Introduction

At Home in Nineteenth-Century America

According to the historian Elsa Barkley Brown, “History is everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms being played simultaneously. . . . In fact, at any given moment millions of people are talking all at once.” Throughout the nineteenth century, many Americans were talking all at once about home; they were speaking to and past one another and often meant very different things. At Home in Nineteenth-Century America focuses on the home as a physical site and cultural ideal in order to help re-create some of this unwieldy conversation. Using primary documents, it revisits the variety of places that Americans called home—middle-class suburban houses, slave cabins, working-class tenements, frontier dugouts, urban settlement houses—and explores the shifting interpretations and experiences of these spaces from within and without.

Rather than offering a history of material culture or architectural styles, this volume uses the home as a synthetic tool to pull together stories of nineteenth-century America. The result is less a tidy account of shared domestic values or a straightforward chronology of change over time than an opportunity to eavesdrop on a wide-ranging conversation that included 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.

And no wonder: few institutions were as central to nineteenth-century American culture. Beginning in the 1820s, the home emerged as a sentimental and celebrated space apart from the public world of commerce and politics, competition and corruption. Indeed the emergence of the
new domestic ideal was itself inseparable from changing economic relations and the rise of the urban middle class. Despite the initial association of the Victorian domestic ideal with the private lives of the white, native-born bourgeoisie, it crossed lines of race, ethnicity, class, and region, reshaping personal, political, and economic landscapes over the course of the century. Likewise, the boundary between home and public was itself moveable. On the one hand, market concerns, consumer goods, and paid employment found their way into the most private reaches of respectable homes. On the other hand, the values and spatial conventions of the single-family home crossed the threshold into public life, giving rise to public parlors, domesticated department stores, “homes” for female workers, settlement houses, and even public baths. An imperfect description of reality, the domestic ideal was powerful nonetheless. Those excluded from it sought to claim respectable domesticity as their own, and those constrained by it stretched its boundaries to encompass an array of public concerns and institutions. In sum, “the Victorian home” literally embodied the power and tested the limits of nineteenth-century American values to shape everyday spaces and experiences.

As depicted in many documents, 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. Exploring the spatial manifestations of American Victorianism inspires comparisons to the spaces we inhabit today—malls, movie theaters, college campuses, our own homes—and encourages us to see the lingering imprint of past ideals. The concreteness of studying houses, parks, and city streets helps frame sophisticated questions. For example: If women of all classes entered into public spaces in order to keep house, why was middle-class white femininity rooted so deeply in the home? How did men inhabit homes and interpret domesticity in both private and public life? How did class and racial differences shape domestic ideals, and in turn, how did ideals of domesticity both uphold and undermine these social divisions? Were domesticated public spaces ever truly public? How did differing interpretations of home create or circumscribe cultural or political power for various social actors? Through such questions, we move from the literal spaces to the ideals that shaped them—from homes to domesticity, from domesticity to politics and culture.
This freedom of movement is essential to good history. Over the last several decades, it has become increasingly difficult to develop cohesive yet inclusive narratives of the American past—to wrap our arms around social, cultural, economic and political developments while simultaneously appreciating the variations of race, class, and gender. The sheer variety of primary sources about domestic spaces and life—advice manuals and architectural designs, personal accounts and material culture, popular periodicals and fiction, advertising images and reform literature—makes it possible to integrate and explore the themes of nineteenth-century American social and cultural 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, these sources sketch a narrative of both inclusion and difference. To this end, *At Home in Nineteenth-Century America* traces the popular celebration of home as a moral force, notes the movement of domesticity into the public worlds of politics and reform, and considers home’s relationship with and penetration by and of the marketplace. In short, it charts the connections between spatial arrangements, cultural values, public policies, and lived experiences—connections at the heart of American Victorianism and history writ large.

Like today, American homes in the past served a variety of functions and accommodated a number of activities. Most commonly they were places for cooking and eating, for labor and leisure, for entertaining and sleeping. Of course, the spaces and goods devoted to these activities varied over time, by region, and according to economic and social distinctions of their inhabitants. Prior to 1800, for example, the bed might be the finest piece of furniture a family owned and stand in a place of honor in its parlor. By 1820, houses had grown in size and the parlor was a more formal room, the public face of the house; the bed was now removed to a private room. Such changes reflect more than growing wealth, a desire for comfort, or advances in home construction. For many Americans, setting aside a room (or part of a room) for formal entertaining meant sacrificing valuable living space. It served as a mark of respectability and reflected the growing separation of private and public life. The importance of this spatial and social divide is also evidenced in the emergence after 1800 of the entry hall to delineate the
passage between private and public realms. Previously, one simply walked through the front door and right into a family’s domestic life.\textsuperscript{8} Today entry halls, parlors, and bedrooms may seem like mundane domestic spaces, but their adoption reflects a considerable and growing commitment to privacy and domestic leisure over the first decades of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{9} As these rooms took shape, houses often contained a great many people; not only a nuclear family but also extended kin, domestic servants, apprentices, and even boarders commonly filled out a household. Simply put, personal privacy was not easy to come by, and these spatial innovations required considerable cultural commitment. Houses were sites of family life and also of labor. When a New England farm family connected its barn and home and placed the parlor away from the barnyard, it balanced the needs and rhythms of labor against social aspirations and cultural ideals.\textsuperscript{10} The same was true for middle-class families who mastered new cultural norms and invested in domestic goods and furnishings to define and support increasingly specialized domestic spaces.\textsuperscript{11} Over the course of the nineteenth century, the cultural primacy of the single-family home was reinforced by the growing popularity of balloon-frame construction, the easy availability of house plans, and the production of ready-made houses, all of which could accommodate more modest budgets. Likewise, many Americans sought to re-create or approximate the ideals of refined and respectable domesticity in new settings—the frontier, overseas, or in a small flat.

There was, of course, considerable variation among the places Americans called home. Well into the nineteenth century, many Americans continued to inhabit small houses of only two rooms, while urban tradesmen might have lived in a house of two stories and wealthy businessmen in even finer dwellings with as many as four stories. Domestic inequality was even more clearly pronounced in the slaveholding South, where the large homes of great planters stood over the slave quarters and apart from the small houses of nonslaveholding white farmers.\textsuperscript{12} And despite the American fascination with single-family homes, the nineteenth century saw the proliferation of multioccupancy housing types: boarding houses, residential hotels, tenements, and apartment houses. All of these confounded celebratory notions about domestic privacy and highlighted troubling connections between home and marketplace. Even though a third to a half of urban dwellers boarded or took in
boarders, this is not what most nineteenth-century Americans envisioned when they spoke of home. At Home in Nineteenth-Century America uses the selection and juxtaposition of primary sources to compress the insights of several historical fields and approaches. The historian Thomas Schlereth has broken the field of house history into three stages. The first dates back to the nineteenth century itself and focuses on “collecting and authenticating.” This stage of identification and preservation was followed in the first half of the twentieth century by the efforts of art historians interested in “describing and classifying” houses by style and structure. In the 1970s and 1980s, social historians turned their attention homeward and began “analyzing and explaining.” This work tells us more about home life than about houses and privileges activities over artifacts. Since Schlereth developed his schema, a fourth approach has emerged that reflects history’s broader “cultural turn.” Concerned with the cultural construction of home, this scholarship considers domesticity as a way of making meaning and has studied home’s influence in public life.

The content of this volume benefits from each of these approaches, but its structure and analyses are informed most strongly by the last two. It also draws heavily from the work of women’s historians, particularly scholarship exploring the “separate spheres” ideal. Dating back to the 1960s, the concept of separate spheres has been used both to define an oppressive set of cultural norms confining women to the home and to describe the private sphere as a site of female identity grounded in notions of respectability and nurturance. Scholars have tracked the movement of public policy into private life and of private values into the public. We have asked about the women excluded from this construct and documented the multiplicity of coexisting public and private spheres. We have blurred the lines between home and public to the point that speaking of separation seems like an exercise in futility at best and obfuscation at worst. Yet the dichotomy between private and public, albeit flawed, had tremendous meaning in the nineteenth century. We can deconstruct it but not ignore it. Again and again, women and men used home and the language and values of domesticity to interpret and change their lives.

Together, the documents in At Home in Nineteenth-Century America capture the most important scholarly arguments about the nineteenth-
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century home and domesticity and give voice to a variety of historical actors. Some are by famous people and others by ordinary men and women. Excerpts are drawn from advice manuals, architectural and design literature, personal accounts, popular periodicals and fiction, reform literature, newspaper articles, and speeches. In addition to texts, each chapter includes images from house plans, catalogs, advertisements, games, and sheet music as well as lithographs, photographs, and drawings. The images not only help document the physical meaning of home but also serve as examples of the material culture that people lived with as they gave meaning to their domestic spaces.

The six thematic chapters are also broadly chronological, moving from the early to the late nineteenth century. Chapter 1 explores the relationship between home and the emergence of a new middle-class moral order, highlighting the ways in which that morality was transmitted and embodied in house design and goods. Several documents in this chapter focus on home’s separation from the world of work and the marketplace, with an eye to new gendered dynamics within the home. The chapter also introduces Victorian Americans’ complex understanding of domestic goods as something more than markers of wealth. Homes and their contents reflected and shaped character, and at least in principle, good homes and morals were not exclusively tied to any one class or race.

Chapter 2 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 sources document the ways in which commercial and domestic ideals undermined and reinforced one another, as men and women sought to balance business interests and moral concerns both within and outside the home. Together the documents belie notions of a universal moral home and instead show how domestic labor and paid employment in the home served as signs of class and racial difference. In short, domesticity served to define and mark social differences. The tension between domestic work, social status, and morality connects this chapter to the previous one while underscoring inconsistencies between ideals and experience.

The next two chapters explore the ways in which various Americans interpreted, manipulated, and challenged the ideals of domesticity. Chapter 3 documents how politically marginalized groups used domes-
tic norms, goods, and labor to lay claim to “civilization” to make demands for equal status and new rights. While the goals of racial and gender equality, an inclusive citizenry, and control over one’s own labor challenged the status quo, the reliance on a single domestic ideal gives these documents a conservative cast worth noting. Chapter 4 builds on the connections between home and civilization by focusing 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,” these documents consider the give-and-take between home and nation and consider the use of domesticity in the creation and assertion of American identity at the end of the nineteenth century.

The final two chapters turn to the breakdown and rethinking of the nineteenth-century domestic ideal. Chapter 5 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. Many of the documents highlight the loss of privacy, respectability, family feeling, and morality at home, while others depict new public spaces designed to serve previously domestic functions. Chapter 6 hints at 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.

In the twenty-first century, home may no longer be the signature institution of American life, yet it remains a complex site of experience and meaning. A setting for private life, personal expression, leisure, and social intimacy, it is permeated by paid and unpaid labor, consumer values, technological networks, and public policy. Public and private blur in ways that that we seldom fully appreciate, and like our Victorian counterparts, contemporary Americans live with and simultaneously ignore these contradictions. Banks sell off home mortgages as investments, while federal tax policy incentivizes homeownership as an individual and public good. First-time homeowners dream of idealized domestic lives but often face destabilizing debt in pursuit of the goods that support that dream. The middle class sets aside personal space for home offices and shuts out the world in minivans that replicate living-room comforts. Domestic workers are treated “like family” but are too
often denied benefits and protections associated with paid employment. In sum, by listening closely to the nineteenth century’s sweeping conversation about home in its various guises, we may better hear our own.

Notes

4. Jeanne Boydston’s Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) underscores the ways in which the home was permeated by labor—both paid and unpaid—of tremendous economic value, while her notion of “pastoralization of housework” explains how this work became culturally invisible. For a different take on the market’s place within the home, see Kristin L. Hoganson, Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
6. This line of analysis is indebted to Paula Baker’s “The Domestication of American Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780–1920,” American Historical


