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The Other Suburbanites: African American Suburbanization in the North before 1950

Andrew Wiese

In 1959, a writer from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* visited a small African American community near Cleveland called Chagrin Falls Park. He described a landscape of small houses, large gardens, frame churches, and cinder block stores, as well as overgrown lots and cannibalized automobiles. To the reporter's eye, the nine hundred inhabitants of Chagrin Falls Park lived in a "shanty town." But among those he interviewed were men and women who described "the Park" as a community where they had built better lives for themselves. Representative of these was Magnolia Strickland, a native of Georgia, who praised the community for its open space, fresh air, gardens, and the opportunity to own a home. "I think I bettered my condition," Strickland said; "I got five rooms; they all got heat from an oil furnace. I got an electric stove and hot and cold running water from my well—and it's all paid for . . . I couldn't have done all that in Cleveland."¹

The divergent views of Strickland and the white reporter illustrate common reactions to the phenomenon of early black suburbanization. To outsiders—journalists, city planners, white neighbors, and many middle-class blacks—these places were "slums" or, in the case of Chagrin Falls Park, "a curse." To academic scholars, too, these communities often seemed little more than "rural slums" or "little ghettos" that belonged outside the legitimate suburbanization process.² To residents, however,

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¹ Magnolia Strickland quoted in "Negroes Fight for Better Life in Chagrin Park Shantytown," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Feb. 2, 1959, p. 1.

² Marvel Daines, *Be It Ever So Tumbled: The Story of a Suburban Slum* (Detroit, 1940); Greg Stricharchuk, "The Secret Chagrin Falls," *Cleveland Magazine*, 10 (Feb. 1981), 49–51, esp. 50, 122–27, esp. 124; Harold M. Rose, "The All-Black Town: Suburban Prototype or Rural Slum?," *Urban Affairs Annual Reviews*, 6 (1972), 407; Leonard Blumberg and Michael Lalli, "Little Ghettos: A Study of Negroes in the Suburbs," *Phylon*, 27 (Summer 1966), 117–31; see also Harold M. Rose, *Black Suburbanization: Access to Improved Quality of Life or Maintenance of the Status Quo?* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976).

these communities represented something altogether different: they were home, places where people had bought land, built houses, nurtured families, and created community. Moreover, the comments of Magnolia Strickland and her neighbors suggest that residents of these suburbs wanted many of the same things as other suburbanites, including homes of their own, a bucolic landscape, and family-centered community life. Slums to some, these places were also suburbs, and they were suburbs shaped by the experience, aspirations, and income of the black families who made them home.

Although scholars have paid little attention to these suburbs until recently, early black suburbanites formed an important component of the Great Migration—the movement of more than a million African Americans out of the South in the 1910s and 1920s. The great majority of southern migrants settled in central cities, but suburbs accounted for approximately 15 percent of black population growth in metropolitan areas outside the south between 1910 and 1940, or about 285,000 people. By 1940, approximately 500,000 African Americans lived in suburbs north of the Mason-Dixon line, a number that represented almost one-fifth (19 percent) of the African Americans in metropolitan areas of the North and West.³ Socially, these suburbanites were similar to migrants who settled in cities. Most were southern-born, low-skilled, and poorly paid, and they shared similar patterns of migration and family structure. At the same time, they made choices that distinguished them from their central city counterparts. They were more likely to be homeowners, and they pursued different patterns of economic survival, including distinctive uses of property and wider variation in the proportion of women who worked outside the home.⁴ Many of them also avoided cities explicitly, and, like other suburbanites, they created suburban landscapes that mixed elements of urban and rural living.

These differences raise interesting questions for the study of African American and suburban history. The fact that as many as one in six black migrants to the North before World War II ended up in suburbs suggests that a wider range of options was available to working-class black migrants than studies of central city communities have suggested. Moreover, the diversity of black urban and suburban neighborhoods illustrates that migrant communities contained a range of opinions about what constituted better places to live and work. At the same time, similarities among black suburbs suggest that early suburbanites—and perhaps southern

³In 1940, the United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census defined suburbs as the “thickly settled” districts adjacent to a central city, but the bureau drew metropolitan limits using county boundaries. By its definition, there were 468,000 African Americans in northern suburbs and 32,000 in suburbs in the West in 1940 (compared to 208,000 and 7,000 in 1910). In the North and West, most black suburbanites were recent migrants who held urban jobs. In the South, there were 982,000 African Americans in “suburbs” in 1940; many of them, however, were actually farmers. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Eighteenth Census of the United States: 1960*, vol. III, pt. 1D: *Selected Area Reports, Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas* (Washington, 1963), 2–5.

⁴Nonwhite home ownership, 1940 (city vs. suburban ring): Chicago, 7% vs. 25%; Kansas City, 15:49; St. Louis, 7:43; Los Angeles, 24:34; Detroit, 15:49; Newark, 3:17 (Essex County); Philadelphia, 10:28; Pittsburgh, 13:19. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Housing*, vol. II, *General Characteristics*, pt. 2: *Alabama–Indiana* (Washington, 1943), 213, 763; *ibid.*, pt. 3: *Iowa–Montana*, 575, 869; *ibid.*, pt. 4: *Nebraska–Pennsylvania*, 145, 859, 176.

migrants in general—shared values regarding housing and home ownership, as well as aesthetic preferences for landscape, that have been largely ignored by historians.⁵

Early black suburbs are also important to the history of American suburbanization. Although African Americans never constituted more than 5 percent of the United States suburban population before 1960, they were part of a much larger (and equally neglected) group of blue-collar suburbanites who formed the majority in many suburbs before 1940.⁶ Although working-class families often moved to suburbs for employment, the suburbs appear to have been as attractive to workers as they were to middle-class Americans. However, the precise features of suburban landscape and life-style differed with each group. For historians, the presence of several hundred thousand African American suburbanites in northern suburbs, as well as millions of other working-class suburbanites, poses a challenge to write suburban histories that include the range of Americans who lived on the city's edge, and it suggests that we need to reconceptualize suburbanization to mean the *whole* expansion of American cities beyond their bounds, not just the celebrated decentralization of the white middle class.

Through a case study of one early black suburb, Chagrin Falls Park, Ohio, this paper will place early black suburbanization within the context of United States suburban history, and it will offer tentative conclusions about the motivations and values of early black suburbanites. First, early black suburbanites appear to have moved to the suburbs for many of the same reasons as nonblacks. Many of the normative values associated with middle-class suburbanization ("the suburban dream") were widely shared among Americans in the early twentieth century. Black suburbanites also responded to many of the structural forces that encouraged urban decentralization generally. At the same time, race and class influenced the patterns of suburban life they created. Like other Americans, early black suburbanites internalized images of ideal places to live, and these drew upon black history and culture in the South, as well as the experience and aspirations of black migrants in northern cities. They desired home ownership in fulfillment of long-held dreams in the black South. They preferred living in family-based communities, although the family of emphasis was extended rather than nuclear. They rejected city living, and they re-created rustic landscapes reminiscent of the region from which most had come.

Finally, many early black suburbanites, like many working-class whites, settled at the outskirts of town as a means of adapting to urban industrial life. Faced with low incomes and unstable employment, blue-collar workers used suburban property in similar ways, regardless of race. Before the advent of the welfare state, they sought economic security through various forms of domestic production and sacrifice. They grew extensive gardens, took in work, kept livestock, rented rooms to newcomers,

⁵ For the ways in which migrants refreshed and reconstructed southern values in northern cities, see, for example, Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Migration in the Urban Midwest: The Gender Dimension, 1915–1945," in *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Joe William Trotter Jr. (Bloomington, 1991), 134. See also James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850–1970* (Urbana, 1980), 100–142.

⁶ Reynolds Farley, "The Changing Distribution of Negroes within Metropolitan Areas: The Emergence of Black Suburbs," *American Journal of Sociology*, 75 (Jan. 1970), 333–51; Richard Harris, "Working Class Home Ownership in the American Metropolis," *Journal of Urban History*, 17 (Nov. 1990), 46–69.

and delayed costly services such as water and electricity. Many even built their own homes. Racism, too, contributed to these patterns by limiting black access to credit and skilled labor. Even as working-class white suburbs moved closer to middle-class norms over time, early black suburbs lagged behind in income, housing quality, and public improvements. In these ways, class, as well as race, shaped the process of African American suburbanization before 1950.

Although Chagrin Falls Park was a small place, it is an apt choice for a case study. As a residential “all black” subdivision, it represents a whole category of early black suburbs. Moreover, a growing body of literature suggests that patterns characteristic of Chagrin Falls Park were common in black suburbs of all kinds. Because Chagrin Falls Park was a suburb developed from scratch by working-class black families, it reveals migrant values and aesthetics with a minimum of external influence. Black suburbanization in Chagrin Falls Park, Ohio, is not the last word, but it illuminates new avenues for research in both African American and urban history.

First, a brief word is in order about the methodology of the case study itself. I initiated research in Chagrin Falls Park in 1986 as a college student preparing an honors thesis. During that summer, I conducted face-to-face interviews with forty-two residents selected at random, and I collected taped oral histories with eighteen senior citizens selected through a snowball sample. To document settlement and home building patterns, I reviewed deed and tax records, mechanic liens, and court dockets as well as material from local, county, and city newspapers. I tracked institutional development through various organizational records, including minute books from the local Republican Club, school board records, and papers from the Cleveland branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Finally, I used Cleveland City Directories to trace occupations, housing tenure, and Cleveland addresses for early household heads before they moved to Chagrin Falls Park. Reopening this material a decade later, I found it remarkably resonant with primary and secondary materials I had collected for dozens of other black suburbs in the interim. Taken together, these documents suggested the case and synthesis that follow.

The Literature of Suburbanization

For more than thirty-five years, suburbanization has been a fertile area for research in United States urban history. Since Sam Bass Warner Jr. published his landmark study, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870–1900*, historians have detailed the physical, social, and political development of suburbs. They have illustrated the roles of transportation, the real estate industry, local boosters, and the federal government in creating the suburban pattern, and they have probed the desires and fears of middle-class Americans that made the suburban home a cornerstone of the American dream.⁷

⁷ Sam Bass Warner Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870–1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962). For a sample of this voluminous literature, see Carol O'Connor, *A Sort of Utopia: Scarsdale New York, 1891–1981* (Albany, 1983); Henry Binford, *The First Suburbs* (Chicago, 1985); John Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820–1939* (New Haven, 1988); and Margaret Marsh, *Suburban Lives* (New Brunswick, 1990).

For all of this diversity, however, historians have taken a rather narrow view of American suburbs.

With a few exceptions, historians have focused on suburbs of elite and middle-class whites, and they have defined suburbs according to the standards of these communities. Kenneth Jackson, for example, argues that America's distinctive landscape can be summarized as follows: "Affluent and middle-class Americans live in suburban areas that are far from their work place, in homes that they own, and in the center of yards that by urban standards elsewhere are enormous." For Jackson, home ownership, low population density, and middle-class commuting from dormitory neighborhoods are essential to the definition of suburbanization. Middle-class suburbia is not merely a physical landscape, however. As Robert Fishman explains, "suburbia . . . expresses values so deeply embedded in bourgeois culture that it might also be called the bourgeois utopia."⁸ At the root of the physical pattern of middle-class suburbia, then, is a cultural landscape, a set of ideas including an idealization of family life, leisure, feminine domesticity, and union with nature that are deeply rooted in Anglo-American culture. Given this characterization of American suburbs as middle-class in essence, it is not surprising that working-class black suburbs have received little attention. Unfortunately, this view leaves an incomplete picture of American suburbanization in the early twentieth century, and its emphasis on the middle class tends to obscure the possibility that poorer families, too, idealized life in the suburbs.

This image of suburbanization notwithstanding, "bourgeois utopias" represented just one kind of suburb. Before World War II, the fringes of American cities were also home to large numbers of working-class, immigrant, and ethnic white homeowners. In 1940, the geographer Richard Harris demonstrates, skilled workers were more likely than professionals to be suburbanites in three of the nation's six largest metropolitan areas, and at the national level working-class families proved as likely to be homeowners (often in the suburbs) as members of the middle classes.⁹ Further, the development of working-class suburbs reflected many of the same influences that underlay the growth of middle-class suburbs. Cheap land, inexpensive transportation (especially widespread automobile ownership), cheap fuel, and a relative lack of building restrictions at the edge of town attracted workers as well as middle-class commuters to the suburbs. In contrast to the middle-class model, the metropolitan fringe before 1945 was a variegated landscape that included factories, workers' housing, and ethnic white enclaves, as well as middle-class commuter suburbs.

Although they shared the edge of the city with middle-class suburbanites, workers and immigrants expressed distinct ideas about housing, community, and family life.

⁸ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985), 6. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York, 1987), 4.

⁹ Harris, "Working Class Home Ownership in the American Metropolis," 56, 58, 62. Richard Harris, "The Unplanned Blue-Collar Suburb in Its Heyday, 1900–1940," in *Geographical Snapshots of North America*, ed. Donald G. Janelle (New York, 1992), 94–98. Becky Nicolaides, "'Where the Working Man Is Welcomed': Working Class Suburbia in Los Angeles, 1900–1940," unpublished manuscript, 1998 (in Andrew Wiese's possession).

For example, workers were more likely than middle-class suburbanites to view their home as a basis for economic survival—as a source of income through renting rooms, as a supplement to wages through garden produce and backyard livestock, and, in the years before the welfare state, as irrevocable shelter in times of unemployment, sickness, or retirement. They were less likely than the middle class to view a house as a long-term investment that they would later sell, and they were more likely to “under-consume” by building their own homes, growing large gardens, resisting service improvements, and sacrificing children’s education for additional wages.¹⁰ Consequently, the historians Roger Simon and Olivier Zunz have shown, working-class immigrants in such cities as Milwaukee and Detroit were *more* likely to own their own homes than native-born, middle-class whites—a pattern that was especially pronounced on the suburban fringe. At the turn of the century, Zunz concludes, home ownership “was neither particularly middle-class nor American.” For Richard Harris, the distinctiveness of America’s suburban landscape was not that middle-class homeowners lived at the city’s edge (the same was true of the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia), but that so many working-class homeowners lived there with them.¹¹ Not only was the suburban population more diverse than commonly acknowledged, but, in the early twentieth century, there were diverse ways of being suburban.

Part of that diversity included the homes and communities of blue-collar African Americans. Before World War II, most black suburbanites settled in three types of suburbs: industrial satellites, domestic service enclaves in affluent commuter suburbs, and residential “all black suburbs” such as Chagrin Falls Park. As early as 1928, the sociologist T. J. Woofter Jr. reported that “in every city, small outlying settlements are growing up where land is cheaper, and where Negroes can afford small houses and use street cars or automobiles to reach their working places.” Four years later, a panel of experts on “Negro housing” convened by President Herbert Hoover identified “settlements on the outskirts,” such as Chagrin Falls Park, as one of three primary categories of black residence in the nation’s metropolitan areas, the other two being “industrial workingmen’s homes” and “better residences.”¹² By 1940, nearly every city that attracted a stream of black migrants during the Great Migration counted at least one of these communities among its suburbs. A city as small as Columbus, Ohio (population 306,000), had four peripheral subdivisions where working-class black families bought land and

¹⁰ Richard Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto’s American Tragedy, 1900 to 1950* (Baltimore, 1996); see also Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, 1964), 117–22, 135–37, 155–57.

¹¹ Roger Simon, “Housing and Services in an Immigrant Neighborhood: Milwaukee’s 14th Ward,” *Journal of Urban History*, 2 (Aug. 1976), 435–58; Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 1982), 152–53. Harris, “Unplanned Blue-Collar Suburb in Its Heyday,” 94.

¹² T. J. Woofter Jr., *Negro Problems in Cities* (New York, 1929), 106; The President’s Commission on Home Building and Home Ownership, *Negro Housing*, ed. John M. Gries and James Ford (Washington, 1932), 13. See also Farley, “Changing Distribution of Negroes within Metropolitan Areas”; Harold X. Connolly, “Black Movement into the Suburbs: Suburbs Doubling Their Black Populations during the 1960s,” *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 9 (Sept. 1973), 91–111.

built homes during this period. Smaller Youngstown, Ohio, may have had two. Larger cities, such as Cleveland and Detroit, spawned a half dozen black suburbs with roots in such subdivisions—several within walking distance of suburban factories.¹³ Moreover, working-class black subdivisions were not confined to the suburbs. In a number of cities, African Americans bought land and built houses in unrestricted allotments at the edge of town but inside the city limits. Other subdivisions began as suburbs and became central city neighborhoods through annexation. Most notably, the suburb of Watts, annexed by Los Angeles in 1926, developed from a series of semi-rural lot subdivisions.¹⁴ While these subdivisions were not (or ceased to be) suburbs, as defined by political independence from a central city, they reflected the larger processes of United States urban decentralization, and they owed their existence to similar aspirations among working-class blacks. If anything, they indicate that the number of African American families who wanted a place of their own on the urban fringe was even greater than the numbers in suburbs alone suggest.

In addition to building brand-new suburbs such as Chagrin Falls Park, post-1916 black suburbanites swelled the population of older black communities in the metropolitan fringe. In states such as New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, small black communities had proliferated as a result of antebellum emancipation and abolitionism. Some of these hamlets were distant from central cities, but others attracted new settlement and subdivision after 1915. In North Amityville, New York, where the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) church dated to 1815, real estate firms opened half a dozen black subdivisions in the 1910s and 1920s. In Lawnside, New Jersey, a nineteenth-century black town southeast of Philadelphia, the Great Migration sparked new home building (also next door in Magnolia). Likewise, the St. Louis suburb of Kinloch, Missouri, which had attracted blacks since the 1880s, was the site of repeated subdivision after 1910. Like white suburbs that had once been rural towns, older black enclaves became suburbs in the early twentieth century as

¹³ For Columbus suburbs, see Grace E. Richmond, "Housing Conditions in the Outlying Districts of Columbus" (M.A. thesis, Ohio State University, 1926); Harold M. Rose, "The All-Negro Town: Its Evolution and Function," *Geographical Review*, 55 (July 1965), 362–81. In Youngstown, "Sharline Heights," *Cleveland Gazette*, Sept. 30, 1923, p. 2; and "Beautiful Suburban Building Lots," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 19, 1926, p. 3. For suburbs of Cleveland and Detroit, see Andrew Wiese, "Places of Our Own: Suburban Black Towns before 1960," *Journal of Urban History*, 19 (May 1993), 49, 53–54. Other sources on early black suburbs include Robert T. Ernst, "Growth, Development, and Isolation of an All-Black City: Kinloch, Missouri," in *Black America: Geographic Perspectives*, ed. Robert T. Ernst and Lawrence Hugg (Garden City, 1976), 368–88; Henry L. Taylor Jr., "The Building of a Black Industrial Suburb: The Lincoln Heights, Ohio, Story," (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1979); Leslie Wilson, "Dark Spaces: An Account of Afro-American Suburbanization," (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1991); and Bruce Haynes, "Constructing a Black Suburban Community: The Genesis and Development of Runyon Heights, Yonkers, New York, 1910–1990" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1994).

¹⁴ For black subdivisions in Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, see Woofter, *Negro Problems in Cities*, 107–8, 143; Thomas J. Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto: Neighborhood Deterioration and Middle Class Reform, Chicago, 1880–1930* (New York, 1978), 107–8, 181–82; Wilbur Watson, *The Village: An Oral Historical and Ethnographic Study of a Black Community* (Atlanta, 1989); and Mayor's Interracial Committee, *The Negro in Detroit* (Detroit, 1926), 58. See also Patricia Rae Adler, "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1977); Watts sales by the Golden State Realty Company, Grantor Index, 1913–1920, Los Angeles County Recorder of Deeds (Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, Department Headquarters, Norwalk, California).

the city expanded outward and they attracted urban workers moving from the South or the city.¹⁵

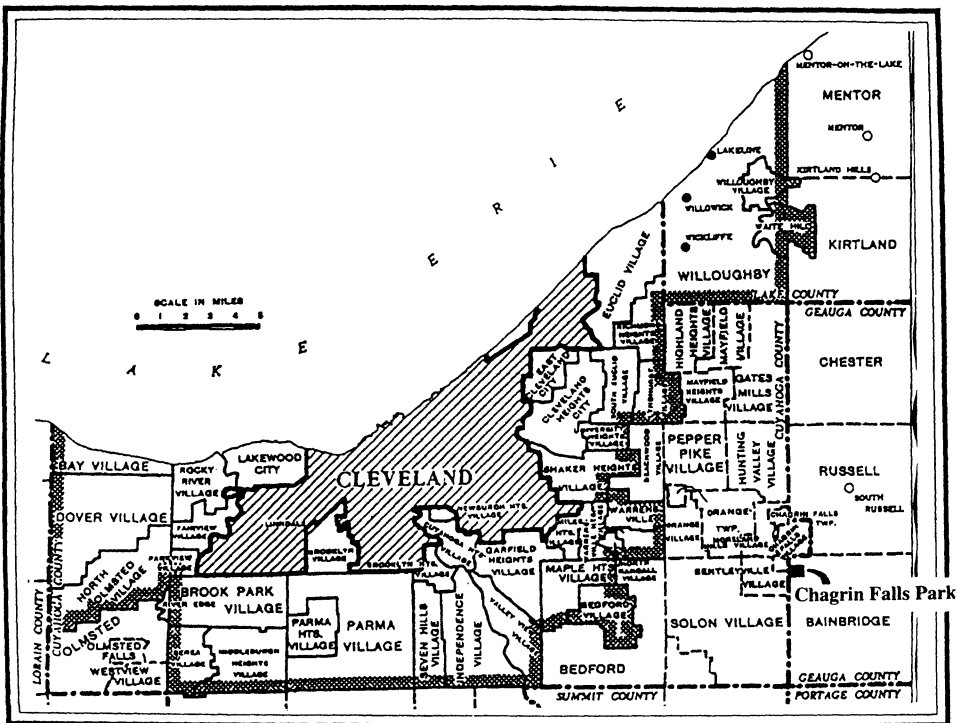
Finally, even though a minority of black suburbanites settled in strictly black suburbs such as Chagrin Falls Park, patterns of living characteristic of these places were apparent even in suburbs where African Americans lived cheek by jowl with industry or elite commuters. In such industrial suburbs as Madison and Harvey, Illinois; River Rouge, Michigan; or Plainfield, Rahway, and New Brunswick, New Jersey, black factory workers bought land and built houses much as in Chagrin Falls Park. In the crowded steel satellites of Pittsburgh, black families put yards and housing to productive use in spite of the fact that only a handful were able to purchase homes. Likewise, the availability of marginal land in predominantly white commuter suburbs, such as Evanston, Illinois; Englewood, Hackensack, and Montclair, New Jersey; and Pasadena, California, enabled black families to achieve comparatively high rates of home ownership through similar means.¹⁶ Regardless of suburban type, working-class African American families expressed recognizable values regarding housing, home ownership, open space, and family life. Where there was vacant land, they worked to buy it and build homes. In even the most congested suburbs, they grew substantial gardens (often accompanied by livestock), and they used domestic spaces to generate income. They relied on extended family for economic as well as emotional support, and they shaped environments reminiscent of the rural South. Taken together, these preferences reflect a coherent vision of better living in the urban North—what we might call a working-class African American suburban dream.

Residential Black Suburb: Chagrin Falls Park, Ohio

During the spring of 1921, an agent of the Home Guardian Corporation of New York approached Samuel Rocker, publisher of the *Jewish World*, a Yiddish-language newspaper in Cleveland. Home Guardian had recently subdivided an eighty-one-acre suburban tract southeast of the city called Chagrin Falls Park. The agent proposed to Rocker that the *Jewish World* offer lots in Chagrin Falls Park as subscription premiums. Home Guardian would sell lots, and Rocker would sell papers. By June 1921, full-page advertisements in the *World* announced the premiums, and readers began buying the 20-by-100-foot lots in the subdivision. Developed with a minimum of investment and no building restrictions, the subdivision had no sewers, water mains, or electricity, and its streets were crude dirt lanes. Perhaps because of

¹⁵ Walter G. Clerk, *North Amityville: A History* (North Amityville, 1976); Subdivision Registrations, Babylon Town Assessor (Babylon Town Hall, Lindenhurst, New York); Rose, "All-Negro Town"; Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, *A Study of Living Conditions among Colored People in Towns in the Outer Part of Philadelphia and in Other Suburbs both in Pennsylvania and New Jersey* (Philadelphia, 1915), 37–39; John Kramer and Ingo Walter, "Politics in an All-Negro City," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 4 (Sept. 1968), 69.

¹⁶ "Non-white" home ownership in suburbs compared to that in central cities, 1940: Evanston (26% vs. 7% in Chicago); Pasadena (41% vs. 24% in Los Angeles); Englewood (27%), Hackensack (25%), Montclair (20%) compared to 3% in Newark and 4% in New York. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the U.S.: 1940, Housing*, vol. II, pt. 2: *Alabama–Indiana*, 213, 763; *ibid.*, pt. 4: *Nebraska–Pennsylvania*, 145, 172, 177, 269.



Metropolitan Cleveland, 1930.
 Map by U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930.

poor services, the buoyant expectations of Rocker and Home Guardian went unfulfilled. Lots sold slowly, and in 1924 Home Guardian sold the remainder of its lots to the real estate agents Grover and Florence Brow (also white), who began a thirty-year career selling Chagrin Falls Park lots—most to African Americans in the city of Cleveland.¹⁷

In marketing rustic building lots to African Americans, the Browns replicated the decision of real estate agents in dozens of American cities. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, black newspapers routinely advertised lot subdivisions like Chagrin Falls Park. The *New York Age* and the *Amsterdam News*, for instance, advertised subdivisions in no less than thirteen suburbs between 1921 and 1927. The *Chicago Defender*, *California Eagle*, and *Cleveland Gazette* similarly published advertisements for local subdivisions, as well as faraway developments in Egg Harbor and New Brunswick, New Jersey; Detroit; and Washington, D.C.¹⁸

¹⁷ Judge Manuel Rocker (grandson of Samuel Rocker) interview by Andrew Wiese, July 1986 (notes in Wiese's possession); Geauga County Torrens Record Docket, no. 1, Geauga County Recorder (Courthouse Annex, Chardon, Ohio); "For This We Waited," *Jewish World*, June 14, 1921, p. 1, translation by Phillip Horowitz; "New Allotment Is Started," *Chagrin Falls Exponent*, June 23, 1921.

¹⁸ For black subdivisions in Amityville, Deer Park, Yonkers, and Croton (also Jamaica, Queens), New York; and New Brunswick, Asbury Park, Hackensack, Plainfield, Westwood, Coytesville, Reevytown, Potter's Station,

Regardless of region or the race of the subdivider, sales pitches for these allotments were remarkably similar. Viewed as a group, these appeals reflect agents' best understanding of their market. Insofar as families bought, these ads offer clues to the desires of black suburbanites during the Great Migration. Reflecting migrants' rural southern origins, ad after ad offered a piece of country life: open space for fruit trees, garden plots, and chickens and other small livestock. Further, they promised the country in combination with urban amenities: proximity to urban employment, convenient transportation, and community facilities such as churches, schools, and stores. In a few cases, agents appealed to race pride overtly, encouraging readers, "join hands with your own people" by buying lots in a black subdivision. More often, they linked suburbanization to race uplift by naming subdivisions after heroes in the freedom struggle such as Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, or Abraham Lincoln. Promoting a borderland between urban and rural living, with the image of racial progress at center stage, agents, above all, promised the opportunity "for colored people to own a home."¹⁹

Although the Browns' sales pitch does not survive, they made inexpensive suburban land available to working-class black Clevelanders. Prices of a Chagrin Falls Park lot fluctuated during the 1920s from \$60 to \$200—two weeks' to two months' salary for the average black factory worker in Cleveland. By contrast, similar parcels in the city ran to several hundreds of dollars, and house prices reached into the thousands. African Americans began purchasing lots from the Browns after 1924, and a small number began to build houses in this semi-rural subdivision. Ironically, lot sales picked up after 1929 as real estate prices collapsed during the Great Depression. By the mid-1930s, Florence Brow sold lots in the Park for as little as \$25, and black families who had managed to save money were able to purchase at a bargain. Even more important, many early white purchasers let their taxes fall delinquent during the 1930s, and scores of black Clevelanders purchased lots at the county sheriff's auction, some for as little as two dollars apiece.²⁰

Rahway, and Fanwood, New Jersey; see, for example, *New York Age*, April 16, 1921, p. 8; *ibid.*, July 30, 1921, p. 8; *Amsterdam News*, Nov. 29, 1922; *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 17, 1920, Feb. 24, 1923. See also *Cleveland Gazette*, Nov. 20, 1920, p. 2; *ibid.*, April 5, 1924, p. 2; *ibid.*, June 20, 1925, p. 1; "Beat the Landlord, Buy Your Own Home," [Egg Harbor], *ibid.*, April 9, 1921, p. 3. For the *California Eagle*, see Wilson, "Dark Spaces," 76–79. As in Chagrin Falls, these subdivisions were typically located in marginal areas with respect to services and transportation. More developed areas commanded higher prices plus the attention of white developers who did what they could to prevent sales to nonwhites. The exception was in areas with existing black communities, where local whites often accepted black migration as long as it was confined to well-defined limits.

¹⁹ "\$5 per Month Buys You a Lot near Hackensack," *Amsterdam News*, Nov. 29, 1922, p. 8. Advertising for the Oakwood, Ohio, subdivision was titled as "Stop Paying Rent," *Cleveland Gazette*, June 14, 1924, p. 1; Shrewsbury Manor and Reevytown, New Jersey, as "Join Hands with Your Own People," *Amsterdam News*, Oct. 17, 1923, p. 11; New Brunswick, New Jersey, as "Plenty of Work at a Highway Scale," *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 17, 1920, p. 3; Jamaica, N.Y., as "Opportunity for Colored People to Own a Home," *ibid.*, July 7, 1917, p. 3. Subdivisions intended for blacks often were given such names as Booker Terrace (Amityville, New York), Subdivision Registrations, Babylon Town Assessor (Babylon Town Hall, Lindenhurst, N.Y.); Douglass Park (near Washington, D.C.), *Cleveland Gazette*, April 5, 1924, p. 2; and Lincoln Heights (Oakwood, Ohio), *ibid.*, May 31, 1924, p. 1.

²⁰ For advertised real estate prices in Cleveland, see *Cleveland Gazette*, 1921–1927; Essie Kirklen interview by Wiese, July 16, 1986 (transcript in Wiese's possession); William Hagler interview by Wiese, Aug. 11, 1986 (transcript in Wiese's possession); Geauga County Common Pleas Court Appearance and Execution Docket, nos. 1–7, 1929–1941, Common Pleas Court of Geauga County (Gauga County Courthouse, Chardon, Ohio).

Stop Paying Rent

Buy a Homesite of

The Lincoln Heights Land Co.

located in Bedford, only 30 minutes to the Public Square of Cleveland. We will assist you in getting financing to build a home.

It Does'nt Require Much Money

\$10.00 per month will pay for your lot. We permit you to

BUILD A HOME AT ONCE

AND MOVE INTO IT RIGHT AWAY!

The Garden Spot Of This County

Good Water, Fine Atmosphere, Fruit Trees, Free Grading, Free Schools.

School bus takes your children to school and brings them back again, each day.

Reasonable Restrictions

Why pay rent when you can pay the same, or less, on your own home?

Humane treatment in case of sickness or loss of employment. We have only a limited number of lots left to sell. Fill in coupon below and mail or call, Main 8290, for appointment.

The Lincoln Heights Land Co.

1008 Schofield Bldg.

COUPON

Name

Address

A REAL OPPORTUNITY

To Get a Home Quickly And at Minimum Cost—Splendidly Located Near the City—
Stop Paying Rent

The president of the Lincoln Heights Land Co., Mr. Goodman, one of the foremost business leaders of Cleveland, is an old acquaintance of the editor of *The Gazette*. In talking with him, recently, Mr. Goodman said the congested down-town residence districts of Cleveland first suggested to him the idea of obtaining a beautiful location where pure air, good water, fruit trees, a chance to raise chickens and garden truck, and still be close enough to the city of Cleveland so that residents could come and go from their work within 30 minutes time.

In order to make it still easier to win a home site, the company has arranged for building three or four-room cottages on the property so that anyone with \$100, or even less, can move right in and pay a modest monthly sum on their own property. Instead of feeding the landlord.

Those who have been thinking of buying a home site for investment or to live in, why not buy near Cleveland instead of 50 or 100 miles away where you can't possibly make use of your purchase. For information call, Main 8290 or write 1008 Schofield bldg.

Any honest real estate man will tell you the next big development for Cleveland is towards Bedford way, with big profits to present buyers.—
Advt.

Advertisements for a black subdivision in Oakwood, Ohio, near Chagrin Falls Park.
Cleveland Gazette, June 14, 1924.

The people who bought lots and built homes in Chagrin Falls Park were primarily working-class black Clevelanders who had migrated from the South (predominantly Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee). Of household heads who settled in the Park between 1924 and 1945, 60 percent had worked in unskilled labor or personal service in Cleveland before moving to the Park. Fully a third had been common laborers. Most settlers relocated to the Park as mature married couples—most were in their late thirties or forties—having lived in Cleveland for a number of years before moving to the suburbs. Just 5 percent owned homes before moving to the Park—a home ownership rate less than half the average in the neighborhoods from which

they moved. On the whole, original Park residents represented a cross section of black Cleveland weighted toward the lower end of the economic ladder.²¹

Having purchased bare lots in Chagrin Falls Park, black families built homes and community institutions in a fashion similar to immigrant workers described by Harris, Zunz, and Simon. Clara Adams described her husband's efforts:

When they had the sheriff's sale, he went up there and bought these three lots. He built on two lots a little three-room house. He had friends to help him. The funny part about it, he was on W.P.A. at that time and he was talking about building a house. I said, "How you gonna build a house? You haven't got any money." And he said, "I got \$50." And I said, "\$50?" Cause that tickled me, him talking about building a house on \$50. But he said, "Well, if you never start anything, you never get anything."²²

Buyers with greater resources hired builders, and a few rented or bought houses vacated by early white residents, but most newcomers, like Adams, came out on the weekends or evenings and built their own homes.²³ To cut costs, many used scrap lumber, and they extended construction over long periods, building what they could afford and then waiting until the next few paychecks to proceed. Where family labor or carpentry skills proved insufficient, many builders employed the muscle and abilities of friends and neighbors. An ethic of neighborly aid pervaded the community during the early years of building. Essie Kirklen, whose mother built her own house, remarked that "most everybody could do some kind of fixing, and everybody kind of helped everybody." Ruby Hall, who was a young adult when her father built in the Park, remembered, "The neighbors dug the basement by hand, and my father and another man that lived down the street built the house. Everything was done as we went. We paid for the stuff as we went along."²⁴ In some cases, the products of these labors were little more than tar paper shelters or rickety "nautilus houses" that expanded each year as a family's needs and income grew.

In spite of primitive conditions and the challenge of owner building, Chagrin Falls Park gained population. The 1930 census enumerated just 57 African American residents, who were interspersed with a smaller number of whites. By 1940, the census tallied 200 African Americans in the Park (most whites had moved on), but World War II spurred a period of rapid growth that marked the community's heyday. After the war, Chagrin Falls Park was a bustling settlement with four churches,

²¹ Using deed records, membership rosters, and other local sources, I compiled a list of 150 adults who lived in Chagrin Falls Park before 1945. Using Cleveland city directories, I verified a last place of residence in Cleveland for 93 household heads, occupations for 73, and housing tenure for 66. 53% of men who moved to Chagrin Falls held unskilled jobs before their move, compared to 45% of black men in Cleveland in 1930. Another 9% worked in domestic or personal service, compared to 16% of black men in Cleveland. Kenneth Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870–1930* (Urbana, 1976), 201; Andrew Wiese, "A Place of Our Own: The Chagrin Falls Park from 1921 through 1950" (Senior honors thesis, University of Iowa, 1987), appendix, 4–9. Without a manuscript census or similar community survey, evidence for nativity is anecdotal. Thirteen of fifteen early residents interviewed for this project were born in the South, as were their spouses and extended families. Because of the role of family ties in peopling the Park, this sample provided information for several dozen families who moved to Chagrin Falls before 1950. By all reports, southerners were the great majority.

²² Clara Adams interview by Wiese, July 29, 1986 (transcript in Wiese's possession).

²³ Essie Kirklen interview by Wiese, Aug. 15, 1986 (*ibid.*); Shepherd Beck interview by Wiese, Aug. 18, 1986 (*ibid.*); Lula Hitchcock interview by Wiese, July 31, 1986 (*ibid.*).

²⁴ Kirklen interview, July 16, 1986. Ruby Hall interview by Wiese, July 7, 1986 (transcript in Wiese's possession).

numerous social clubs, several small night spots, beauty parlors, and stores, and an automobile service station. The community's most notable public buildings were a two-room elementary school, a cinder block firehouse, and a brand new community center, built with local donations and volunteer labor. By 1950, Chagrin Falls Park was home to approximately 650 black residents, and the community boasted a home ownership rate of 70 percent, considerably higher than the 52 percent in neighboring Chagrin Falls, where many Park residents worked as domestic servants.²⁵

Owner building was just one factor that reduced the cost of a suburban home for residents of the Park. Living at the margins of their income, residents avoided the cost of utilities by doing without. Like many such communities, Chagrin Falls Park had no paved streets, electricity, gas, water lines, sewers, garbage collection, or local fire protection throughout its early years. Residents lit with kerosene, they dug wells and backyard privies, and they cooked over coal or wood stoves. Families burned or hauled their own garbage (or fed it to the pigs that many kept), and they struggled frantically when a home or church caught fire. Electricity arrived in the Park in 1936, when the Bainbridge Township school board built a new (and de facto segregated) elementary school in the community, though it would be decades before some residents connected. The school board also drilled the first deep well in the community, and some residents relied on the schoolhouse pump for water. Other services followed slowly. In 1946, the Park welcomed its first paved street, and a group of local men had established a volunteer fire company. A survey that year revealed that 40 percent of local wells faced imminent danger of seepage from septic tanks and backyard privies, though families were left to respond to the problem on an individual basis. Sanitary conditions in the Park remained a recurrent problem until the township government laid sewers and storm drains in 1974, although even then a substantial number of residents opposed construction for fear that the tax assessment would price them out of their homes. As late as the 1980s, there were a few older residents who lived in Chagrin Falls Park in homes without running water.²⁶

²⁵ 1930 and 1940 totals are for Bainbridge Township. The total for 1950 is estimated from the "Negro" population of Geauga County (758). United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population*, vol. III, pt. 2: *Montana–Wyoming* (Washington, 1932), 521; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population*, vol. II, *Characteristics of the Population*, pt. 5: *New York–Oregon* (Washington, 1943), 628; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Census of the United States: 1950, Population*, vol. II, *Characteristics of the Population*, pt. 35: *Ohio* (Washington, 1952), 183. The percentage of home ownership for Chagrin Falls Park represents black home ownership in Geauga County. Rural, nonfarm home ownership by blacks in the county (the category that comprised the Park) was even higher, 73%. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Housing*, vol. II, *General Characteristics*, pt. 4: *Nebraska–Pennsylvania* (Washington, 1943), 609, 613.

²⁶ "Chagrin Falls Park Plans to Revitalize," *Cleveland Call and Post*, Dec. 21, 1974, p. 3; Mary E. Crawford, "Bainbridge School Investigation," March 15, 1946, Chagrin Falls Park School File, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Cleveland Branch (Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio); "Re Lois Wilson v. Chagrin Board of Education—Gauga County," Aug. 2, 1945, *ibid.*; "Park School Origins," Oct. 1963, Kenston School Board Records (Kenston School District Offices, Bainbridge, Ohio); Raymond J. Walsh, "Exclusionary Housing Practices in Bainbridge Township, Geauga County, Ohio," typescript, May 31, 1972, p. 3 (in Wiese's possession). Rustic conditions characterized many black suburbs through the 1960s. In East Chicago Heights (Ford Heights), Illinois, for instance, 60% of households had no indoor toilet in 1960. Farley, "Changing Distribution of Negroes within Metropolitan Areas," 340; see also David Kenneth Bruner, "A General Survey of the Negro Population of Evanston" (Senior thesis, Northwestern University, 1924), 34.



Stephen and Ruby Hall built this house in the late 1930s with the help of Mrs. Hall's parents and other relatives. In the backyard were a cast iron pump, chicken coop, vegetable garden, and an outhouse.

Photograph by Andrew Wiese

Although the longevity of primitive services in Chagrin Falls Park represented an extreme, limited public service and regulation were characteristic of working-class suburbanization before 1945. In fact, as Marc A. Weiss and Robert Fishman have noted, the ubiquity of unrestricted development was one of the reasons that cities and suburbs may have enacted land use planning in the first place. Most suburbs did not enact zoning laws until the 1940s, however, and even those that did had no influence over development outside their boundaries. Hence, the unincorporated fringe was the native environment of working-class suburbia.²⁷

In African American suburbs, however, race often acted as a brake on future improvements. Discrimination in employment and lending kept black suburbs poor, and poorly housed, even as working-class white suburbs installed public improvements and rose in income after World War II. Racism also made it unlikely that

²⁷ Marc A. Weiss, *Rise of the Community Builders: The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning* (New York, 1987), 68–72; Robert Fishman, "Comment," panel "The Other Suburbanites," annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Chicago, Illinois, April 1992. Within incorporated suburbs, too, land use restrictions were often uneven before World War II. See Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs*, 147–60; Becky M. Nicolaides, "In Search of the Good Life: Community and Politics in Working Class Los Angeles, 1922–1955" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1993), 47–48, 54–62, 65, 247–85; Andrew Wiese, "Suburban Community Building: African American Housing in Evanston, Illinois, before 1945," paper delivered at the Seventh National Conference on American Planning History, Seattle, Oct. 25, 1997, pp. 19–27 (in Wiese's possession); and Blumberg and Lalli, "Little Ghettos," 117.



Residents of Chagrin Falls Park created a rustic landscape that included modest homes, large gardens, livestock pens, and plenty of open space.

Courtesy of Mrs. Grace Bolden.

neighboring suburbs would annex, extend services to, or share schools with these communities. Where black neighborhoods were located within larger suburbs, poor services often expressed municipal bias as much as African American thrift, and they served as means to mark the color line. Either way, the rustic environment of many black suburbs tended to reinforce white racism over time. Hence, rudimentary services persisted for much longer in early black suburbs than in most comparable white communities.²⁸

In addition to doing without services, residents of Chagrin Falls Park and other suburbs extended their incomes by growing vegetables and raising small livestock. Ruby Hall recalled that her father “wanted a place where he could have a garden to help with the food, and he got him hogs and killed them in the winter time. A lot of people was doing the same. So people had them a lot of chickens and gardens. A lot of people had been farmers, so they knew how to farm.” Throughout the early years of community growth, residents relied on gardens to supply fresh food in the summer and to produce surplus for the winter. Like Mrs. Hall’s father, many residents supplemented their diets with animal produce as well. Chickens were abundant, but residents also kept geese and ducks, and occasionally a hog or two. A few residents, like Horace Lumpkin, raised animals to sell (or turned corn into alcohol), and others sold garden produce in small stores that dotted the community.²⁹ Residents also put the nearby landscape to economic use, cutting wood for fuel, picking fruit, and hunting. Essie Kirklen remarked, “all this was woods back up in here, and people

²⁸ Rose, “All-Black Town,” 398–99, 418; Wiese, “Struggle for the Suburban Dream,” 211–12.

²⁹ Ruby and Stephen Hall interview by Wiese, July 20, 1986 (transcript in Wiese’s possession). See also Hitchcock interview; Fannie Detwyler interview by Wiese, Aug. 19, 1986 (transcript in Wiese’s possession); Clydie Smith interview by Wiese, July 29, 1986 (*ibid.*); Estella Jackson interview by Wiese, Aug. 18, 1986 (*ibid.*); Lumpkin divorce, Case 8934, Nov. 19, 1937, Geauga County Common Pleas Court (Gauga County Courthouse, Chardon, Ohio).

didn't care whose woods it was, and they thinned that woods out and burned it up."³⁰ While urban African Americans of the same income level suffered during years of economic hardship, residents of such suburbs as Chagrin Falls Park at least had the cushion of home produce to keep starvation from the door.

Even in prosperous times, the challenge of making a living in a community distant from city employment placed a burden on families in Chagrin Falls Park. As low-skilled and low-paid workers, residents acutely felt fluctuations in the business cycle. Although most residents held blue-collar jobs, men often commuted to work in Cleveland or nearby suburbs. Stephen Hall noted, "we went through a whole lot . . . just to be out here . . . [but] there wasn't no thought of us not staying, of this not being home. This was home. Once we got here, this was it. Whatever it took to get back here, that's what we did." Trolley service from Cleveland to Chagrin Falls ceased in 1924, but workers could catch a bus to the city from several neighboring suburbs. Some men drove or car-pooled, while other men spent the week in the city and weekends in the Park with their families. Luke Walker, for example, worked at American Steel and Wire in Cleveland and drove himself and several other Park men to and from the city each day. Henry MacMiller and his brother-in-law, Frank Young, were among several Park men who worked for the Cleveland Department of Sanitation and who car-pooled in MacMiller's auto. Al Turner, on the other hand, worked with his wife as caretaker for a whites-only social club in a nearby suburb.³¹ Facing a restrictive job market, limited incomes, and a commute of more than fifteen miles to the most reliable sources of employment, black men in the Park risked a great deal more than did their middle-class white counterparts for a home in the suburbs.

Given the insecurity of male employment, women's wage work was vital to the survival of Chagrin Falls Park and suburbs like it. Middle-class white suburbanites could generally afford to live on the salary of a male breadwinner alone, and the limited research on working-class white suburbanites suggests that few married women worked outside the home.³² In contrast, working-class black families who aspired to a home in the suburbs often relied on the income of both parents. While men typically commuted to distant jobs, many women found work as domestic servants for white families just a mile away in the village of Chagrin Falls. The 1940 census reported 29 percent of Park women employed outside the home, but other sources suggest that women's wage labor played an even more important role than this figure implies. All twelve of the early female settlers of the Park interviewed in 1986 reported having worked as domestic servants, cooks, or laundresses at one time or another during their years in Chagrin Falls Park. Moreover, service was the occupation of their mothers, aunts, and sisters in the Park. Women who worked exclusively as housewives were identified prominently as such. One elderly man, for example,

³⁰ Kirklen interview, July 16, 1986.

³¹ Ruby and Stephen Hall interview by Wiese, Aug. 22, 1986 (transcript in Wiese's possession). Hitchcock interview; Ruby and Stephen Hall interview, Aug. 22, 1986; Essie Kirklen interview by Wiese, Aug. 11, 1986 (transcript in Wiese's possession); "Summary of the Chagrin Falls Park School Case," typescript, Jan. 11, 1946, Chagrin Falls Park School File, Papers of the NAACP, Cleveland Branch (Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio), 2.

³² Nicolaides, "In Search of the Good Life," 142.

proudly noted that his wife had not had to work outside the home. A 1983 community survey supported this conclusion; when asked to list their occupation, 79 percent of female seniors who had lived in the community for longer than thirty years listed a current occupation or reported the category “retired” as opposed to that of “housewife.”³³ Even if the census revealed that less than a third of the women were in the labor force at enumeration time, a higher percentage appear to have been employed at crucial times during their lives—periods of male unemployment, for example, or during periods of property accumulation and home building.

In other suburbs, women’s participation in the paid labor force varied greatly depending on local economic opportunities, as well as individual choices. In industrial suburbs, where relatively high paying industrial jobs were available to black men, typically fewer black women worked outside the home than in central cities or other suburbs. In Lackawanna, New York, near Buffalo, just 12 percent of black women were in the paid labor force in 1940, and in River Rouge and Ecorse, Michigan, south of Detroit, proportions were almost as low. In these suburbs, there were usually fewer opportunities for working women, but the numbers suggest that black couples also made conscious choices to rely on one income. For these families, suburban factory work was the foundation for a family pattern otherwise common only at the top echelons of black society. By contrast, other suburbs attracted large numbers of black women who needed, or wanted, to work for wages. In leafy suburbs such as Mount Vernon and New Rochelle, New York, where white elites hired domestic laborers, more than 60 percent of black women worked outside the home in 1940, and a proportion above 50 percent was normal in similar suburbs. Black women were often the first migrants in a family to move to domestic service suburbs, and they routinely outnumbered men in the local population by large margins. As in Chagrin Falls Park, women’s wage work in a racially segmented occupation was instrumental in establishing these black communities, and women’s wages formed an essential base for institution building, home ownership, and family mobility.³⁴

In addition to working for wages, black women in suburbs of all kinds stretched incomes through production at home. In Chagrin Falls Park, for example, women took in laundry or sewing from Chagrin Falls, and several daughters remember their mothers rendering soap from lard and selling the product to neighbors or families in Chagrin Falls. Several women in the Park also operated small stores. Nellie May Lawrence, who was the local midwife, opened a store in a tar paper structure in the 1940s from which she sold products ranging from coal oil to candy and fresh pro-

³³ United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population*, vol. II, *Characteristics of the Population*, pt. 5: *New York–Oregon* (Washington, 1943), 593; Beck interview; Chagrin Falls Park Community Center, “Residents’ Roster,” 1983 (in Wiese’s possession).

³⁴ Rates of black female employment in domestic service suburbs, 1940: Evanston, Illinois (56%); Mount Vernon (65), New Rochelle (62), and White Plains (60), New York; Montclair (62), East Orange (54), and Englewood (50), New Jersey; Webster Groves, Missouri (54); and Pasadena, California (41). Female participation in the paid labor force in central cities usually ranged from one-third to one-half: Chicago (35%), Cleveland (35), St. Louis (37), Newark (40), Los Angeles (42), and New York (51). United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population*, vol. II, pt. 1: *Alabama–District of Columbia* (Washington, 1943), 617, 633; *ibid.*, pt. 2: *Florida–Iowa*, 631, 643; *ibid.*, pt. 4: *Minnesota–New Mexico*, 445, 459, 893, 896, 928; *ibid.*, pt. 5: *New York–Oklahoma*, 132, 135, 160.

duce from her garden. Lottie Lewis and Estella Jackson ran small canteens with jukeboxes and space for dancing. Thursday afternoon, the domestics' day off, was the liveliest time of the week. In addition to increasing women's influence within the community, women's work—inside and outside of homes—provided a vital source of income for black families who wanted to purchase land, build homes, and relocate from the city.³⁵ In contrast to the emphasis on suburban homes as sites of consumption, property in working-class suburbs was the locale of essential domestic production—much of it by women.

Although further research is warranted, women in Chagrin Falls Park also appear to have played a broader public role than women in white suburbs, regardless of class.³⁶ That role often included employment outside the home, as well as active participation, if not leadership, in local politics and public affairs. During the 1940s, residents of the Park organized a number of campaigns for local improvement, including the establishment of a political organization, a move for municipal incorporation, a desegregation suit against the township school board, and efforts to construct a local community center and a fire station. Women took leading roles in all but the last effort.

The surviving minutes of the Geauga County Negro Republican Club (May 1940–April 1941) offer several examples of women's public roles in Chagrin Falls Park. Established in 1940, the Republican Club rallied voters, secured patronage jobs through the county Republican party, and transported voters to the polls on election day, as well as sponsoring the local baseball team and other social activities. Within the club, women fulfilled a variety of "traditional" gender roles. For example, women chaired the sick committee and the social committee, they performed the musical numbers that opened and closed each meeting (a man always led the opening prayer), and their comments tended to emphasize social service, health, education, and children. Even before the war began to siphon young men from the community (though most of the club's members were above draft age), women filled three of the five positions on the club's executive committee. Women were nearly equal contributors to the club's frequent collections. Finally, when the club appointed official delegations—to visit the offices of the county Republican chair, or the editor of the *Cleveland Call and Post*, the city's black newspaper, for example—women shared these responsibilities.³⁷ Although women in many suburbs participated in child- and family-related service activities, women's political participation in Chagrin Falls Park suggests an even broader latitude for public action in early African American suburbs.

³⁵ Alma Walker interview with Wiese, Aug. 12, 1986 (transcript in Wiese's possession); Hitchcock interview; Derwyler interview.

³⁶ See Marsh, *Suburban Lives*, 100–101, 109–11, 174–79; David Contosta, *Suburb in the City: Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, 1850–1990* (Columbus, 1992), 175–89; Nicolaides, "In Search of the Good Life," 103–12.

³⁷ Minutes Book, May 1, 1940, to April 25, 1941, Geauga County Negro Republican Club (in Wiese's possession).



Women in suburbs such as Chagrin Falls Park wore many hats, including those of mother, breadwinner, and extended family member. Nellie May Lawrence, who moved to Chagrin Falls Park to join family in 1941, served the community for many years as its midwife and became a surrogate “grandmother” to many local children.

Courtesy of Mrs. Fannie Detwyler.

This same pattern was evident after the war. When residents petitioned Bainbridge Township for incorporation as a village in 1946, a woman led the initiative, and two women served on the three-person committee that presented the case to the township board of trustees. That same year, a delegation from Chagrin Falls Park addressed the Cleveland Branch of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to press for desegregation of the Park elementary school; eleven of the fourteen representatives from the Park were women. Two years later, when residents established a local community center, half of the founders were women.³⁸

The activities of the irrepressible Essie Kirklen suggest the range of women's roles in Chagrin Falls Park. In the years before 1945, Mrs. Kirklen not only taught Sunday school at the Church of God, but she helped lay the church's foundation and swung a hammer in the church rafters.³⁹ She raised a son and the children of relatives, and she earned an income for a time through day work in white homes. She purchased building lots at the county sheriff's auction, rented property, and lent a hand while neighbors built homes. She kept minutes for the Republican Club and pushed for the establishment of the community center, and, in 1946, Kirklen led the failed campaign for municipal incorporation. Kirklen was an extraordinary individual, but her vita suggests that there was space in such communities as Chagrin Falls Park for women to play broader public roles than in suburbs of either middle-class or working-class whites. In a suburb with limited economic resources in which men earned uncertain incomes at distant jobs, the needs of community building itself may have challenged gender roles within African American families and offered assertive women the opportunity to shoulder responsibilities that were less available elsewhere.

Toward a Working-Class African American Suburban Vision

The most important reason early residents gave for settling in Chagrin Falls Park was the desire to own a house and property. Among early settlers, the value for property ownership ran so deep that it needed almost no explanation. Ruby Hall, for example, noted that families like hers moved to the Park because "wasn't nobody could buy in the city." Others seemed to take it for granted that working-class people would buy property when the chance presented itself. Describing the events that led to her move in 1940, Clara Adams recalled,

I had a couple of days [of work] per week out in Euclid [another suburb], and I met Mrs. Love who was living out here. She was telling me about the lots and how you would get them for four and five dollars. . . . I told my husband about this, and so he wanted to meet her. She told him about how he could go to the sheriff's sale in Chardon and get these lots. So when they had the sheriff's sale, he went up there and bought three lots.

³⁸ "Minutes of Special Meeting," Nov. 6, 1946, Bainbridge Township Board of Commissioners (Bainbridge Township Hall, Bainbridge, Ohio). "Education Committee Minutes," April 3, 1946, Chagrin Falls Park School File, Papers of the NAACP, Cleveland Branch (Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio).

³⁹ Essie Kirklen, "The History of the origin of the Church of God," typescript, n.d. (in Wiese's possession).

To Ruby Hall, the reason people struggled to build a community in an isolated section of suburban Cleveland was simple. "Everybody at that time," she said, "wanted a little place of their own."⁴⁰

The desire for "a place of one's own," historians have shown, has been a central feature of American suburbanization since the nineteenth century. Exactly what different groups wanted and why, however, remains a subject for debate. Middle-class whites, for example, often invested home ownership with images of masculine independence, female domesticity, and idealized nuclear families (not to mention long-term capital appreciation). Working-class whites, on the other hand, more often valued home ownership for its everyday economic usefulness, as well as for economic security over the long run.⁴¹ Among African Americans in Chagrin Falls Park, too, the desire for home ownership reflected several interrelated values that included strategies of economic subsistence. A closer look at the meaning of home ownership and the broader pattern of settlement and community life in Chagrin Falls Park and other suburbs suggests the outlines of a working-class African American suburban vision rooted in settlers' experience in the rural South as well as their expectations for life in the northern metropolis.

As black southerners, Chagrin Falls Park residents' value for property ownership had a long history. In the aftermath of the Civil War, property ownership ranked next to freedom itself among the aspirations of former slaves. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, property ownership persisted among the chief values of blacks in the rural South.⁴² Proprietorship symbolized hard work and ambition in a way evident to every member of the community. It provided a basis for upward mobility, shelter for immediate and extended families, and a footing in a society that systematically marginalized African Americans. Last, it meant a greater degree of independence, which is to say freedom, than any form of tenancy. Although historians such as James Grossman have suggested that the ideal of upward mobility through urban industrial labor gradually supplanted the value of independent landownership among African Americans as the Great Migration progressed, rural southerners who boarded trains for northern cities did not discard older values as easily as excess baggage. Peter Gottlieb suggests as much in his study of black migrants to Pittsburgh, adding that the difficulty most blacks faced in finding and purchasing housing contributed to a lasting ambivalence about northern life. Even more recently, the anthropologist Carol Stack has revealed that the desire to own or protect family property, even at the cost of modern utilities, is among the values that have drawn many African Americans back to the rural South since 1970.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ruby and Stephen Hall interview, July 20, 1986; Adams interview.

⁴¹ Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs*, 120, 131, 157; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 45–72; John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900–1930* (Urbana, 1982), 153–80.

⁴² Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York, 1988), 104–6, 374–77; Leon F. Litwak, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), 398–407; Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York, 1974), 236–37, 537–38.

⁴³ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, 1989), 36; Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916–1930* (Urbana, 1987), 76, 183, 209–10; Carol Stack, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (New York, 1996), 17–44.

In spite of limited means, then, thousands of African Americans in Cleveland and other cities jumped at the chance to buy property. While some relinquished this dream over time, others clearly did not. The early Park resident Nellie May Lawrence was a case in point. As her daughter explained, Mrs. Lawrence had been a sharecropper all her life—"did all the work, give 'em half the profits." Consequently, she "always wanted to be in a home of her own."⁴⁴ For migrants like Mrs. Lawrence, communities like Chagrin Falls Park offered the prospect of upward mobility through urban labor without the sacrifice of long-held desires for independent property ownership. Hence, for a significant group of African American migrants before World War II, suburbanization combined the best of both worlds.

In addition to fulfilling historic desires for property ownership, a house of one's own represented an economic strategy for many early suburbanites. Here, however, African American values merged with those of working-class whites. As Richard Harris and Becky Nicolaides demonstrate, economic uses of housing were widespread among working-class suburbanites generally. Gardens and livestock helped families economize. Proprietorship allowed them to escape central city rents, and home ownership occasionally provided income that supported economic mobility and helped families weather hard times. Regardless of race or ethnicity, domestic production was a characteristic feature of working-class suburbia.⁴⁵

This was particularly true of black suburbs, where sources offer abundant evidence of self-provisioning and other economic uses of property across the range of suburban types. In Homestead, Pennsylvania, for instance, Margaret Byington reported in 1910 that African American and white immigrant steelworkers used yards for gardening and raising small livestock whenever they could. Similarly, Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo reveals that black women in wartime Richmond, California, almost uniformly kept kitchen gardens where they grew okra, collards, butter beans, sweet potatoes, and other vegetables. By growing familiar foods, they not only supplemented their income and diet; they reinforced community bonds through exchange and preserved direct links to their heritage as African American southerners.⁴⁶

Black suburbanites not only grew food in the backyard; they also rented rooms and apartments in their homes as a source of income. In some suburbs, builders

⁴⁴ Detwyler interview.

⁴⁵ Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs*, 109–35. In metropolitan Los Angeles, Becky Nicolaides uncovered intensive economic uses of property in suburbs ranging from Anglo-American Compton, Southgate, and Bell Gardens to Mexican American East Los Angeles to African American Watts; see Becky Nicolaides, "Where the Working Man Is Welcomed."

⁴⁶ Margaret F. Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (New York, 1910), 46–49; Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 139–41. For self-provisioning in other suburbs, see Alice Bugg interview by Nettie Simons, Oct. 8, 1984, Pasadena Oral History Project (transcript, Pasadena Public Library, Pasadena, 1984), 10; City of Pasadena, Department of Planning and Permitting to owner of 523 Pepper Street, April 4, 1952, Building Permit Files, 1922–1985 (Hale Building, Pasadena, California); and Wilson, "Dark Spaces," 349. See also Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, *Study of Living Conditions among Colored People*, 11–12, 22, 30, 32, 35, 51, 54; Clerk, *North Amityville*; Taylor, "Building of a Black Industrial Suburb"; Richmond, "Housing Conditions in the Outlying Districts of Columbus," 11–12, 18, 37; and Ann Morris and Henrietta Ambrose, *North Webster: A Photographic History of a Black Community* (Bloomington, 1993), 9, 17.

actually inscribed the practice into the landscape by constructing or converting houses for two or more families.⁴⁷ In Chagrin Falls Park, for example, Estella Jackson not only ran a small canteen in her house, she and her husband built an addition to their home that they rented to recent arrivals. Essie Kirklen initially rented space from another family when she moved to Chagrin Falls Park, and once she became settled, she, too, occasionally took in boarders to supplement her family's income. Clara Adams's husband built their own home as well as three additional houses, which the Adamses kept as rentals. Socially and economically, then, home ownership in suburbs like Chagrin Falls Park supported upward mobility for many African American families. Magnolia Strickland's comments that open this article support precisely this point. Looking back from 1959, Strickland remembered that her twenty years in Chagrin Falls Park had not been easy, but they had been worth the struggle. Measuring the distance she had traveled from the rural South by the amenities of her Chagrin Falls Park home, she concluded, "I couldn't have done all that in Cleveland."⁴⁸

In addition to supporting upward mobility, home ownership in a suburb like the Park also reflected migrants' insecurity with the urban consumer economy. Although wage relations had expanded in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, millions of southern blacks worked as tenant farmers, largely outside the cash economy. With expanding industrial job opportunities during World War I, thousands of young southerners left this life behind—often moving to nearby towns and cities before making the leap north. While high wages promised access to a world of new consumer goods, the transition to a cash economy could also be traumatic. As wage workers at the bottom of the metropolitan labor market, African American migrants suffered greatly during slumps in the economy. Dependence on an urban wage alone could spell disaster in the event of unemployment, sickness, or injury. Hence, like many European immigrants, as well as native-born whites, some black migrants responded to "proletarianization" by holding onto familiar patterns of economic survival.⁴⁹ Household production in the suburbs was a cushion against the market and a middle ground between rural and urban life.

A number of contemporary observers drew this same connection, often contrasting suburbanites' "rural" strategies with "progressive" or "modern" city life. For example, a black social worker argued critically in 1926 that residents of black suburbs

⁴⁷ Bruner, "General Survey," 35–36, plate XII; City of Evanston, Department of Building, Permits for 1919, 1921, and 1937 Grey Avenue, Building Permit Files (Evanston Historical Society, Evanston, Illinois); United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Census of Housing*, vol. I, *Block Statistics, Evanston, Illinois* (Washington, 1942), 6–12. For similar patterns among white workers, see Simon, "Housing and Services in an Immigrant Neighborhood," 448–49.

⁴⁸ Jackson interview; Kirklen interview, July 16, 1986; Adams interview. Strickland quoted in "Negroes Fight for Better Life," p. 1.

⁴⁹ Joe William Trotter Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (Urbana, 1985). For self-provisioning and other economic uses of housing among black coal-mining families, see Trotter, "Race, Class, and Industrial Change: Black Migration to Southern West Virginia, 1915–1932," in *Great Migration in Historical Perspective*, ed. Trotter, 60, 62. For home production among whites, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York, 1990), 11; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920–1960* (Baton Rouge, 1987), 115–33, 298–300.

often “slip into old southern rural ways of doing things.” A black real estate agent in the same study agreed, noting that in the suburbs, “there is no opportunity for a type of development which would enable them to adjust to an urban environment.”⁵⁰ To the contrary, it appears that many early suburbanites were doing just that. For laboring families who understood privation firsthand, these strategies were not backward; they were adaptive and practical. Several residents of Chagrin Falls Park remarked pointedly that they had seen hard times, but they had never gone hungry. While many southern migrants embraced the market—perhaps, as Lizabeth Cohen argues, more avidly than their working-class white counterparts—others were clearly chastened by the experience, and some sought a life-style in the suburbs that gave them access to urban opportunities without requiring complete dependence on the market.⁵¹ Evidence from black suburbs suggests that migrants brought with them diverse ideas about survival and mobility in the northern metropolis as well as considerable ambivalence about the urban economy.

In other ways, too, black suburbanites adapted to life in the North by bringing parts of the South with them. Like migrants to central cities, early black suburbanites followed intricate migration chains to the suburbs.⁵² The kinship network of one early Chagrin Falls Park resident, Sallie Denson, suggests the ways that extended family supported the development of suburban communities. Mrs. Denson, a widow, moved to the Park in the late 1920s and built a cinder block house on Geneva Street with the help of her grown children. By the early 1930s, five of those children, Essie, Edith, Cornelia, Letha, and Pete, had relocated from Cleveland to Chagrin Falls with their spouses. Two other sons, John and Willie, lived in the Park with their wives for a short time before returning to Cleveland. By 1940, Essie’s sister-in-law and her husband had also settled, as had two of Mrs. Denson’s nephews and their wives. Those wives, Annie and Mattie Pounds, attracted cousins, Shepherd Beck and Nellie May Lawrence, to settle with their families in Chagrin Falls Park during the early 1940s. The Denson family had among the most extensive kin relations in the Park, but other early residents followed a similar pattern, settling with or joining family already living in the Park. Henry MacMiller and his sister, Josephine Young, for example, settled with their spouses in the late 1920s. Josephine’s brother-in-law, Eugene Young, and his wife also settled in the Park in the early 1930s. In 1936, Mr. MacMiller’s adult daughter, Ruby Hall, moved to Chagrin Falls Park with her husband.⁵³ By the 1940s, a strong network of kin-based suburbanization had created a

⁵⁰ Mayor’s Interracial Committee, *Negro in Detroit*, 58–59; Wilfred S. Lewin, “A Study of the Negro Population of Mount Vernon,” typescript, 1935, Civil Works Administration (Mount Vernon Public Library, Mount Vernon, N.Y.), chap. 2.

⁵¹ Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 147–57.

⁵² Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way*, 49–52; Kimberley L. Phillips, “‘But It Is a Fine Place to Make Money’: Migration and African American Families in Cleveland, 1915–1929,” *Journal of Social History*, 30 (Winter 1996), 393–413. For the role of kinship in migration to industrial suburbs, see Shirley Ann Moore, “Getting There, Being There: African-American Migration to Richmond, California, 1910–1945,” in *Great Migration in Historical Perspective*, ed. Trotter, 108.

⁵³ Kirklen interview, Aug. 15, 1986; Detwyler interview; Beck interview; Mr. and Mrs. Noah Pounds interview by Wiese, July 15, 1986 (in Wiese’s possession); Walker interview; Geauga County Torrens Record Docket, no. 1; Ruby and Stephen Hall interview, Aug. 22, 1986.

web of familial relationships that bound residents to one another as a community. In a suburb where incomes and jobs were insecure, transportation inconvenient, and voluntary cooperation important for survival, extended families were a bulwark against hardship and a foundation for upward mobility. In contrast to the middle-class suburban model of this era, characterized by child-centered nuclear families, suburbanization for African Americans in Chagrin Falls Park strengthened the bonds of extended family and friendships that stretched through Cleveland to roots in the South.⁵⁴

Finally, in addition to visions of home and family, residents expressed normative ideas about landscape that reflected their experience in the South and shaped the community they built in the suburbs. “My family heard about a place where they could buy them some land which reminded them of home,” Ruby Hall said. “They all came from the South, and they had lived in Cleveland for many years, but they never forgot their home. They wanted a little place where they could have chickens and different little things and a little farm life and gardens.” Weighing the sacrifice of city services against the benefits of country living, Clara Adams, who relocated with her husband in 1940, claimed,

I didn’t mind it [giving up a modern apartment in Cleveland]. When we came out here it was just so nice and quiet. You didn’t hear nothing but the birds in the morning singing nice. It was where I could have a garden, and I liked that. So it wasn’t hard at all. Plus, I was used to the country. That’s where I was raised up, so it didn’t bother me at all. I didn’t like *in* the city—too congested. I liked *out*. I like the fresh air, and it’s nice and quiet.

Magnolia Strickland echoed these sentiments, noting, “I think I bettered my conditions. I had a nice new house to live in. I had nice, fresh air, and you could have vegetables and a garden.”⁵⁵ Based on preferences such as these, residents let side lots grow thick, they cultivated extensive gardens, and they planted fruit trees and even pine trees from “down home.” In the evenings, they sat on front porches they had built and surveyed the quiet. Like middle-class suburbanites, they created a bucolic landscape of residence in union with nature, but with a difference. For early Park settlers, the prospect of fresh air, birdsong, open space, and “a little farm life and gardens” outweighed the desire for modern conveniences that were fundamental to middle-class suburbanization. Their landscape was more rustic, but it was no less suburban.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See Marsh, *Suburban Lives*, 173–79; Barbara Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany, 1993), 106–10. Samples of black households in eleven suburbs from the 1920 census revealed similar extended family patterns. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Census Schedules, Freeport, N. Y., Enumeration Districts 13–15* (Washington, 1922); *ibid.*, Mt. Vernon, N.Y., *Enumeration Districts 76–87*; *ibid.*, Montclair, N. J., *Enumeration Districts 74–90*; *ibid.*, Englewood, N. J., *Enumeration Districts 22–27*; *ibid.*, Evanston, Ill., *Enumeration Districts 68–89*; *ibid.*, Glencoe Village, Ill., *Enumeration District 119*; *ibid.*, Harvey, Ill., *Enumeration Districts 215–19*; *ibid.*, Robbins Village, Ill., *Enumeration District 25*; *ibid.*, Maywood, Ill., *Enumeration Districts 194–95*; *ibid.*, River Rouge, Mich., *Enumeration District 679*; see also *Evanston Review*, Obituaries, 1950–1990; Oral History Collection (Evanston Historical Society, Evanston, Ill.); Pasadena Oral History Project (Pasadena History Museum, Pasadena, Calif.); Langley Oral Histories (Mount Vernon Public Library, Mount Vernon, N.Y.).

⁵⁵ Ruby and Stephen Hall interview, Aug. 22, 1986. Adams interview. Strickland quoted in “Negroes Fight for Better Life.”

⁵⁶ Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs*, 29–31; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 103–37.

Coupled with the attractions of country living, many Park settlers also explained their relocation in terms of repulsion from the city. "I was determined not to live in Cleveland," said Fanny Detwyler. Mrs. Detwyler brought her mistrust of urban living directly from the North Carolina countryside, and she avoided the city altogether in her journey to Chagrin Falls Park. Other early residents, however, sought upward mobility through migration to Cleveland and other cities, and they found the experience wanting. Congestion, poverty—especially during the depression—and what some perceived as the atmosphere of immorality that plagued certain city neighborhoods spurred many early Park residents to seek a better place to live. Magnolia Strickland remarked, "I wanted to move out here, I wanted to move anywhere, because East 61st and Thackery was no good."⁵⁷ Ruby Hall stressed that many people—like herself—came because of rum running and rent parties in Cleveland's crowded east side—"especially a person that had a family and they didn't believe in none of that stuff."⁵⁸ Truck driver Shepherd Beck explained his decision in terms of sleep. "I was working the road, and I'd come home and all the children from the neighborhood was playing ball in my yard and yelling. How am I gonna sleep? I said, 'I'm gonna find me some place quiet.'"⁵⁹ The place he found was Chagrin Falls Park.

Beyond the environmental influence of southern roots, race and the shared culture of African Americans shaped the process of early black suburbanization. Racism, as well as internal cohesion, ensured that most black suburbanites lived in a segregated world. Racism limited black incomes and prevented black families from buying property in all but a few areas of the metropolis—often marginal land with few services. Similarly, bias in mortgage lending encouraged working-class black families to build their own homes and to use property to supplement income. Although informal home building was common among working-class white suburbanites, it was a choice African Americans made from even fewer options. Race also shaped early black suburbanization from the inside. Suburbanites' passion for home ownership sprang from a venerable black tradition in the South. Patterns of family migration and settlement followed lines that were common among African American migrants, and women's economic activity in many suburbs reflected the wider economic participation of black women in the wage economy. Here again, the distinction between externally imposed necessity and internal choice is difficult to discern, but clearly some black women chose to settle in suburbs because they were good places to work and live at the same time.

If race and racism shaped early black suburbanization, suburban life itself tended to reinforce migrants' existing racial identities.⁶⁰ Held at arm's length by white sub-

⁵⁷ Detwyler interview. Strickland quoted in "Negroes Fight for Better Life."

⁵⁸ Ruby and Stephen Hall interview, Aug. 22, 1986. The city's principal black newspaper, the *Cleveland Gazette*, regularly criticized the level of crime and vice on the east side; see, for example, *Cleveland Gazette*, April 21, 1923, p. 3; Aug. 23, 1923, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Beck interview. For urban antipathies in other black suburbs, see Cora Watson interview by S. F. Patton, May 24, 1974, transcript (Evanston Historical Society, Evanston, Ill.), 97; Wilson, "Dark Spaces"; Morris and Ambrose, *North Webster*, 17; Lewin, "Study of the Negro Population"; and "Official History of River Rouge [Michigan]," Minutes, River Rouge City Council, March 23, 1971 (River Rouge Public Library, River Rouge, Mich.).

⁶⁰ For race and identity in white suburbs, see Becky Nicolaides, "My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965," unpublished manuscript, 1997 (in Wiese's possession).

urbanites, African Americans relied on their own resources. They established separate institutions, worshiped in separate churches, and socialized in a predominantly black milieu. In Chagrin Falls Park, black men rode to work together and labored with other blacks in segmented occupations—in the foundry at American Steel and Wire, for example, or at the back of a garbage truck with the Department of Sanitation. Women who worked as domestic servants had closer connections with local whites, but at best these relationships left racism unchallenged. Religious groups from the Park visited black churches in nearby suburbs such as Twinsburg and Miles Heights, and ministers from these communities, as well as Cleveland, preached guest sermons in local churches. The Park baseball team played black “nines” from all over northeastern Ohio, and when the Republican Club hosted an August fish fry, black families from Cleveland and its suburbs crowded Woodland Avenue with their automobiles and “walked in that dust like it was gold dust.”⁶¹ Encouraged by persisting white racism as well as their own sense of accomplishment, residents of such places as Chagrin Falls Park forged a distinct sense of themselves as both African Americans and suburbanites.

Although early African American suburbanites confronted the challenge of urbanization as black people with a unique history and culture, they also followed patterns that were common among working-class suburbanites generally, and they shaped a landscape that shared many features with a wider working-class suburbia. Faced with similar economic circumstances, they responded to urban industrial capitalism in part by withdrawing from it. They valued home ownership for many of the same economic reasons, and they pursued similar strategies of economic subsistence: owner building, home gardening, and other productive uses of domestic space. Working-class suburbanites responded to the urban economy in similar ways, whether they were Mexican immigrants in East Los Angeles, Polish workers in Milwaukee or Detroit, blue-collar emigrants from the British Isles in Toronto or Hamilton, Ontario, or African Americans in Chagrin Falls Park.⁶²

Conclusion

Even as suburbs like Chagrin Falls Park peaked in population after World War II, conditions that had nurtured early working-class suburbanization began to change. Rapid white suburbanization led to the extension of land use controls in formerly unregulated areas. Zoning and building codes curtailed informal home building and raised the price of a suburban home for working-class and poor families. Racist application of these regulations, too, closed the door on development for blacks, and the enforcement of sanitary regulations led to the demolition of existing black housing

⁶¹ Kirklen interview, Aug. 11, 1986.

⁶² George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1910–1945* (New York, 1993), 198–201; Simon, “Housing and Services in an Immigrant Neighborhood,” 447–50; Zunz, *Changing Face of Inequality*, 170–74; Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs*, 109–35; Richard Harris and Matt Sendbuchler, “The Making of a Working Class Suburb in Hamilton’s East End, 1900–1945,” *Journal of Urban History*, 20 (Aug. 1994), 486–511.

and restrictions on domestic production. A number of suburbs also resorted to urban renewal as a means of isolating, or even expelling, suburban black communities.⁶³

At the same time, federal intervention in the housing market and the development of a welfare state undercut some of the economic insecurity that had shaped early working-class suburbanization. This was especially true for working-class whites, but the same trends also affected African Americans. The extension of social security and unemployment insurance to a growing number of black workers, as well as black entrance into unions in the 1940s, promised the kinds of economic security that suburban home ownership had provided before the war. Further, the establishment of federal mortgage programs accommodated the dreams of home ownership for millions of blue-collar families without the hardships of owner building. Comparatively few blacks and other minorities participated in these programs, but even so, tens of thousands of modestly priced new homes were constructed for African Americans during the late 1940s and 1950s, and FHA (Federal Housing Administration) insistence on racial segregation insured that most were built within existing black areas—usually older black suburbs.⁶⁴ While home ownership became marginally more available to middle-income black families, and black home ownership rates inched upward, poor families were increasingly priced out of the market. Within a decade of the war, regulation of the suburbs had foreclosed a wide range of working-class suburban outlets, and federal subsidies limited the number who were willing or able to make the move out from the city. By the mid-1950s, the stream of new black suburbanites had shifted measurably toward the middle-class.⁶⁵

Semi-rural suburbs like Chagrin Falls Park weathered these changes poorly. The Park tripled in population during the 1940s, and it reached a peak of nearly 900 in 1960 as a new wave of black southerners hit the city. However, population dwindled thereafter. As African American living standards improved nationally during the 1950s and 1960s, black expectations for life in an “affluent society” expanded. Strategies of working-class subsistence that had served early suburbanites failed to support a standard of living that was satisfactory to most urban-born African Americans. Pioneer suburbanites preferred a life-style reminiscent of the rural South, but their children and grandchildren often saw these places as “the boondocks.” Moreover,

⁶³ For the impact of land use controls on working-class suburbanization, see Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs*, 233–63; also Henry L. Taylor Jr., “City Building, Public Policy, the Rise of the Industrial City, and Black Ghetto-Slum Formation in Cincinnati, 1850–1940,” in *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820–1970*, ed. Henry L. Taylor Jr. (Urbana, 1993), 176. On similar efforts after World War II, see Andrew Wiese, “Racial Cleansing in the Suburbs: Suburban Government, Urban Renewal, and Segregation, 1945–1960,” in *Contested Terrain: Politics and Participation in the Suburbs*, ed. Marc Silver and Martin Melkonian (Westport, 1995), 61–70; Andrew Wiese, “Struggle for the Suburban Dream: African American Suburbanization since 1916” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1993), 206–13.

⁶⁴ On the impact of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veterans’ Administration on postwar suburbanization, see Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 203–18; Davis McEntire, *Residence and Race: Final and Comprehensive Report to the Commission on Race and Housing* (Berkeley, 1960), 291–314; also Charles Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors: A Study of Prejudice in Housing* (New York, 1955). On FHA-backed housing for African Americans, see Roland Sawyer, “FHA Program Aids Minorities,” *Insured Mortgage Portfolio*, 16 (4th Quarter, 1951), 6–9; Donald W. Wyatt, “Better Homes for Negro Families in the South,” *Social Forces*, 28 (March 1950), 297–303; and William H. Wilson, *Hamilton Park: A Planned Black Community in Dallas* (Baltimore, 1998).

⁶⁵ Farley, “Changing Distribution of Negroes within Metropolitan Areas,” 344.

they had a greater number of options. By the 1990s, population in Chagrin Falls Park had shrunk to 300, and average incomes remained the lowest in Geauga County.⁶⁶ Even so, dozens of elderly men and women lived independently in homes that they owned.

Even though many African American suburbs suffered depopulation and chronic poverty, their history belies the mystique of suburbia as the preserve of elite and middle-class whites. In the years before 1950, thousands of central city blacks moved to suburbs. Long ridiculed as “poverty pockets” and “suburban slums,” the communities where they settled were poor, but they were fully part of the national trend toward urban decentralization known as suburbanization. At the same time, they reflected a vision of residential, family, and community life that was at once suburban, working class, and African American. This vision, as much as economic necessity, shaped the landscape of American suburbia in the same fashion as the well-documented dreams of middle-class whites.

Early residents of Chagrin Falls Park valued home ownership less as a long-term capital investment or as shelter for an idealized nuclear family than for its usefulness in cutting costs, providing supplemental income, and limiting dependence on a fragile wage. Equally important, home ownership was a basic symbol of status in African American communities of the South and a marker by which to measure upward mobility in the North. To the southerners who settled in Chagrin Falls Park, home ownership was a long-deferred dream, and they were willing to sacrifice urban services and modern conveniences in order to achieve it.

Like other suburbanites, residents of Chagrin Falls Park expressed preferences for a bucolic landscape, but their ideal included unrefined open space, an elaborate garden, small livestock, and the familiar food and routine that these implied. In these suburbs, the cackle of chickens was more common than the sound of a lawn mower. Women’s participation in the economic and civic life of Chagrin Falls Park also distinguished it from white suburbs of the era, and the family ideal that encouraged settlement in Chagrin Falls Park placed higher value on kinship networks than on nuclear family. Extended families allowed women to work outside the home without worrying about the care of their children. They provided conduits for information about employment and economic support during times of need. Lastly, the complex networks of family and friendship that characterized Chagrin Falls Park laid a foundation for an intimate, stable, and controllable community life that differed from both central city black neighborhoods and the highly mobile, individualistic, and nuclear-family-based society of middle-class white suburbia. To a greater or lesser extent, similar patterns can be discerned in early black suburbs of all kinds.

⁶⁶ In 1960, the African American population of Bainbridge Township (of which Chagrin Falls Park comprised the vast majority) peaked at 892. By 1990, black population had slipped to 507, but not all African Americans in the township lived in Chagrin Falls Park. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Eighteenth Census of the United States: 1960, Population*, vol. I, *General Population Characteristics*, pt. 37: *Ohio* (Washington, 1961), 135; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Twenty-first Census of the United States: 1990, Population*, vol. I, *General Population Characteristics*, pt. 37: *Ohio* (Washington, 1982), 572; “Building a Proud Future,” *Chagrin Valley News-Herald*, April 19, 1998, p. A8.

Finally, early black suburbanites shared a common displeasure with the quality of life in many city neighborhoods. They desired an atmosphere reminiscent of the small towns and countryside from which most had come. Low incomes and white racism often thwarted these designs, but where they could, early black suburbanites shaped the landscape to suit their preferences, as well as their needs. Like white suburbanites, they settled in places that combined country pleasures with proximity to urban jobs and the cultural and social opportunities of the city. In short, they built suburbs.