadelphia region sold within a remarkably limited range of prices; according to numerous advertisements in the late 1880s, the typical price for a 25-by-100-foot lot in outlying and newly developing Philadelphia wards marketed to “the workingman” averaged about $200. Within any particular Southwest subdivision, however, topographical variations and different lot sizes resulted in many different lot prices. When first advertised, Clearview lots ranged from $65 to $100. Larger, prominently located, or corner lots could be two or three times more than the cost of the least expensive lot. “Corner premiums” were added to the corner lots in a number of the subdivisions. In contrast with planned subdivisions created for exclusively residential purposes (with accompanying leisure pursuits), corner lots here added no benefits and could even be considered undesirable for residential purposes because of added noise and loss of privacy. When Laycock priced corner lots from $50 to $100 more than other lots in Suffolk Park, he was well aware that potential purchasers included those who intended to set up retail establishments. When lower Southwest subdividers accommodated the commercial needs of some future residents, they created a flexible design for mixed use within these subdivisions, another signal of an unplanned (i.e., not strictly residential) suburb.

Restricting land use to residential purposes was a common practice in planned subdivisions, but lower Southwest subdivisions banned only fairly ambiguous “offensive” activities. The Improved Mutual Association deeds defined “offensive” uses as “skindressing or bone-boiling establishment[s], glue, soap, candle, or starch manufactur[ies]” as well as the “keeping of pigs or other animals of like offensive character.” Perhaps the homeowners in the Improved Mutual tract did observe the bans on the keeping of pigs, but several adjacent pig farms operated until the 1960s. In spite of warning that “no offensive building or factories” were to be erected in Clearview, Scott somewhat contradictorily listed the presence of a “brass finishing works” as a “benefit” of purchasing a Clearview building lot.


25 Homer Hoyt, One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), 427–30, 432–33. Improved Mutual Association deeds to Owen Sherlin, 1897 (brackets in the original). Both deeds were generously lent by Regina Eichinger and are in the author’s possession. “Clear-View,” FR, November 10, 1888. The brass works operated until the mid-1920s, when it was considered “an old Clearview landmark” (“Real Estate Notes,” Clearview Messenger [hereafter CM] 2, no. 3 [August 1925]).
Clearly, he (and these other speculators) understood that some of their potential market was going to be involved in "offensive" occupations or at least did not expect to be protected from unpleasant odors and noises.

Even were such restrictions enforced within individual subdivisions, these nineteen tracts were immediately adjacent to each other, so what was allowed in one subdivision would very likely affect residents in another. Deed restrictions in the 1880s commonly forbade the sale of alcohol in the late 1880s, a period when Philadelphia temperance advocates successfully restricted the number of liquor licenses granted each year. In Southwest, Gladwyn advertisements stated that no "malt nor spiritous liquors manufactured or sold thereon."27 This subdivision, however, was not far from Tinicum Avenue, where two taverns served local farmers and soldiers stationed at nearby Fort Mifflin. Banning taverns from Gladwyn would not have created a temperance environment. These unplanned subdivisions lacked the clear boundaries and buffer zones that allowed for effective enforcement of deed restrictions.

Other types of restrictions typical in planned subdivisions were not even mentioned here. No Southwest subdivision restricted lot owners from further subdividing individual building lots. In the Elmwood tract, with its fairly uniform 50-by-100-foot lots, some families and small-scale building speculators did subdivide lots and sell them. Many more families purchased two or more lots, in some cases portions of blocks, because they desired spacious yards and gardens, which maintained a rural feeling throughout much of the local vicinity. Some purchasers acquired multiple lots because they intended to establish businesses. For example, the owners of the Camac Brickyard purchased two full blocks of lots in the Improved Mutual tract on the southern periphery in the 1890s. Many lots never sold or remained unused by absentee owners; neighborhood residents frequently planted gardens on these lots, taking advantage of haphazard development to use the land in ways that best suited their own needs. As restrictions and subdivision plan information implied, each individual building lot existed within a physical context that could enhance or reduce the lot's financial value and the worth of the future dwelling that would be built on it.28 Possibly even the minimal deed restrictions indicated by lower Southwest speculators gave future home builders some assurance that their sacrifice to acquire family homes was not a complete gamble.

In planned subdivisions, physical improvements such as paved streets and sidewalks, sewer systems, and utility lines to light and heat houses were some of the most immediate and visible benefits families paid for when they purchased a lot. Improvements required large-scale investment. The peculiar topography of lower Southwest Philadelphia made such improvements as installing sewers and stormwater drainage difficult and expensive, perhaps another reason why corporate developers who did intend to implement modern improvements bypassed this vicinity. In Southwest (and other outlying Philadelphia subdivisions for a similar market) speculators advertised complicated schemes for using lot sale profits to fund improvements. They sounded dodgy and often were. In the matter of improvements, subdividers dropped the talk of "flower garden lots" and emphasized that Southwest lots were in fact "city lots" and city hall would take care of future residents, tacitly admitting they had no intention themselves of implementing such improvements.

The most basic physical improvements signaling the transformation of an agricultural landscape to a residential one were the grading and paving of streets, basics that could not be taken for granted during this land boom. Some associations in other outlying wards of the city openly invited prospective purchasers to take a look at the unimproved site—"where the cows were grazing yesterday"—perhaps understanding that their target market did not expect much. Some Southwest subdividers do seem to have used at least some money from early lot sales to fund basic improvements. Here, street grading (rarely paving) seems to have begun one to two years after the first lots were sold—thus, as the first houses were being constructed by these families who paid for lots on installment plans. In the summer of 1886, Clearview announced "40 men and teams doing street improvements ... sidewalks, curbing and paving and building in active progress." Scott did install some boardwalks for a block on Buist Avenue (the main street in his Clearview subdivision and the site of some small shops), but local improvement association members finally paid for and laid sidewalks and curbs themselves. As late as spring 1890, Cherbourg Park realtors noted that some of their lots fronted on Island Road, "which is now being macadamized" by the city. This ad implied that paving Island Road, the major

27 "Gladwyn," PR, September 24, 1887.
28 Sanborn maps, 1927 and 1951. Numerous multiple lot purchases are recorded in property transfers, indicated on maps, and recalled in oral interviews with former residents.
thoroughfare through the vicinity, was the city’s first step to paving the dirt roads in Cherbourg Park, but city hall was not going to pave roads in subdivisions with few residents on the southwest margins of the city.20

When subdividers in Southwest did implement improvements, they were far from comparable to improvements undertaken by corporate developers. The Pennsylvania Railroad installed electric streetlights throughout its large tracts, but Scott boasted of installing “ten new gas-lamps” to light the 3,000 Clearview lots. After four years of lots sales, “C’VIEW’S TWO YEARS SUMMARY OF PROGRESS!!!” unimpressively included “regular mail delivery.” He discarded poetry for politics when he repeatedly reminded potential home builders that “Clear-View’s in Phila. And this Rich city, like a rich father, has to spend money on his child.” Even Scott obviously intended to let city hall finance most improvements. Locations within municipal boundaries did not mean that city hall would or even could fund improvements in every developing ward, so the less populated outlying districts lagged far behind the rest of the city in utility connections.30

Two items in Clearview’s list of progress reflect Scott’s community-building vision. One was the planting of 2,000 trees. Although in some ads Scott admitted to planting only half that number, former residents interviewed all described a central “forested” park area surrounded by several blocks planted with trees that in the summer formed a canopy overhead. Unusually for an unplanned subdivision and unique among Southwest Philadelphia subdivisions, Scott’s subdivision plan reserved two blocks in his tract for a neighborhood park. In the late 1880s, when the first residents wanted to erect a Methodist church, Scott allowed them to use a portion of the park for that purpose. True, he quickly advertised “a church coming soon” (a church that residents paid for and built themselves) to his updated progress list of improvements. However, he truly seems to have been, within the scope of his own limited capital, conscious of creating “the Town of Clear-View,” as noted at the top of his subdivision plan. No other Southwest speculator advertised parks and trees.

The most visible sign of the improving landscape here was house-building activity, which lagged far behind the number of lots sold. After three years of lot sales, Scott had sold about 800 Clearview lots, but only about forty families were living in the new subdivision. Elmwood had begun advertising lot sales in November 1885 and the following summer boasted in bold typeface, “See what a large settlement there is already there. Over 20 houses built, more going up this week.” After another year of lot sales, this association boasted of “40 houses erected or in course of erection.” At that time, the association claimed to have sold more than 800 lots. The other ten lower Southwest tracts subdivided before 1900 indicated similar house-building rates.31

The discrepancy between the number of lots sold and the number of dwellings constructed is due to several factors. As indicated by property transfers, Sanborn maps, and interviews with former residents, many families (and some businesses) purchased more than one lot. According to advertisements for similar subdivisions in other outlying wards and in New Jersey, multiple lot purchases were common. Even more important was very small-scale speculation in building lots. More accurately, house building did not lag behind lot sales—land speculation at the level of one or two building lots exceeded purchases of lots by future home builders, a much more limited market.

Lot speculation could be and often was profitable in the 1880s and 1890s. Larger corner lots designed for commercial establishments seem to have been especially prized for this level of speculation. Real estate transfers recorded in the Philadelphia Record indicate that many first lot purchasers did indeed resell their lots at a profit within just a few years. Scott offered the larger Clearview lots (25 by 127.6 feet) for $100 in the mid-1880s; in the early 1890s resellers averaged between $300 and $400 for a lot of this size. Several factors cushioned the risk of short-term, small-scale speculation: lots could be paid for through installment payments to which no interest was attached, and original lot purchasers were shielded from taxes for a period of time. The Elmwood Land Company, for instance, paid all taxes for 1885 and 1886 for those who paid off lots. The Cherbourg Realty

20 “Clear-View,” PR, June 12, 1886; “Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Course,” PR, May 24, 1890. The Record also reported that Island Road was then being macadamized: “Common Council,” PR, March 28, 1890, 3.


Company promised to pay purchasers' taxes for five years.32

Not everyone purchasing lots as a small investment achieved a quick turnaround. Later in the 1920s, many undeveloped lots were still being advertised for sale. In that decade, Clearview realtor George Gaul frequently advertised building lots in the Clearview Messenger (fig. 7). His advertisements contrast greatly with building lots ads from the 1880s and 1890s. Gaul makes no claims for Clearview, preferring to emphasize the overall development of the city. At various times, Gaul offered on behalf of owners as many as 500 lots. If these individuals were indeed lot speculators, they did not accrue quick profits, but they could still have made some profit. Nonresident property owners often did not pay taxes and for very small fines every five years or so could continue to own their property. Lot values reported by Gaul indicate substantial increases in lot values over the four decades since subdivision had first begun in this vicinity. In 1925, for instance, Gaul advertised one pair of lots measuring a total of 50 by 165 feet at the "quick sale" price of $1,100. The wording of many advertisements, though, suggests that sellers had first hoped for even higher prices. Southwest Philadelphia did enjoy a boom in the 1920s, but for a number of reasons it could not compete with adjacent areas of Delaware County or the developing northeast section of the city.33

Even during the height of the land boom of the 1880s and 1890s, not everyone could profit. The pace of subdivision between 1885 and 1895 and again from 1900 to 1909 exceeded the demand for housing and even speculation. When Laycock abandoned his dream of becoming another John Jacob Astor and announced his retirement sale of remaining Suffolk Park lots in 1889, he peevishly noted that "building lot operations are in a measure overdone." The effects of such a rapid pace of subdivision affected the profits to be made at every level of speculation and were perhaps the main reason why he decided to "cut loose from the business" after investing in building and land speculation for less than a decade.34

Home builders suffered the greatest harm as a result of this period of intense land speculation at the building lot level. Earlier subdivisions slowly filled in, so that more developed residential and commercial areas were typical of centrally located subdivisions. Just surrounding this central area and on the fringes, vacant lots increased the cost of installing utilities. Between 1900 and World War I, nine more tracts were subdivided. As already noted, these investors seem to have sold only a small portion of the lots in their tracts. Nonresidents and absentee landowners who continued to hold hundreds of scattered lots in great measure determined the haphazard development patterns. Early home builders formed civic associations to undertake the work of "developing" the subdivisions themselves, trying to create a workable neighborhood despite the legacy of irresponsible speculation.35

"You can build a pretty vine-covered cottage": Creating a Family Home

House building was the most immediate result of the late nineteenth-century land boom and the most visible improvement that signaled the transformation of the once predominantly agricultural landscape to a residential and commercial suburb. After a slow start, as many early lot purchasers took advantage of one-year installment plans to pay for their lot(s), the Southwest subdivisions evolved steadily from the 1880s to World War I. Each subsequent decade of building activity roughly doubled the number of houses. Timing of a family's arrival,

32 "In this day of Grasping Trusts," PR, June 21, 1890. Unsold lots were just as common in subdivisions targeted for a middle-class market. See Hovinen, "Suburbanization in Greater Philadelphia," Michael Doucet, studying Hamilton, Ontario, found that enough building lots came on the market there for the population of 14,000 people plus an additional 17,000 more. See Doucet, "Speculation and the Physical Development of Mid-Nineteenth Century Hamilton," in Shaping the Urban Landscape: Aspects of the Canadian City-Building Process, ed. Gilbert A. Stetler and Alan F. Artibise (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1982).

33 "Real Estate Notes," CM 2, no. 5 (October 1925): 5-6; Gaul advertisement, CM 2, no. 3 (August 1925), back cover. Former residents remember building lots being distributed as door prizes at dances and local movie theaters in the 1930s. Two former residents stated that their parents built houses in the Meadows after winning lots in a dance contest.

34 "Notice: Building Lots at Half Value," PR, June 1, 1889. This headline is misleading: Laycock did not reduce lot prices. He was instead suggesting that he had always offered these lots at bargain prices.

35 Neither the lack of services nor the quality of housing stock resulted in demolition—the problem was unused and thus untaxable land. Kravikowski, "The Dream about Eastwick," in "Workingman's Paradise," chap. 9. As land economics writers (Helen Monchow, Homer Hoyt, Philip Cornick, and, most pertinently, director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission Edmund Bacon) all suggested in the 1930s and early 1940s, once land is subdivided into small lots, the only way to change land use patterns is to reacquire control of the land through eminent domain. Helen Monchow, Seventy Years of Real Estate Subdivision in the Region of Chicago (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1939); Hoyt, One Hundred Years of Land Values; Cornick, Premature Subdivision; Bacon, "Diagnosis and Suggested Treatment."
More than One Billion Dollars
Is Being Spent in Construction
In the City of Philadelphia

To appreciate rightly what this sum means, see it written out in figures—$1,000,000,000.

This money is being spent on new public buildings, homes, railroad stations, grain elevators, sewers, office buildings, bridges, libraries, transit lines, industrial establishments, museums, harbor improvements; Philadelphia is doing big things, great things, not only for you, but for the generations that will come after you.

 Believe in
Invest in
Philadelphia

You don’t have to go to Florida, or New Jersey, to secure investments. We have many opportunities right here in the 40th Ward of your own City that will make you a nice profit if you buy now.

Special Sale List

7054 Saybrook Ave. ...$5800
64th & Glenmore Ave. $4250
1519 S. 50th St. ........ $3000
6521 Gesner St. .........$5500

75th & Buist Ave. ....... $4750
86th & Bartram Ave. .... $4000
77th & Brewster Ave. ...$3750
7816 Lyons Ave. ....... $6000

GEORGE A. GAUL
Successor to JOHN T. PEDLOW
Real Estate Broker

7028 Woodland Avenue

BUY A LOT, We Have Over 500 in This Section
Vacant Ground in This Section is Bound to Make You Money

S. s. Buist Ave., 100 ft. west 80th St., 50 x 127½ ft.
W. s. 77th St., 100 ft. N. Buist Ave., 50 x 100 ft.
S. s. Ave. E, 225 ft. W. 78th St., 50 x 100 ft.
N. E. Cor. 77th and Dicks Ave., 50 x 100 ft.
S. s. Guyer Ave., 125 ft. east 81st St., 75 x 110 ft.
N. s. Lyons Ave., 150 ft. W. 77th St., 25 x 127½ ft.
S. s. Chelwynde Ave., 250 ft. W. 80th St., 50 x 195 ft.

Reliable and Courteous Service Since 1908

Fig. 7. Advertisement, Clearview and surrounding subdivisions. (Clearview Messenger 2, no. 5 [October 1925], back cover.)
motivations for moving to these subdivisions, family budget, building skills of family members and friends, building code enforcement, availability of utilities, and cultural values and personal goals of individual families all played a role in determining the type of dwelling each family could obtain. Southwest subdivisions plans and deed restrictions established only the broadest outlines of the future neighborhood, which allowed residents to fill in the details.

Speculators had targeted their modest market accurately: household heads in these subdivisions ranged from skilled to unskilled workers and even day laborers. Most families who purchased building lots and built a house depended on the industrial economy for their livelihood. According to manuscript censuses, many heads of household worked in the higher-paying metals trades (shipbuilding and manufacturing locomotives, small tools, and machine parts) and refineries, which included the region's largest employers, such as Midvale Steel (where Frederick Winslow Taylor conducted his first efficiency studies), Baldwin Locomotive, J. G. and Brill Company, Westinghouse, and the Penncoyd Iron Works. A significant number worked in construction-related trades; many of these men were self-employed. Other neighborhood residents were proprietors of small neighborhood dry goods stores, groceries, bakeries, barbershops, beauty parlors, repair shops, drugstores, and tailoring shops. Day laborers, junkyard workers, street cleaners, ragmen, and lamp-lighters rented, paid mortgages on, and even owned dwellings.66

Clearview and neighboring subdivisions drew both native-born and immigrant families. Approximately half the residents were immigrants and children of immigrant parents. Until 1900, these families represented ethnic groups long familiar in Philadelphia: Irish Protestants and Catholics, British, and Germans. After that year, many new arrivals to the neighborhood represented more recent newcomers to the city: Russian Jews, Italians, Catholic Lithuanians, and Poles. World War I brought hundreds of temporary residents to Southwest Philadelphia to work in war industries but also saw the influx of southerners—both white and black—who brought families and intended to stay. Residents were conscious of the ethnic diversity of their neighborhoods. Many spoke different languages at home (more than twenty according to the 1920 census) and adapted to American customs and holidays only when the children brought them home from school and instructed their parents in American ways. Families from all groups lived scattered throughout the subdivisions.

Some racial and ethnic clustering was recorded on censuses and recalled by former residents. For instance, in both the 1920 and 1930 censuses, African Americans from the South heavily populated the last two subdivisions to open up; these had been subdivided just before the war began and so there had been little home-building activity when they arrived in the last year of the war. African American households headed by parents born in northern states tended to be scattered throughout these subdivisions. In general, southerners, whether white or black, seem to stand out in the memories of oral interviewees; they also tended to settle on the peripheries of the residential subdivisions, near surviving farms, creeks, and the marsh. Possibly this location reflected their limited finances. However, descendants of these families recount bringing pine trees to plant and raising peanuts, so their location on the southern periphery of these developing neighborhoods might have reflected their desire to recreate in some measure the surroundings they had left behind.

Families came to one of the Southwest subdivisions for a combination of reasons. One reason often cited by former residents (some recalling their parents' stories) was to follow a relocating employer. In most cases, though, the decision to follow an employer cannot by itself explain the decision to purchase a lot and build a house in a Southwest subdivision, as interviews make clear. For instance, many skilled men worked for Baldwin Locomotive or J. G. Brill and Company. In the 1880s, Brill moved to a location in the upper section of Ward 40, and in the following decade Baldwin, one of the largest employers in the metropolitan area, moved to expanded facilities in Delaware County, adjacent to Southwest Philadelphia. Many workers for these two companies made the more obvious choice and purchased new speculatively built eight-room brick row houses in one of the new neighborhoods developed around these industrial facilities. The comparatively small minority of these employees who chose to purchase a Southwest subdivision lot and then endure an inconvenient journey to work presumably had a combination of motivations for relocating to this particular vicinity. More frequently emphasized reasons for moving to Southwest

66 Information on subdivision residents was obtained from the 1790–1930 census manuscripts, property transfers recorded in the PR, city directories, the CM, the Southwest Chronicle, and oral interviews with former residents.
Philadelphia were to be close to relatives and to own large yards (even to purchase several lots for extensive vegetable and flower gardens). According to oral interviews and as borne out by census manuscripts, many families had extended networks of relatives in these subdivisions, a circumstance that was practical as well as emotional. Additional reasons were the desire to have many windows and to self-build dwellings. These motivations were shared by families whose head of household continued to work in Center City, which would have been a very inconvenient journey to work.37

Most families who purchased lots in Southwest subdivisions moved from more densely populated row house neighborhoods typical of Philadelphia, so a brief look at the housing stock in the city and typical costs is helpful in establishing what many residents who moved to Southwest were trying to achieve and what the landscape they created meant to them. By the 1890s, speculative builders operating in wards adjacent to the built-up core were erecting thousands of row houses with six or seven rooms and the newly popular front porch. Eight-room houses, even in industrial districts like Tacony, were not uncommon. Unlike architects concerned with style and aesthetics, Philadelphia boosters and housing reformers praised the row house for its functionality. Indeed, it was the row house that made Philadelphia a “City of Homes.” For this reason, an illustration of a row house block typical of one of the lower rungs of the speculative building market was featured along with photographs of

37 Richard Harris has carefully traced the employment of residents of the Toronto suburbs he studied to determine the motivations families had for moving to fringe areas of the city. He found that following an employer explained the decision of many but not by any means all families (“Did the Factory Lead the Way?” in Unplanned Suburbs, chap. 3). Many families self-built or contributed to building houses. Harris found that working-class Toronto neighborhoods were characterized by a large number of below-standard dwellings, but this was not the case in lower Southwest Philadelphia. The census also indicates that a significant number of men were professionally employed in construction-related trades and were thus capable of providing dwellings for their families that equaled the quality of the speculative market. Also, it is unlikely that self-builders who did hope to erect standard dwellings found lower Southwest Philadelphia subdivisions any more hospitable than many other areas of the city. Beginning in the 1870s, the state required the City of Philadelphia to create building permit procedures and to hire two (and later three) building inspectors. Given the more than 50,000 houses erected between the Civil War and World War I, it is unlikely that more than a small number of new dwellings erected anywhere in the city were physically inspected. This assumption is supported by the 1909 formation of the Philadelphia Housing Commission, which wrote and successfully won the enactment of the 1913 Philadelphia Housing Code. Even thereafter, the Housing Commission had to hire its own inspectors to track compliance, but the inspectors lacked enforcement authority.

much grander dwellings, famous historical sites, and monumental buildings and industries in a Philadelphia booster publication designed for the Columbian Exhibition (fig. 8). This illustration depicts several rows of uniform brick row houses set on a very narrow and treeless street. Yet, even here, some families have substituted awnings for the privacy and coolness of shade trees. These dwellings are not completely lacking in amenities: the street is narrow, but the sidewalk is fairly wide and provides some separation between street traffic and the domestic environment. The private space of the family is further protected by the raised elevation, so that basements have windows letting in light and air, and families have some privacy in their front rooms. Helen Parrish, a longtime worker with the Philadelphia Chapter of the Octavia Hill Association, stated that even unskilled workingmen could purchase new four- or even six-room brick row houses with small rear yards in the first years of the twentieth century.38

Row housing, however, was by no means the most inexpensive housing erected in North American cities. After the balloon frame was developed for detached houses, fireproof row house construction could be more expensive per square foot than detached dwellings. Improved brick-making machinery reduced the price of bricks, but fire regulations often required time-consuming labor to build the required heavy masonry party walls, which could offset declining brick prices. In the Philadelphia region, bricks remained expensive: Philadelphia brick workers demonstrated with increasing frequency and vigor in the late 1880s and 1890s, successfully winning wage increases in return for accepting machinery in the brickyards.39 According to one writer in the Sunday Press, most brick row houses constructed in Philadelphia in the late 1880s cost the buyer between $2,000 and $6,000, but the great majority of houses were priced from $2,000 to $3,000. Among the least expensive speculatively built row houses advertised in the late 1880s and early 1890s in the Record was a group of “Picturesque Homes” in South Philadelphia. Smaller than the standard six- or seven-room workingman’s dwelling, these

two-story, five-room brick houses were priced at $1,500. Even this price was beyond the means of many families who desired to own a family dwelling.  

Families who could not afford to purchase a speculatively built row house outright had several alternatives. Many families rented such dwellings and never expected to own their own home. The rent-to-own scheme was another alternative for families who wanted to risk leveraging a modest budget into ownership of a speculatively built dwelling. Former Helen Parrish noted that many working families rented speculatively built dwellings and eventually purchased the dwelling they had been renting. Parrish also observed that once many families owned their dwellings, they in turn rented it to another family and moved up to a larger house for which they began paying on another rent-to-own scheme, in effect trading up to obtain larger and perhaps more favorably located family dwellings.  

The third alternative, represented by the Southwest subdivisions, was available to families who perhaps did not want to rent but did not have the budget for a “spec”-built house or for those who wanted a dwelling in a significantly different physical context. John Scott of Clearview often scoffed “Can’t afford it! Oh, yes you can! You can buy a lot and build a pretty vine-covered cottage for a few hundred dollars.” The most commonly cited restriction on Southwest building lots concerned the minimum value of dwellings to be built. Scott’s Clearview subdivision plan stated that “no residence costing less than $700 can be erected,” although the designation “residence” is somewhat grand for a

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42 Clear-View,” PR, May 1, 1886.
dwellings in that price range. The Improved Mutual deeds stated that "no house erected on said premises shall cost less than six hundred dollars."45 These values represented less than half the cost of the least expensive speculatively built row houses at this time.

Southwest subdivisions, like those in other outlying wards, offered families several ways to reduce house-building costs and to spread them out over a longer period of time. Families could benefit from the two-step process of first purchasing a building lot (or even several, as many did) and paying it off on time if necessary and then, as budgets permitted, building or contracting for a house. All building lot advertisements included information about installment payment plans, to which no interest was added. Not all families availed themselves of paying on time, but the majority probably did, because subdividers did not begin reporting on the "first dwelling under construction" until about a year after they first advertised lots. A few subdividers also advertised that they provided financing for house building, but the details here are murky. All speculators seem to have discontinued their business associations after selling lots for a limited time period, and few can be traced afterward. With the exception of Scott, whose name appears in property transfer records until the late 1890s, the speculators do not seem to have been around to offer construction financing after the first few years. Advertised terms for house building might have been a ploy to encourage lot sales. In any case, details of construction financing and dwelling values are available only from the years before 1900.

Whether or not these speculators actually did offer financing for construction, their own profits in lot sales depended on accurately targeting their market. This suggests that advertised examples of house values accurately indicate the real budgets of lot purchasers. If so, $1,000 was a typical house value in these subdivisions during the first ten years or so of building activity. The variety evident from photographs and the lengthy forty-five-year period of active house building make an overall average or an average at any other time difficult to determine. Some families purchasing building lots in these subdivisions erected more expensive houses. In 1886, the first full building season during which houses in Clearview were erected, John Scott singled out a $1,600 house as an example of what prospective buyers could erect; in subsequent advertisements he singled out houses contracted for $2,000 and $3,000 "in Section 21."44 There would have been little reason to exaggerate the cost of dwellings because prospective lot purchasers could view current construction on the frequent site excursions and perhaps even meet other purchasers. These values might not have been typical for this vicinity but do indicate that some families had the means, if they wished, to purchase a new speculatively built row house.

Detached dwellings predominated in all Southwest subdivisions before World War I and thus seem to prove the desire of many families to obtain a dwelling set in a relatively large yard. This was true for the Bernauer family. Emil Bernauer came to the United States after serving in the Franco-Prussian War and found employment as a cabinetmaker for J. G. Brill and Company. In the 1880s, Bernauer and his family lived in a row house in the borough of West Philadelphia, from which he could easily have commuted to Brill's new location in the upper part of Ward 40. In 1894, however, Bernauer paid Scott $160 for two 25-by-100-foot Clearview lots. Later that year, Bernauer, his wife, and his five children moved into the new three-story detached-frame house on Eightieth Street. As shown here fifty-five years later (fig. 9), this substantial dwelling (with a similar one just evident on the adjacent lot) was still home to one of the Bernauer daughters and her own family, who continued to enjoy the spacious garden. The fencing was added in the late 1940s when the road was widened and repaved. The Bernauers could have chosen to remain in West Philadelphia or to move to one of the new row house or semidetached neighborhoods surrounding Brill's new location in the upper part of the ward. Instead, they desired to live in a detached house with a large garden. The Bernauers and other families, after perhaps comparing their options, chose to build a larger frame rather than a smaller brick dwelling.45

After 1900, almost all dwellings were constructed of brick, and the first Sanborn map (1927)...

44 "Clear-View," PR, March 1, 1887, and June 23, 1888.
45 The 1894 lot purchase was recorded in the PR; their West Philadelphia address was listed in Gopsill's Philadelphia Business Directory (Philadelphia: Gopsill, 1867-1907). On the occasion of the couple's golden wedding anniversary, their story was recounted in "Golden Wedding Anniversary," CMz, no. 2 (July 1923): 12. The article implies that Bernauer contributed to the building of the house, but he himself did not state this explicitly. In the interviews I have conducted with former residents, they always emphasize the details of a family member's contributions to building a family house. In April 1951, the Evening Bulletin photographed the Bernauer house and garden when Eastwick was featured as part of the series "Great Philadelphia Home Neighborhoods."

45 Improved Mutual Association deeds to Owen Sherlin and Henry Broadbent.
characterizes the vicinity as a brick district. The change of preferred building material might have been dictated by increased enforcement of municipal building codes; perhaps increasing numbers of building permit applications in the vicinity brought construction activity to the attention of the three building inspectors. Whatever the legal reason, the use of bricks became more practically convenient in the late 1890s, after the owners of the Camac Brickyard purchased a group of building lots in the southern portion of the Improved Mutual subdivision. The owners hoped to profit from the steadily increasing building activity in the vicinity.\footnote{From 1854 to 1866, this neighborhood was part of Ward 24. From 1866 to 1898, it was included in Ward 27. From 1898 to the present, it has been included in Ward 40. See Ward 27 in George Washington Bromley, \textit{Atlas of the City of Philadelphia}, 1885–1894.}

Many families on tight budgets leveraged building and construction-related skills to obtain a family dwelling at a cheaper cost than that available through the speculative market. Bernauer was a carpenter and could have contributed his professional skill to the construction of his dwelling, but most likely he contracted with a local builder or lumberyard for his sizable dwelling. Early subdividers frequently reported the number of houses under contract in their subdivision, indicating that many families did hire professionals to build their dwellings. Other families self-built or contributed skills to creating a


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Fig. 9. Bernauer dwelling and yard, Eightieth Street and Chelwynde Avenue, Clearview subdivision, built mid-1890s, photo early 1950s. \textit{(Philadelphia Evening Bulletin}, April 3, 1951, Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives, Philadelphia.)
home, substituting sweat equity for the cash they did not have. Richard Harris has formulated the concept of the "self-built threshold," the price below which speculative builders would not profit and so were not willing to build. On the basis of his case study of Toronto, Harris equated self-building with the cheapest possible housing. This was also true of some dwellings in lower Southwest Philadelphia (particularly those erected by white and black southerners arriving during World War I), but self-building in these subdivisions should not be equated only with the bottom of the housing market—at least in terms of quality of construction. A high proportion of neighborhood residents worked in building and related trades. If they built or performed some of the skills to provide a family house, their work would have been equal (and perhaps even superior) to that found in spec-built houses. They were also in a position to exchange professional skills with coworkers, friends, and family members who likewise worked in construction-related trades. Moreover, many adult men in other occupations had some summer experience as teenagers working with relatives and neighbors in building and related trades and thus acquired some professional experience, which they were later able to put to use.47

Southwest subdivisions opened up at a time when some house-building tasks were becoming more simplified. Some former residents recall that their families originally moved to this area of the city because family members had a dream not just of home ownership but of actually building or contributing to the creation of the family home. Michael Doucet and John Weaver characterize the period from 1870 to 1900, which includes the first fifteen years of house-building activity in lower Southwest Philadelphia, as "the golden age of housing for the common people." They describe professional changes (the development of contracting) and the simplification of many building tasks (with prefabricated house components, tool improvements, wire nails, and wire mesh lathe) that reduced the cost of houses and simplified the task of building for professionals and self-builders alike. Later additions and alterations were hobbies for many families, and a few even built cabins and summer cottages as family projects. For instance, the Doppler family built a summer cottage on the Chesapeake Bay over the course of four summers while they lived in tents. Family members even made and laid foundation blocks themselves.48

Most families who self-built undoubtedly did so from necessity, and many of the self-built houses are examples of some of the more idiosyncratic housing stock of the neighborhood. Russian tinsmith Franz Richard Goldhahn was an early lot purchaser who built his own house, partly from necessity but, according to family histories, also partly from desire. Goldhahn and his wife settled in Kensington, with convenient transportation to Center City, where he worked as a roofer. In 1886, Goldhahn purchased three 50-by-100-foot Elmwood subdivision lots for $195. He built his two-and-a-half-story frame house, and in 1887 daughter Josephine was the first Goldhahn child born in the new house. In faded and blurry family photographs from the 1950s, the house appears to be an unpainted and unadorned narrow box. Goldhahn continued to work in Center City but moved to Elmwood in order to farm part-time. His house was built on one of the outer streets in the Elmwood subdivision, adjacent to the fields he rented. He subsequently built two bungalows as wedding presents for children.49

Some dwellings, particularly before 1900, were much smaller than the Bernauer and Goldhahn dwellings and certainly cost less than the lowest-priced speculatively built brick row houses. One unpretentious dwelling that can be seen in towns throughout the Delaware Valley was depicted in a simple line drawing in the building lot advertisements of a Camden County, New Jersey, subdivision targeted to the same market as the lower Southwest

47 Richard Harris, "Self-Building in the Urban Housing Market," Economic Geography 67, no. 1 (January 1991), and Unplanned Suburbs; Catherine Harley McVor, tape-recorded oral history interview, May 19, 2000. All tape-recorded oral history interviews for this project were conducted by the author, and all transcripts are in the author’s possession.


49 Information about Goldhahn was obtained from the 1880 and 1900 manuscript censuses, property transfers recorded in the PHL Gossip's Directory, issues of the Goldhahn Family Newsletter, and a tape-recorded oral history interview with Goldhahn's granddaughter Alice Boyd Ryback, May 4, 2000. In 1925, when Charles Lindbergh visited Philadelphia, he landed in the Goldhahn potato field, now part of the Philadelphia International Airport. In the 1970s, Goldhahn's youngest daughter, Emma, was finally evicted from her father's house, which stood in the way of the proposed route for Interstate 99.
subdivisions. This dwelling was described as the most economical type of house being erected in West Berlin; $500 was the price given (fig. 10). Many similar frame dwellings were constructed in lower Southwest, some of which still survive (fig. 11). This dwelling as originally constructed was even plainer than the one featured in the advertisement. Brick versions appear to be just as small as the frame model when viewed from the street but actually contained six rooms.

Surviving houses and photographs document the activity of some modest speculative building activity in the early years, as documented by this group of humble detached dwellings that once stood in the southern portion of the Elmwood tract (fig. 12). Uniform setbacks from the street, even spacing between dwellings, and the repetition of the house plan indicate that this was a speculative building venture. Elmwood lots uniformly measured 50 by 100 feet, so here the practical builder subdivided lots before erecting this group of unadorned dwellings, which were similar to the Berlin Land Association’s economical dwelling. Front porches provided some privacy, but even before the road was widened (as shown in this 1950s photograph) the houses must have been very close to Tinicum Avenue, not even separated from it by a sidewalk. At one point, families erected fences and hedges as defensive barriers. Speculative building activity thus represented various levels of the housing market.

In more centrally located areas of these subdivisions, speculative builders risked offering more amenities. In the same period that the Elmwood dwellings were constructed, another speculative builder erected more spacious two-and-a-half-story frame dwellings in the Clearview subdivision (fig. 13). Sizable porches and originally greater setbacks from the street would have offered families more privacy than the group of Elmwood dwellings. The sidewalk was a later addition to the neighborhood, added when the road was widened and paved. This matching pair could have been built to sell or to rent, another real estate investment common throughout the city. After several years of building activity, John Scott advertised “21 fine houses in C’View to rent, $15 month.”

The semidetached house became more popular as brick became the primary construction material, perhaps to offset the increased cost of brick compared to lumber. After 1910, semidetached houses were constructed almost as frequently as single dwellings. The semidetached, or twin, was similar in plan to the typical row house but offered several features not possible with the row house, such as more windows and larger yards; indeed, many families living in semidetached houses also purchased several lots, so in Southwest Philadelphia the semidetached dwelling became characteristic of the landscape most often associated with planned suburbs. In this regard, it is important to emphasize, as Margaret Marsh has already done, that all but the wealthiest Philadelphians embraced the twin as a desirable suburban residence. Such houses were built in Overbrook Farms and even in the more exclusive Chestnut Hills. Of concern for both small speculative builders and self-building families, twins could be less expensive to construct than row houses: local building codes did not require heavy masonry party walls to prevent fires from spreading, and so they were often framed completely in wood. At the same time, they provided a significantly larger yard than a row house, one that could also accommodate a drive and freestanding garage.

51 “Clear-View,” PR, October 22, 1887.
A number of surviving semidetached dwellings indicates that early examples in these subdivisions were some of the most "sophisticated" in terms of architectural style. Many are in, or at least approximate, popular styles of the nineteenth century, as in the case of two pairs of surviving dwellings erected on Buist Avenue, again in the Clearview subdivision. Here, a two-and-a-half-story frame dwelling was embellished with the rounded turrets of the immensely popular Queen Anne style (fig. 14). These would have been quite stylish when they were built in the 1890s, a decade during which numerous house advertisements described "quaint" and "picturesque" houses, both common adjectives for this style. An even larger and more costly pair of dwellings was erected on the adjacent block (fig. 15). By the late 1880s and 1890s, the Second Empire was nothing new, but certainly this particular pair of dwellings represents an awareness of high style in architecture and a level of cost significantly above the lower reaches of the housing market. As also evident in this photograph, the original or perhaps later owners of both twins purchased additional lots to create large side yards. As seems to have been typical in this neighborhood, these larger twins display porch rooflines that give the illusion of a single detached dwelling.

Semidetached houses in lower Southwest subdivisions were built in a variety of sizes and displayed a corresponding variety of decorative detail and style. Many were small and simple, containing only six rooms (fig. 16). These twins closely resemble the economical dwelling advertised by the Berlin Land Association. The continuous brick courses across the front indicate that this pair was built as one speculative unit. Semidetached dwellings were sometimes built at different times. Most frequently, the second family added an identical house, but families did not feel constrained to complete a twin in the same style, as these surviving twins from the Cherbourg Park subdivision demonstrate (fig. 17). Alternatively, some families purchased lots next to a semidetached house sitting on the property line and chose to build a detached house sited in the middle of the lot, apparently not bothered by the blank wall of the neighboring house sitting on their property line. The blank wall unpunctuated by windows might have been regarded as a benefit, providing more privacy.

Scott's simple line drawing depicting "Charming Clear-View" reminded prospective home builders that neighborhoods contained other types of buildings as well (fig. 6). Churches and schools, the two other neighborhood social institutions included in
Scott’s vision of the future Clearview, were soon erected or provided by early residents. In the early years of development, the school district supplied teachers, but parents rented former farmhouses to serve as schools; without public transportation children could not get to existing schools. Clearview Methodist Church was the first of several erected by Southwest residents themselves when Scott agreed to donate a section of the grove he had reserved in his subdivision (fig. 18). This church was periodically expanded and embellished by neighborhood residents, many of whom were not Methodist but did participate in social activities. Surviving original windows display the carved names of residents who contributed to the first structure. When early residents formed the Clearview Improvement Association, they met in the church, which also functioned as a community center for the neighborhood. Commercial establishments also figured in this evolving landscape. Most owners of corner stores, meat markets, dry goods stores, pharmacies, barbershops, candy stores, tailor shops, and other small proprietor shops did not live above their stores, although owners often rented out the second floor as one or more apartments. Some buildings were erected to function as small stores (fig. 19). Like many of the most successful neighborhood proprietors, the Doppler family lived near and not above the family grocery store.

World War I was a turning point for the Southwest subdivisions. Large gardens, undeveloped lots, and surviving farms imparted a semirural look to some of the vicinity, but steady residential development erased the lines between the individual subdivisions. Sometime in the 1910s, residents began referring to the general residential vicinity as “the Meadows,” and the formation of the Meadows-Congregated Building and Loan likewise reflected a broader neighborhood identity. At the same time, however, the name “the Meadows” captured the quality of their landscape that most families seemed to have prized: its relatively underdeveloped state and the adjacent Tinicum Marsh. The creation of the mammoth Hog Island Shipyard and railroad line in the last year of the war quickly altered the nearby landscape and brought the vicinity to the attention of other Philadelphia residents for the first time. The nearby shipyard and participation in the war effort increased awareness among residents of their importance to the city’s economy and to
Fig. 13. Speculatively built houses, Buist Avenue, Clearview subdivision, built 1890s. (Photo, Anne Krulikowski.)

Fig. 14. Queen Anne-style semidetached houses, Clearview subdivision, built 1890s. (Photo, Anne Krulikowski.)
Fig. 15. Second Empire-style semidetached houses, each with extra side yard, Clearview subdivision, built 1890s. (Photo, Anne Krulikowski.)

Fig. 16. Semidetached two-story houses, Improved Mutual subdivision tract, built ca. 1890s. (Photo, Anne Krulikowski.)
the national war effort. They entered the postwar period with increased pride in their neighborhood and the expectation of seeing continued development and improvement throughout the vicinity.

"No Better Place to Live": The Meadows after World War I

The 1920s brought another building boom to the Philadelphia region. The Meadows did not experience the pace of building activity seen in adjacent areas or several other outlying wards but did experience the highest rate of population growth, house building, and improvement to occur in this vicinity within one decade. Reflecting the sentiments of neighborhood residents, local realtor and booster George Gaul suggested there was "NO BETTER PLACE TO LIVE" than Southwest Philadelphia. The realtors, builders, and other neighborhood go-getters also believed there was no better place to speculate. In the two subdivisions to open up just before the war, small-scale builders erected several block-long rows of six-room and more spacious eight-room dwellings, both with enclosed front porches (fig. 20). According to insurance information from the 1940s (when this photograph was taken), this rare block-long row of dwellings in Boon Park each contained six rooms and an enclosed front porch. Their raised elevation created some privacy, enhanced by the trees planted by either the builder or purchaser. The trees provided a suburban context for this urban dwelling type. Speculative building, though, was generally on a smaller scale; shorter rows of six or eight dwellings were more common, and groups of three dwellings were even more frequently built. These relatively few block-long and shorter row housing projects did not significantly impart a more urban look to the Meadows. The preferred house type continued to be brick detached and semidetached houses, most commonly with eight rooms and a front porch. A few scattered bungalows also appeared.

Neighborhood residents financed construction or constructed buildings themselves as either a main source of income or a side business to enhance the

54 Maps and other documents often refer to Boon Park as "Boone Park." Pennsylvanian Daniel Boone was, of course, a more well-known cultural referent than the early Swedish Boon family, for whom Boon’s Island and the Boon’s Dam School were also named.

economic resources of the family. Quite a few men engaged in a variety of real estate and building activities to benefit their families, but oral interviews with their children indicate that at least some of these men also derived some enjoyment from the business deals and their associated risks. The building partnership of Joseph Cermak and Ernest Dean was so successful for a time that one observer noted, "Mr. Cermak and Mr. Dean are fast becoming real-timers of the neighborhood." As Marie Cermak recalls, "My father and Mr. Dean were going to set the world on fire. So they started building. Two twins, a row of garages and then three houses together. . . . They lost their pants during the Depression."^56

Like the original lot speculators, these two friends saw the possibilities of an active real estate market. Dean, whose grandfather had been an original Clearview lot purchaser, was the proprietor of a heating, septic tank, and sanitary plumbing business. Cermak worked for the Burpee Company as a seed salesman, but by the mid-1920s he was placing real estate advertisements in the Messenger and describing himself as a "Builder of Small Homes." In 1925, Cermak and Dean offered for sale eight two-story brick semidetached dwellings. Alexander Cook, a neighbor and self-employed paperhanger, papered the sample house. That same year, Cermak and Dean also offered for sale a "beautiful store and apartment house on 78th and Buist Avenue." These entrepreneurial friends also rented garages on Chelwynde Avenue for four dollars a month, a popular neighborhood investment as more neighborhood families purchased automobiles.

Many residents looked for ways to increase family security by expanding and modifying the family dwelling. Stanley Agent arrived at Ellis Island in 1900 when he was about seventeen years old. Like a number of residents, he first worked in the Pennsylvania coal mines before coming to Philadelphia, where he and his family lived in a "shack" adjacent to the Tinicum Marsh. By the early 1920s, the Agents lived in a brick semidetached house in the Clearview subdivision, where Agent owned a meat market. To accommodate his family of five sons, Agent expanded his six-room house to twelve rooms, which was possible because of his very large yard on the extra lot. A portion of their substantial brick house as it appeared in the 1940s can be seen here as Mr. and Mrs. Agent walked to church (fig. 21). The wide cement sidewalk seems a little bare, but the brick wall holds the shadow of one of the many curbside trees this active man planted. Agent also invested in rental property. His son recalls, "He had three homes that he rented. During the Depression he could not bring himself to evict tenants when they couldn't pay the rent, so he himself could not meet his own mortgage payments and lost the house." Agent eventually reacquired his own house and continued to expand and convert parts of it to other economic uses: "Pop was always building. He was a very, very energetic man. You can see how he made the store, then he added three apartments. Then after the store closed [mid-1940s] that was converted into apartments. Then he built several garages behind the house to rent out."^57

During the 1920s prosperity boom, many neighborhood families purchased or built their own homes for the first time. In 1925, the Messenger

^56 "Real Estate Notes," GM2, no. 5 (October 1925): 5–6; Marie Cermak, tape-recorded oral history interview, November 1, 1999.

^57 Frank Agent, tape-recorded oral history interview, November 8, 1990. In 1925, the editors of the GM praised "Mr. Agent's enlargement of his shop" in "Improvement," GM2, no. 1 (June 1925): 12.
noted that John Harley was “progressing wonderfully with his new home on Chelwynde Avenue west of 75th Street. His sons and their friends deserve great credit for their assistance and overtime in producing a dwelling which will provide a beautiful and commodious home” (fig. 22). Harley, who had lived for a time in the Improved Mutual subdivision as a young boy, came back to the neighborhood with his wife and young family in 1913. The Harleys rented a dwelling (lit by oil lamps) for more than a decade. In the mid-1920s Harley purchased three lots behind the house in which his mother lived (a dwelling built by John’s brother). By that time, Harley’s son was a professional bricklayer, working for a neighborhood firm. John Jr. did the brickwork, and his friends in the building trades contributed their skills. The Harleys had long dreamed of a suburban home but had to budget carefully. They placed their house in the center of their three lots, but the brick dwelling with four rooms on the first floor and five bedrooms on the second floor was actually a semidetached structure with no windows on one side. In this photograph, it appears to be a detached dwelling, but the other side was a solid brick wall. Like most houses constructed after World War I, it had full indoor plumbing and was wired for electricity. It was not the typical detached dwelling most commonly associated with suburban living, but for the Harleys, this slightly odd-looking house was their suburban dream come true.\(^{58}\)

During the 1920s, more than 800 families arrived in the neighborhood and purchased or built new houses. Many were immigrants who had arrived in the years immediately before the war or were the children of immigrants who grew up in the more congested neighborhoods of South Philadelphia. Michael Washlick and his family had lived in a six-room brick row house on a narrow South Philadelphia street, where the front steps constituted their only outdoor space (fig. 23). In the 1920s Washlick, his wife Helen, and their young children moved to one of the Southwest subdivisions when they purchased a new semidetached dwelling built of the yellow brick popular at that time, as well as the adjacent lot. The Washlicks treasured their large back and side gardens, where they took many photographs of themselves, emphasizing the feature of their new dwelling they most valued (fig. 24).\(^{59}\)

Spacious lots and the underdeveloped landscape attracted other young couples. Christopher and Mary Hilliard also moved from a South Philadelphia

\(^{58}\)“Real Estate Notes.” CM 2, no. 5 (October 1925): 6; manuscript censuses for 1900, 1910, and 1920; McIlvor, interview.

\(^{59}\)Anna Warnock White, tape-recorded oral history interview, May 22, 2000.
LOCATION 8333 Botanic Ave. Northwest Side 1st, Northeast from South 84th St.

Map: PHILA. Vol. Page

Risk is a 2-sty. BK. Row

Construction GOOD

Age 25, Repair GOOD

Cornice METAL CUT

Roof FLAT GLASS

Floors 201ST.

Ceilings LIP

Partitions LIP

Stairs OPEN

Cooking GAS

Heating HOT AIR

Hot water GAS

Lighting ELECT

Ashes METAL CAN

SPECIAL CONSTRUCTION

Columns—wood, iron, steel

Protected, Unprotected

Beams—wood, iron, steel

Protected, Unprotected

Elevators

Dumb Waiters

Fire doors

HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

SPECIAL RISKS or UNDESIRABLE FEATURES

SHEET NEED ASBESTOS SHEET METAL INSULATION IN BASEMENT

WASTE and RUBBISH

PROTECTION EQUIPMENT

Buckets, Extinguishers, Hose Sprinklers, Steamer Connections, Watchman, Clock System

RISK (if hazards are removed) is excellent, good, fair, poor

Recommend DECLINING CANCELLATION

Fig. 20. Examples of speculatively built houses, 8300 block of Botanic Avenue, Boon Park, built 1925, photo 1944. (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Contributorship, policy no. 34148, 1944.)
row house in the 1920s. Their daughter recalls, “My sister Marguerite always told a story about when she first saw the Meadows. . . . They got off the trolley at Seventy-seventh Street and had to walk all the way out to the house. My sister said that when they walked along it was all open fields at that time, with only a few houses along Seventy-seventh Street. She said when they got off the trolley, it was so beautiful to her, because all the cherry trees and the lilac bushes along the road in the fields were in bloom. She never forgot that first sight of the Meadows. She talked about it the rest of her life.”

Relocating to the Meadows meant that Christopher had a time-consuming daily journey to the Atlantic Refining Company (ARCO) in South Philadelphia. The Penrose Ferry Bridge over the Schuylkill River could not safely support the load of a bus. After walking across the bridge from the Meadows, foot passengers were picked up by a bus in Passyunk, South Philadelphia. Eventually, Meadows residents could take a bus from their neighborhood to the bridge. Later, Christopher walked from his house on Chestwynd Avenue down to the river (about two miles), across the bridge, and then to the ARCO refinery, about another three miles, and back each day so that the Hilliard children could afford trolley fares to attend a Catholic high school. Like other parents, the Hilliards had to carefully allocate nickels and dimes and sacrifice their own convenience to raise their children in the Meadows.

Families sometimes made do without other modern utilities as well. When Jennie Harley married paperhanger Alexander (Lex) Cook, Lex purchased a lot and then had a brick house attached to that of Jennie’s mother. The young couple had a very limited budget, so the second floor was unheated. Jennie, however, did want a new gas range. Lex finally paid the gas company to install a main down Dicks Avenue; neighbors reimbursed Cook for a portion of his cost when they wanted to be hooked up. Other neighborhood wives wrote letters to the gas company for mains because they too wanted gas appliances; in 1928, the gas company finally installed mains under several streets. Neighbor Alice Washlick Warnock remained in the Meadows to raise her own daughter, Anna, but like many young couples she and her husband began married life in a small house without modern utilities, located in the southern area of the neighborhood. In the late 1930s, she and her husband finally acquired a new brick twin house with electricity and were able to purchase a gas range, a significant family event they documented with a photograph (fig. 25). Like Lex and Jenny Cook, many families built new brick semidetached houses with electrical outlets in the mid-1920s. They had no electricity, however, and relied on gas lamps for several years. Such experiences became part of their unique family history as well as a bond shared by Meadows families.61

After World War I, almost all new houses were built with running water in the kitchen and bathroom and indoor toilets. Some residents living in houses built earlier recall the 1920s or the 1930s


61 Francis Cook, tape-recorded oral history interview, December 1, 1999. When the Philadelphia Tribune, the city’s leading black newspaper, featured families protesting another wave of eviction and demolition in the early 1970s, one family displayed many oil lamps collected from neighbors when they converted to electricity.
(when labor costs and prices decreased) as the time when toilets and upgraded bathrooms were installed. Not all families acquiring indoor toilets demolished their outhouses, though, which they found convenient when working in the yard or having company. Mothers preferred husbands and children to use outhouses rather than track mud through the house. Isabel Doppler Foster, whose family had modern indoor plumbing, asserts that her family “had one of the nicest outhouses around. It was all plastered inside, a double seater. We used it in many emergencies if a lot of people were in the house.” The path from the house to outhouse was commonly concealed by grapevines and arbors. Families placed chairs and benches in this space, where they could enjoy the coolness and shade created by the arbor during the summer heat. In many cases, the presence of outhouses in the yard did not always indicate the absence of full modern indoor plumbing.

A few pockets existed where residents had access to fewer modern conveniences. Nicholas Saunders, the son of white southerners who arrived during World War I, grew up on the southern periphery of the neighborhood near the marsh. He believes that “in the center part everyone had facilities. We lived on the outer edge by the swamps; we had less than those who lived up more toward Island Avenue.” Like the Saunders family, many others living in the southern areas had arrived during World War I and erected their own simple dwellings (fig. 26). The owners of this very small house valued their family domestic space and took care to separate private space from the public road, over which very few people probably passed. The hedge was untrimmed at the time this photograph was taken but had been well tended in the past, and its presence imparts a more substantial appearance to the dwelling.

The Meadows was also the location of some very unorthodox dwellings that would not be recognized as adequate dwellings in planned subdivisions. Some World War I workers lived in garages or hastily built shacks on the southern periphery near the marsh; in the 1930s, a number of families evicted from other areas of the city likewise constructed unusual

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62 Foster, interview. Outhouses were fairly common in many wards. Philadelphia did not require indoor toilets in every dwelling until 1952.

63 Nicholas Saunders, tape-recorded oral history interview, May 19, 2000.
shelters. When William Farrell lost his job during the Depression and could not pay his rent, he moved his family back to the Meadows, where he brought two railroad boxcars to a group of empty lots and turned them into a family home. A few years later, he purchased a neighborhood bungalow. Most bungalows were actually “Hog Island Bungalows.” During World War I, the Emergency Fleet Corporation built only a small group of bungalows at Hog Island for the 30,000 workers at the world’s largest shipyard. Local families greatly overcrowded themselves to accommodate shipyard employees, many of whom lived in unheated garages and hastily built shacks without running water, in order to make the world safe for democracy. After the war, the government sold the bungalows to purchasers who then moved them to Southwest subdivision lots. A surviving group on Harley Avenue in the Cherbourg Park subdivision was the only group erected in the neighborhood (fig. 27). They were constructed on very narrow lots, but each has a backyard about the length of the house.64

Another family who had been evicted from a rental apartment created an even more unusual family dwelling. In the early 1930s, distressed Municipal Relief Bureau workers “discovered a family living in an abandoned circus wagon in the meadows of Greater Eastwick,” but Mr. and Mrs. George Green told reporters they had never been happier. A friend had paid five dollars and Green came up with the remaining nine dollars to purchase the wagon, which they moved to a lot they could rent for an annual fee of three dollars. As reported in the local newspaper, Mr. Green transformed the wagon into a family dwelling: “He covered the wagon with

64 Goldhahn Family Newsletter 6, no. 1 (March 1994), n.p.
Fig. 25. Alice Washlick Warnock, daughter Anna, and the family’s new gas range, late 1930s. (Anna Warnock White.)

Fig. 26. Probably self-built dwelling, southern fringes of the Meadows neighborhood, built 1940s, photo early 1950s. (Photo in author’s possession.)
Building paper, painted the side gray, cut three windows and a door, put props under the wheels, covered the ‘foundation’ walls with tar paper and pieces of board to keep away winds, built a porch with three steps up, and presto! There was the home, all ready for the family!” When relief workers insisted the family find “proper” accommodations, an angry Mrs. Green replied, “We have it nice here. We’re happy and I really feel good here.” Cheap empty lots, lack of code enforcement, and the help of some neighbors who supplied water and a few other necessities freed the Greens from the pressing anxiety of accumulating debts.65

In terms of both practical use and enjoyment, former residents often speak of the landscape in the same terms used by early lot speculators. The fear of debt is a constant theme of oral interviews with former residents—even as children, interviewees had been aware that their parents did everything possible to avoid debt. As the Green family found, the semirural landscape and the opportunity to purchase more than one lot offered families the opportunity to engage in economic activities that would not have been possible for most urbanites. In 1921, the Saunders family moved to Lyons Avenue and quickly acquired several adjacent lots: “We enclosed it in and had a huge garden. ... We raised our own rabbits and chickens. We had apple trees, cherry trees, pear trees. We raised our own peanuts.”66 Many families had large vegetable gardens and tried raising chickens, rabbits, and turkeys, activities that enhanced their diet. Sometimes these activities had economic motivations, but some residents just liked turning their hand to self-sufficiency. Isabel Doppler Foster recalls that her father liked experimenting: “We always had a vegetable garden. My father made his own wine, just to try to do it. Then he raised turkeys, which was a pretty hard thing to do. We did get some eggs, and raised more. He had bees and we’d get the honey. But he seemed to always like to try new things. Always the smokehouse going. We spent a lot of time in our yard and garden. We always had chickens, pigeons, a rabbit, a stray duck. We always had cats and a couple of dogs.”67

These extensive outdoor activities occasionally even prepared a few residents for future jobs. One recalls that by playing in the grove planted by subdivider John Scott in the 1880s he developed an ability to tolerate heights: “Years ago, if you stood in the street in front of this house and looked down Dicks Avenue, the trees formed a canopy; it looked like a tunnel all the way to Eighty-fourth Street. ... This was a great playground for kids, giant trees all

66 Saunders, interview.
67 Foster, interview.
over the place. All we ever did was climb trees. I applied for a job in the [Sun] shipyard during the Second World War. I was assigned to a steel erecto r, working with hot iron. The guy says 'Can you climb?' I said 'Man, I was born in a tree!'"

While many families grew food to extend their budgets, some residents lavished care on large flower gardens for the joy of it. Without prompting, former residents cite with great detail the variety of trees and wildflowers that grew throughout the Meadows, as well as the large gardens they and their neighbors planted and tended. Numerous residents belonged to rose societies and other organized garden groups, competing in annual flower shows. Nancy Hilliard Laird’s mother had wanted to move to the Meadows mainly because the cramped lot of her South Philadelphia row house offered no room for gardening. She expended so much care and effort on her garden that many decades later her daughter still recalls exactly what flowers her mother planted: “In our side yard, my mother had scarlet sage planted right by [the front porch]. There were four o’clocks. Then, toward the back, my mother had phlox, peonies, a beautiful tea rose bush by our back porch. There was a big lilac bush. Then two big flower mounds, one filled with portulaca and the other with petunias. We had a rose of Sharon tree in the front.” Former residents remember which neighbors trained wisteria to grow over trellises and which neighbor shaped hedges to resemble animals. Significantly, family gardens and the natural landscape of undeveloped blocks and the adjacent Tinicum Marsh, rather than individual homes, frame the reminiscences of former residents. As noted earlier, Robert Fishman has argued that a carefully laid out physical landscape communally crafted and shaped is the essential quality of planned subdivisions, but although many Meadows residents lovingly planted gardens they could just as deeply appreciate wildflower meadows and the wild marsh.

Depending on urban industry for work, these families seem to have focused their free time mainly on the suburban and even seminatural landscape in which their dwellings stood. They believed that they enjoyed a special life that most “city” residents had to do without. Echoing early building lot advertisements, former residents speak of enjoying “the country life” within the city: “My mother had relatives who lived in the city [i.e., wards near to Center City], and when they came to visit my mother, they would say they were ‘coming to the country.’ They usually came for picnics.” Whether outdoor activities were economically necessary or enjoyable hobbies, their “outdoor life” became part of what residents considered their unique neighborhood and family histories, activities they believed distinguished them from other Philadelphia residents—the “city” residents.

Many residents were proud of their houses and gardens, and many were actively involved in the several civic organizations pressing city hall for improved and upgraded municipal services: paved roads, modern grade schools, a fire station, better sewage and wastewater disposal, electric street lights, and protection from the railroad that thundered through the neighborhood. In the 1920s, several realtors undertook campaigns to publicize the vicinity and encourage further residential building. At the same time, many neighborhood residents were strongly attached to this unique seminatural landscape and their family dwellings. Henry Eltz was a longtime leader of one civic organization and an active neighborhood booster; as a dentist he belonged to several businessmen’s associations in West Philadelphia and Center City and thus participated in the urban world of Philadelphia. Yet, as editor of the improvement association’s newsletter, Eltz publicly chided one new resident who had “spoiled” the street “by setting his house out on the sidewalk” in “city” fashion. This particular home builder had violated a generally accepted suburban neighborhood aesthetic by behaving like a “city dweller.”

Families who had built their own dwellings or at least contributed sweat equity to their construction and maintenance and lavished immense care on gardens felt a particularly strong emotional connection to their homes. This strong tie to the neighborhood landscape was expressed when residents became aware that the city planned to demolish the entire vicinity. In 1956, local resident Jennie Harley Cook was honored in city hall as Philadelphia’s Mother of the Year. One year later, her house and neighborhood were declared to be a slum and were condemned. In a letter that was printed by a sympathetic newspaper columnist, Cook asked the Redevelopment Authority, “Who is to say what is a fair price for our home?” She did not believe that a government agency could assign a monetary value to

68 Cook, interview.
69 Laird, interview.
70 Fishman, Bourgeois Utopias, 146.

71 Cermak, interview.
the work of her beloved husband and close friends. Jennie’s house had been built by her husband’s friends with the money he had worked hard to set aside, and they had purchased an additional lot for a large garden (fig. 28). Cook elaborated on the human emotions and memories intertwined with the bricks of her home: “Our home is not for sale. It is a home bought with the sweat and toil of a devoted husband and father, with years of planning and scrimping and sacrifice. . . . You sit under an oak tree and you see a little tow-head with a tiny tree, the acorn still dangling on it, saying, ‘This will be for you and Pop to sit under when we are all grown up.’ Pop can no longer sit under it, but when the city bulldozes it out of existence a part of me will die with it.” Sweat equity reduced the financial investment of these families but generated a correspondingly greater emotional investment in family dwellings.

As Dolores Hayden has suggested, “Ordinary people are hopeful about their family and community life, and they struggle to supply what is lacking in order to make places work.” Land speculators had subdivided farms into building lots, but neighborhood residents had to supply just about every-thing else to make these subdivisions work for them and their families. They still had to build or make arrangements to build a dwelling, figure out how to get to work with no public transportation in the vicinity, find their way home over unpaved and unlit streets, build churches, and in early years rent old farmhouses so their children could attend school. They laid cement sidewalks themselves. They quickly formed civic associations to lobby city hall for better sewage, flood protection, public schools, a firehouse, and other necessities of modern life. Over the decades families filled in the details of the bare-bones subdivision plans and created a suburban neighborhood—a neighborhood they would unsuccessfully defend from urban planners and politicians in the late 1950s.

Today, Jennie Cook’s house and about fifty others still stand, but the old neighborhood is gone. The almost 2,500 dwellings, stores, schools, and nineteen churches that made up the Meadows neighborhood were demolished as part of the Eastwick Urban Redevelopment Project. Demolition occurred in several stages in the 1960s and 1970s. New modern housing units, strip shopping malls, light industrial facilities, an extended wildlife preserve, and the expanded airport and highway system have replaced most of the former neighborhood. Surviving houses from the old Meadows neighborhood are incongruously scattered among the newer

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73 Jennie Harley Cook, printed in Morley Cassidy’s column, Philadelphia Inquirer, 1957, copy in author’s possession.
74 Hayden, “Model Houses for the Millions.”
townhouse developments. Former residents inhabit some, but others became home to newer arrivals after neighborhood families were evicted. Almost one-half century after the first wave of demolition, hundreds of former residents keep the neighborhood alive through various reunion gatherings.

Periodically, a surviving dwelling in one of the unredeveloped areas is abandoned and provides a somewhat ghostly reminder that the dreams of home ownership held by many native-born and immigrant working-class families were made a reality for a time in lower Southwest Philadelphia (fig. 29).