At Home in Nineteenth-Century America uses the home as a synthetic tool to pull together stories of nineteenth-century America. The collected documents revisit the variety of places Americans called home – middle-class suburban houses, slave cabins, working-class tenements, frontier dugouts, urban settlement houses – and explore the shifting interpretations and experience of these spaces from within and without. The result is an opportunity to eavesdrop on a wide-ranging conversation that includes a diverse group of historical actors: a domestic servant and Herman Melville, a newlywed housewife and W.E.B. Du Bois, an interior designer and Theodore Roosevelt, all of whom contemplated the power and boundaries of the American home.

When brought together, these voices offer an intimate yet broad view of nineteenth-century American history. Recounting the ways in which a variety of women and men created, conformed to, critiqued, and transformed the ideal of home over the course of the nineteenth century, they sketch a narrative of both inclusion and difference. Nineteenth-century homes and notions of domesticity seem simultaneously distant and familiar. This sense of surprise and recognition is ideal for the study of history, preparing us to view the past with curiosity and empathy, inspiring comparisons to the spaces we inhabit today – malls, movie theaters, city streets, college campuses, even virtual spaces. By permitting us to listen closely to the nineteenth century’s sweeping conversation about home in its various guises, At Home in Nineteenth-Century America encourages us to hear our contemporary conversation about the significance and meaning of home anew while appreciating the lingering imprint of past ideals.
SUMMARY

The introduction describes the history and historiography of the home and domesticity in the United States. It addresses the types of spaces Americans called home in the nineteenth century and highlights important changes in their physical surroundings and material culture. It also discusses the ways that various fields of history (house history, social history, urban history, and women’s history) have studied the home and explains the separate spheres ideal at the center of so much of this scholarship. The goal of this chapter is to underscore the centrality of home to a range of historical inquiries while emphasizing its importance to people in the past.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

• How would you characterize the physical transformation of the nineteenth-century American home?

• What are some of the different contexts in which historians have studied houses and domesticity?

• What was the separate spheres ideal?

• How clear is the boundary between private and public life in our contemporary culture?

EXPANDED ACTIVITY

Ask students to consider the ways in which their own living spaces reflect the interplay among spatial arrangements, social functions, and cultural values. They may reflect on their childhood or family homes or their dorm rooms or apartments. What domestic activities or items are given greatest priority? Which spaces accommodate leisure and which support work, both paid and unpaid? Do particular sections have gendered or generational associations? Are some areas or rooms considered more private than others? Finally, what values and assumptions underlie such demarcations?
The Emergence of the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Ideal

SUMMARY

This chapter explores the relationship between home and a new middle-class moral order emerging in the early decades of the nineteenth century. As men’s labor increasingly moved outside the home, domestic spaces came to be associated with women who were expected to maintain them as bulwarks against the morally suspect, public world of business competition. Within this ideal of separate spheres, women’s domestic labor was recast—less and less depicted as productive labor with economic value and instead described as an extension of inherent femininity.

Sources in this chapter include prescriptive literature from *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and documents by Catharine Beecher, Lydia Maria Child, and Susan Warner considering the relationship between home and femininity. John Angell James and Herman Melville discuss the implications of middle-class domesticity for men and their place in the home, and Andrew Jackson Downing describes the relationship between architecture and morality.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What types of labor did nineteenth-century women do in their homes and how was this work described? What differences can you find in the portrayals of women’s work in the documents by Mary Lee, Lydia Maria Child, and Catharine Beecher?
- In what ways did home life become associated with women and femininity in the first half of the nineteenth century?
- What do John Angell James, Andrew Jackson Downing, and Herman Melville suggest about men’s relationship to domestic spaces and the values of home?
- How do the sources in this chapter depict the growing separation of private and public?

EXPANDED ACTIVITY

As discussed in several documents in this chapter, during the nineteenth century many middle-class Americans believed that domestic spaces and goods could shape morals. Ask students to find examples of the relationship between material culture and morality. They might consider Lydia Maria Child’s concerns about brides’ infatuated with “carpets, vases, sofas, white gloves, and pearl earrings,” Andrew Jackson Downing’s faith that home’s moral influence could be amplified...
The Emergence of the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Ideal

by “truthful” architectural design, or Susan Warner’s detailed description of Ellen Montgomery’s making tea for her mother. What moral messages might Victorians have read in the advertisement for Hennessy’s Cottage Furniture (Figure 1.1)? How does a reliance on goods as conveyers and indicators of morality explain the two versions of N. Currier’s lithograph *Reading the Scriptures* (Figures 1.2 and 1.3)? Is the second, more richly furnished image clearly more “moral”? How so?

Once students have explored several examples, encourage them to reflect on whether economic and class differences were erased or exacerbated when homes and material possessions became markers of morality. Could people with limited resources and few domestic amenities build, furnish, and keep moral homes?
The Persistence of Domestic Labor

SUMMARY

Despite the celebration of home’s isolation from the public world of paid labor and commerce, the two realms remained intertwined. This chapter looks beyond the ideal home to explore the ongoing significance of paid and unpaid domestic labor and reveals the variety of work (economic and cultural) done at home.

The documents in this chapter include accounts of boardinghouse life by a Lowell mill girl and journalist Nellie Bly. Writings by Catharine Beecher, Clarissa Packard, and Lizzie Goodenough explore the relationship between mistresses and domestic servants. An excerpt from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* emphasizes the importance of middle-class women’s unpaid domestic labor, while Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Ward Stafford show the impact of the moral home on depictions of the poor. Finally, an excerpt from Solomon Northrup’s narrative describes domestic arrangements under slavery and offers a contrast to the moral slave cabin envisioned by some slaveholders.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• Based on the documents by Clarissa Packard and Louisa May Alcott, what types of domestic labor did middle-class women continue to do in their own homes?

• How did women’s paid labor inside and outside of the home simultaneously uphold and test the ideal of the middle-class moral home?

• What hardships, challenges, and rewards did domestic life hold out to working-class women in the homes of middle-class employers? Consider the different vantage points of Catharine Beecher, Clarissa Packard, and Lizzie Goodenough.

• How did life in a boarding house challenge the expectations for a respectable Victorian home?

• When were workers, the poor, and even slaves included in the ideal of the moral home? On what terms were they included by employers, reformers, and owners?

EXPANDED ACTIVITY

As men increasingly worked outside the home for wages, women’s domestic labor came to be viewed as separate from the marketplace. On the one hand, this transformation diminished and even erased the economic significance of wom-
en’s domestic labor. On the other hand, it raised the status of women’s work by associating it with an inherent female moral superiority. Historian Jeanne Boydston has called this reframing “the pastoralization of housework.”

Have students compare the excerpts from Catharine Beecher’s Letters To Persons Who Are Engaged In Domestic Service and Lydia Maria Child’s The American Frugal Housewife (chapter 1). Beecher is writing only ten years after Child. How has the depiction of women’s household labor shifted? What examples of pastoralization do the two texts provide? How does class shape the moral significance of women’s domestic labor? Encourage students to move from the specific examples to a consideration of whether this reframing is empowering or disempowering to women. How so? Divide the class in two and have each half take a different point of view.
SUMMARY

As the domestic ideal increasingly included those beyond the white middle class (albeit in uneven and problematic ways), it inspired unexpected claims for political rights and supported new notions of citizenship. This chapter documents how politically marginalized groups – advocates for abolition, woman’s rights, racial equality, Native American citizenship, and trade unionism – used domestic norms, goods, and labor to lay claim to “civilization” and to articulate their particular demands.

Sources in this chapter include an excerpt from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and writings by W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, and Frances Willard. Susan La Flesche depicts Native American domesticity, and Caroline Dall, William Sylvis, and the *Woman’s Standard* consider the relationship between waged labor, domesticity, and gender.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In what ways did various groups use the home and respectable domesticity to prove their own or others’ status as worthy citizens? For example, how do Harriet Beecher Stowe, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Ida B. Wells use domesticity to make cases for African American freedom and progress?

- How did claims by and about marginalized groups uphold the white middle-class domestic ideal? What aspects of Victorian domesticity remained unquestioned?

- How did claims by and about marginalized groups transform or critique the white middle-class domestic ideal? What aspects of Victorian domesticity did they challenge?

- How do Caroline Dall, William Sylvis, and the article from the *Woman’s Standard* portray the relationship between home and the family economy? How do their depictions compare with those by Lydia Maria Child in chapter 1 and by Catharine Maria Sedgwick in chapter 2?
EXPANDED ACTIVITY:

Some documents in this chapter contain arguments that “good homes” foster morality, civilization, and the skills necessary for engaged and responsible citizenship. Other sources suggest that “good homes” are evidence of these qualities. Find examples of these two arguments. (In some cases they can be found in the same document.) What is at stake in these different understandings of home’s significance? Are the two interpretations mutually exclusive? How so? And if not, can they be reconciled using examples from the documents in this chapter?
The American Home on the Move in the Age of Expansion

SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on the use of domestic goods and values to create feelings of stability and progress in the face of geographic mobility and the United States’ global expansion. Taking up the two meanings of “domestic,” it considers the give-and-take between home and nation and the use of domesticity in the creation and assertion of American identity at the end of the nineteenth century.

Documents by W.A. Marin, William Dean Howells, and Stephen Crane offer different views on domestic ideals and experiences in the American west. Mary Antin and an article from Ladies’ Home Journal suggest the ways in which domestic spaces and goods helped women negotiate immigration and growing globalization. And finally, the account of Theodore Roosevelt’s denunciation of international marriages, the descriptions of the Columbian Exposition, and Caroline Shunk’s experiences as a military wife in the Philippines draw more explicit connections between domesticity, international competition, and U.S. imperialism.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• What elements of the nineteenth-century American home were carried into the western frontier and what meanings did men and women give to them?

• Why and how did domestic goods and values serve as stabilizing influences in the face of unfamiliar environments, increased social diversity, and new technologies?

• In what ways did domestic goods and behaviors serve as markers of national identity? Consider public depictions like the Columbian Exposition and Theodore Roosevelt’s condemnation of international marriages. Do these differ from the more intimate portrayals offered by Mary Antin and Caroline Shunk?
SUMMARY

The domestic ideal that emerged in the 1820s rested on distinctions between marketplace and home, male and female, public and private. At the end of the nineteenth century, changes in American urban life seemed to threaten these distinctions, testing the resilience and adaptability of domesticity in the modern industrial city. This chapter explores the ways in which city living challenged Victorian notions of domestic privacy and considers the range of cultural and spatial responses to this challenge.

Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, William Dean Howells, and Edith Wharton highlight the perceived loss of privacy, respectability, family feeling and refinement in urban homes – especially in tenements and apartment houses. Documents by Frederick Law Olmstead, Jane Addams, and Eliza Chester depict new public spaces – public parks, settlement houses, and women’s hotels – designed to serve previously domestic functions.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• How did urban living at the end of the nineteenth century challenge the distinctions between marketplace and home, male and female, public and private that underwrote the ideal Victorian home? What did this blurring look like for the urban poor, the middle class, and the wealthy?

• In what ways did Frederick Law Olmstead and Jane Addams use the vocabulary and associations of domesticity to create new public settings? What elements of home did they transplant into public space? To what degree were these spaces truly public?

• What are the domestic conditions of the urban poor according to Jacob Riis and Stephen Crane? In what ways are these homes inadequate? How do these portrayals compare with earlier accounts by Ward Stafford and Catharine Maria Sedgwick in chapter 2?

• How did proposed housing for unmarried women and the new middle-class apartment houses reflect the persistence of older notions of respectable domesticity alongside the transformation of domestic expectations?

EXPANDED ACTIVITY

Many documents in this chapter and the previous one suggest how domestic goods and private concerns moved into public life at the end of the nineteenth
At Home in the Late Nineteenth-Century City

century. Ask students to consider the presence of domesticity in contemporary public spaces. Are there public settings in which they expect to feel at home? They might consider particular stores, malls, transportation spaces, even their own schools or campuses. What role does domesticity play in these spaces? Is it addressing similar concerns as in the past? Have we found new reasons and ways to domesticate public life?
Dismantling the Victorian Ideal and the Future of Domesticity

SUMMARY

This chapter charts the changing importance of home as a cultural ideal at the turn of the century and considers the challenges posed by feminism, suburbanization, technology, and a growing focus on personality and privacy. To that end, the documents in this concluding chapter do not record the end of the nineteenth-century home but instead reveal various attempts to think outside of it.

Edward Bellamy, Helen Campbell, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman challenge the efficiency of the private home, dismissing it as primitive and calling for modernization. Gertrude Bustill Mossell and A. L. Hall reject the conflation of home and gender roles that constrain women and men. Documents by Mary Abbott, Henry Wilson, and Martha Bensley Bruère celebrate the comfort, informality, and openness offered by the bungalow home and labor-saving devices. Finally, reformer Michael M. Davis, Jr. and the Industrial Housing Associates highlight the interdependence of home and commercial life and spaces for the working class.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• On what terms do the authors in this chapter reject the connection between women’s domestic labor and the moral uplift of their families? How do they depict women’s unpaid labor in the home?

• What are Edward Bellamy’s, Helen Stuart Campbell’s, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s, and Martha Bensley Bruère’s visions of the modern home? Compare their ideas to Clarissa Packard’s recommendations for easing women’s domestic burdens in chapter 2.

• Compare Henry L. Wilson’s bungalow design to Andrew Jackson Downing’s architectural advice in chapter 1. What expectations does each bring to domestic life and how are those hopes reflected in the layout of the houses? Consult the blueprints from the Sear’s Modern Home catalogue (Figure 6.1) and Godey’s Lady’s Book (Figure 1.7).

• How did the new vision of domestic efficiency and the rise of men’s craftsmanship seek to re-gender domestic spaces at the turn of the century? What gendered assumptions did they leave unchallenged?

• What is the relationship between home and marketplace by the end of the nineteenth century? How do the documents in this chapter suggest their interconnection?
Supplemental Assignments

• Did the Victorian domestic ideal that emerged in the first decades of the nineteenth century prove inclusive or divisive as it developed over the century? Use primary sources to support your interpretation. You might consider the impact of the ideal home on particular social groups. For example, did the domestic ideal create opportunities for women to cooperate across lines of class and race? Or did the conflation of domestic goods and labor with morality sustain class divisions that went beyond income inequalities? How did the Victorian domestic ideal delineate or erase racial distinctions? A thorough answer should consider change over time.

• In the 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminists argued, “the personal is political.” By this they meant that the seemingly private problems of individual women often had their roots in more public systems of power and meaning making. Many of the documents in At Home in Nineteenth-Century America reveal the ways in which the domestic was political and, in turn, how many public concerns were often addressed or framed in terms of domesticity. Use documents from the volume to explore the relationship between the domestic and the political. What patterns emerge? Does the relationship between home and politics change over time? What stays the same?

• Find your own primary source on the nineteenth-century home and write a brief (no more than 200-word) introduction to it as though it were going to be included in At Home in Nineteenth-Century America. In addition, explain where your source might belong in the volume and consider how it clarifies, complicates, or challenges other sources already included. What will your source add to the reader’s understanding of the meaning and significance of the nineteenth-century home?