

## Why Did Everyone Love Ozzie and Harriet? Why Does Everyone Hate Suburbia?

Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Pp. x, 396. Appendices, illustrations, notes, tables. \$49.95 (U.S.)

Edel, Matthew; Sclar, Elliott; and Luria, Daniel. *Shaky Palaces: Homeownership and Social Mobility in Boston's Suburbanization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Pp. xxiv, 459. Appendices, illustrations, maps, notes, tables. \$40.00 (U.S.)

Binford, Harry. *The First Suburbs: Residential Communities on the Boston Periphery, 1815-1860*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985. Pp. xiv, 304. Appendices, bibliography, illustrations, maps, notes, tables

Bruce C. Daniels

---

Volume 15, Number 3, February 1987

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018025ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018025ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

### ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this review

Daniels, B. C. (1987). Review of [Why Did Everyone Love Ozzie and Harriet? Why Does Everyone Hate Suburbia? / Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Pp. x, 396. Appendices, illustrations, notes, tables. \$49.95 (U.S.) / Edel, Matthew; Sclar, Elliott; and Luria, Daniel. *Shaky Palaces: Homeownership and Social Mobility in Boston's Suburbanization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Pp. xxiv, 459. Appendices, illustrations, maps, notes, tables. \$40.00 (U.S.) / Binford, Harry. *The First Suburbs: Residential Communities on the Boston Periphery, 1815-1860*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985. Pp. xiv, 304. Appendices, bibliography, illustrations, maps, notes, tables]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 15(3), 290–293. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018025ar>

## Book Notes/Notes bibliographiques

### Why Did Everyone Love Ozzie and Harriet? Why Does Everyone Hate Suburbia?

Everyone loved Ozzie and Harriet. From the mid-1950s to the mid-60s, once a week we shared a half hour of their wonderful but perfectly average lives — lives that reflected the most basic yet most profound human values: family love, growing pains, neighbourliness, and humour. Even at a distance of two decades, remembered images evoke warmth: Ozzie getting an unintended bath when Ricky washed the car; David trying to avoid having to cut the grass; and Harriet being roped into organizing the bake sale for the school parent-teacher association. Not only did father know best, so did mother: kids were good and times were fine. We loved Ozzie and Harriet and their family for one simple reason: they were lovable.

The Nelsons lived in suburbia. For that matter, so did the Beaver, Donna Reed, and Riley, the most famous members of other lovable television families. Ricky washed a station wagon parked in front of a garage attached to his house. David tried to get out of mowing the grass because the front and back lawns measured twice the size of an average city houselot. And, Harriet reluctantly agreed to orchestrate the cookie merchants bazaar because, after all, one of the main reasons she and Ozzie had moved to the neighbourhood was to send their kids to a good, clean school. Stationwagons, lawns and wholesome schools — these are the symbols of post-war suburban life. They were the Nelson family's props as were pets, barbecues, the little league, junior proms and dozens of other artifacts and rituals. If suburbia is so lovable, so benign, so full of decency, so full of Nelsons, how come it has become a dirty word? How come we (scholars) hate it? And, how come everybody seems to want to live in it?

\* \* \*

Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Pp. x, 396. Appendices, illustrations, notes, tables. \$49.95 (U.S.).

Kenneth Jackson provides better answers to these questions than anyone else ever has. *Crabgrass Frontier*, an extraordinarily wide-ranging and learned book, traces the development of the suburban process in the United States from the erosion of the walking city in the early nineteenth century to the revolt against suburban life symbolized by the gentrification movement among the present Yuppies. Few relevant questions escape Jackson's attention: he analyzes causes — individual aspirations, transportation, the economy, wars, demography and government — as well as results

— a drive-in culture, loss of a sense of community, and enervated inner cities. If hate may be slightly too strong a word, it is safe to say that Jackson dislikes suburbs.

What is there to dislike? For starters, Jackson argues that suburbs have devastating effects on the development of creativity among women; promote racism in residential patterns and education; victimize and isolate the poor; weaken the extended family; and produce a culture as banal as it is mobile. In other words, it was not what we saw on the Ozzie and Harriet Show that was offensive, it was what we did not see: working women, Blacks, museums, the poor, grandparents — to name just a few of suburbia's missing ingredients.

Is Jackson fair and accurate to lay so many social ills of the American recent past and present on the doorsteps (or lawns) of suburban life? By and large, the answer is yes. Suburbia emerged as a major mode of living in the late nineteenth century at the same time as another phenomenon historians call the "Cult of True Womanhood." The Cult linked the home with purity and piety which it argued were best achieved in a semi-rural setting isolated from the baser impulses in society. Separating the family from the unpleasant aspects of society would enhance its pristine qualities: what better atmosphere than twelve miles from the city centre and one-hundred yards from the neighbours? In this remote enclave, a woman could exercise her inherently superior moral and social virtues. Similarly, the family could escape ethnic and racial tensions which threatened the tranquility of the ideal life. In 1960, not one Black lived among the 82,000 residents of Levittown, a community whose name has almost become a synonym for low-cost, pre-fabricated bedroom developments. Signs and symbols of the drive-in culture have become such a part of American life that they now seem to be as much a part of the landscape as the grass and trees. Motels, open-air theatres, trailer homes, shopping centres, drive-in banks, parking lots, one-way streets, highway signs and rural factories all contribute to the development of the centreless city best typified by Los Angeles and much of the rest of southern California. As cities lost their psychic and physical centrality, they also lost their residents and tax base. Between 1950 and 1970, eighteen of the largest twenty-five cities in the country suffered a net population loss: in the same period, suburban population grew from thirty-six to seventy-four million.

Jackson's recitation of the ills wrought by suburbanization is compelling but much of what he writes is on the list of grievances carried around by most urban scholars and political Jeremiahs. Two other major components of his synthesis, however, are not part of the standard litany. First, his account of the evolution of the suburb weaves together in wonderful fashion the intellectual, technological, economic and political strands of the inner-city exodus. Too often,

scholars forget that suburbia has a history that began far before World War Two; and, too often, they attribute too much to the streetcar and the automobile. Secondly and most importantly, Jackson shows that suburbia was not created solely or even primarily by natural market forces. Despite all the sneers about split-level living, dandelion removal obsessions and commuter traffic, intellectuals are hard-pressed to criticize suburban life if it is the inevitable result of natural economic forces and if it is the freely chosen lifestyle of the majority of the citizenry. Jackson argues that, although technological developments did provide an impetus to suburban growth and although most Americans like the idea of owning their own chunk of real estate, neither economic nor cultural forces by themselves are sufficient to explain the magnitude of the suburban social revolution. Europeans, too, were wedded to a social ideal based on ownership of land; they, too, had streetcar systems and fell in love with the car. Yet, European suburban development has lagged far behind that of Americans; and the social cost has lagged even more. The difference, Jackson argues persuasively, lies in the role of the government. American local, state and federal government leaders often portray themselves as reacting to the natural forces behind suburbanization. But, in reality, the preponderance of governmental decisions has accelerated the natural forces already at play. In the nineteenth century, local governments shifted the cost of essential items for new community growth such as paving, water, sewers, and utilities from the private to the public sector. Instead of regulating real estate developers, political machines cooperated or looked the other way as they used power, money and connections to put houses on farmland and gain more power, money and connections. State legislatures in the twentieth century refused to redraw the political boundaries surrounding cities; hence, instead of allowing the city to annex communities that are an economic part of the urban unit, the state protects the political autonomy of the outlying neighbourhoods. Allowing deductions under the federal tax code for interest paid on mortgages provides a lucrative incentive to homeownership and a prohibitive disincentive to renting. Banks often "red-lined" inner-city areas and refused to grant mortgages for core-area housing. Not only did the federal government refuse to legislate against this practice until 1964, its two main housing agencies, the FHA and the VHA, also practiced their own version of red-lining. The spectacular failure of inner-city public housing projects added to the deteriorating quality of life in the downtown: the road to the suburbs as well as the road to hell was paved with these good intentions.

Jackson's story is not a very pleasant one. After reading *Crabgrass Frontier* one has the same mixed emotions that all great tragedy produces: a detached pleasure to be given such a fine work of art to enjoy; and a sadness for the sorrowful state of affairs that we humans often create.

\* \* \*

Edel, Matthew; Sclar, Elliott; and Luria, Daniel. *Shaky Palaces: Homeownership and Social Mobility in Boston's Suburbanization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Pp. xxiv, 459. Appendices, illustrations, maps, notes, tables. \$40.00 (U.S.).

At first blush, *Shaky Palaces*, an analysis of the relationships between homeownership and social mobility in Boston's suburbs, promises to provide something positive about the effects of suburbanization. The economic benefit to those lucky enough to be among the suburban successful has long been an article of faith to both the general public and the scholarly community. Why pay rent to someone else when you can pay it to yourself? Why raise your kids in the crime-ridden urban centre when you can send them to a safe school where they will be educated well enough to move a rung or two upwards on the social ladder? Although it may be sad that the Ozzie and Harriet Show left out people who did not fit, at least those who did fit were happy, successful parents preparing their children for a bright future.

Not so, say co-authors, Matthew Edel, Elliott Sclar, and Daniel Luria. They argue that although home ownership has proved adequate for housing a large segment of the population, it has not been a good vehicle for upward social or economic mobility. Home values are subject to external circumstances over which individuals have little control: unemployment in a region, neighbourhood deterioration, unexpected changes in the economy, may cause house values to decline. Edel, Sclar and Luria supply data to show that over the last century in Boston's suburbs, house prices have risen approximately at the same rate as inflation. Opportunities open to larger and more knowledgeable investors have had a much higher rate of return. The Dow Jones average, for example, has consistently outperformed house values.

As if going one sacred cow was not enough *Shaky Palaces* attacks another. Home ownership may actually provide a slight impediment to the upward mobility of children living in the suburbs. When sons of homeowners were matched with sons of renters of similar economic, educational and social backgrounds, the homeowners' sons had a slightly lower level of educational achievement at the post-secondary level. The explanation offered for these surprising data is that homeowners place more of their assets in the home and renters are more willing to save and invest their assets in education. Moreover, even if suburban parents do scrimp to send their kids to university, their education may still be diminished by the choice of suburb the parents made years earlier. Analyses of admission patterns at various distinguished, average, and lesser colleges reveal a consistent bias at work. To a substantial degree, admission to a distinguished school is much easier if one lives in certain suburbs and much more difficult if one lives in others. And, inasmuch as career achievement relates strongly to the quality of school, the authors argue that many children are "entrapped" by the suburb in which they live.

Indeed, entrapment is the theme that courses through *Shaky Palaces* and provides the justification for the book's title. The three authors, self-described political activists of the 1960s who derived their scholarly interests from their personal commitments, wear their ideological beliefs on their collective sleeve. They are reformers; they do not like suburbia; they verge on self-righteousness: but, within the limits imposed by their beliefs, they try to be fair and honest. Staking out a middle ground between those on the right who argue that suburbia represents a pattern of life freely chosen by the American middle class and those on the left who argue that it represents a calculated attempt on the part of capital to control the lives of workers, Edel, Sclar and Luria view suburbia as a result of a compromise between the demands of capital and labour. When workers mounted radical challenges in the late nineteenth century, the capitalist/political elite responded by giving in on some issues. Homeownership, mass transit, and suburbia were, in effect, a way of buying off radical demands by giving workers some benefits. This compromise worked reasonably well in terms of promoting peace among classes until the 1960s when it began to unravel.

Finding fault with *Shaky Palaces* is easy and many reviewers will. It is too long; several sections such as the one on land developers could have been reduced by half with no real intellectual loss. The authors do not seem to be able to consider the possibility that for some suburbanites the personal pleasures of homeownership may more than compensate for the abstract knowledge that their money might have been better invested elsewhere in stocks or bonds. Homeowners may have made a conscious choice to spend weekends putting on storm windows instead of poring over the financial pages of the newspapers. And, despite their care in handling data, the authors draw strong conclusions from some less than strong correlations that may have been influenced by some unanticipated variables. Nevertheless, *Shaky Palaces* makes an important contribution to the urban history literature. It shifts attention from suburban-city relations to suburbia itself. Most scholars dislike suburbs for what they have done to the cities; Edel, Sclar and Luria dislike the suburbs for what they have done to suburbanites. Arguments they make will be much pursued and debated by colleagues and graduate students.

\* \* \*

Binford, Harry. *The First Suburbs: Residential Communities on the Boston Periphery, 1815-1860*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985. Pp. xiv, 304. Appendices, bibliography, illustrations, maps, notes, tables.

Henry Binford also uses metropolitan Boston as his vehicle to comment on suburbanization and he, too, views the process from the vantagepoint of the residential periphery

instead of looking outward from a downtown skyscraper. Binford examines the evolution of two suburbs, Cambridge and Somerville, during the Jacksonian and ante-bellum years and for a few pages one thinks that here at last is an historian who likes suburbia. Not a product of urban sprawl, Boston's first suburbs reflected a conscious attempt to build new communities based on an old community ideal. The early suburbanites did not commute to Boston but sought to profit from the city's nearby location. Most were land developers or small businessmen. Living and working in Cambridge and Somerville, these entrepreneurs mixed politically and socially with the earlier generation of farmers who still farmed in the towns. Entrepreneur and farmer together took pride in their town, felt a loyalty to it as more than a place to leave from in the morning and return to at night, and together made it a genuine community in the fullest sense of the word.

Alas, this early era of suburban development did not last long — from approximately 1815 to the mid-1830s. A sad what-might-have-been quality permeates Binford's account of how the early suburban community gave way in less than three decades to the suburban town that was no community at all but merely a place to hang one's hat and escape to daily from nearby Boston. Bridges, omnibuses and railroads helped make Cambridge and Somerville bedroom towns long before the advent of the streetcar and the automobile. Real estate developers in the 1840s differed from their predecessors: no longer local entrepreneurs combining home and work, they were outsiders exploiting towns in which they did not live. The Irish migration to Boston created a group of migrants to the suburbs who were not moving to realize a community ideal but were fleeing what they regarded as inner-city human pollution. The politics, zoning regulations, building practices, and social organizations of Cambridge and Somerville started to reflect a quest for an Anglo-Saxon middle-class version of purity and to take on an anti-city defensive attitude. By the 1860s, the transition from nearby community to bedroom town was completed and the first of Boston's suburban areas with all its warts and selfishness had emerged.

By the time Binford ends his story, he has become more contemptuous of the suburbs than either Jackson or Edel, Sclar and Luria. Suburbs are, he believes, and have been since the 1860s, "a disaster for the metropolitan community, blocking the efficient delivery of services, depriving the cities of revenue, confining the poor to a deteriorating core, and allowing well-to-do city workers to avoid the burdens and responsibilities of city living (p. 227)." Without stating it, Binford shifted his vantagepoint: no longer standing on the periphery, he ends by looking at metropolitan Boston as do most scholars from a downtown glass tower. Bitter he is, wrong he is not.

*The First Suburbs* is well researched and gracefully written: it tells a story well but will not have as big an impact on

urban scholarship as will the above books by Jackson and Edel, Sclar, and Luria. Binford's account is not as startling or as iconoclastic as he seems to think it is. Few people would be likely to assume that the suburbs were born in an immediate burst of commuting and exploitation. Binford's discussion of the evolution of Cambridge and Somerville seems intuitively familiar. Yet, it is nice to have intuition confirmed by solid research.

\* \* \*

Perhaps one good thing may be said about the suburban movement: it is no longer growing and may be coming to an end. Not only are scholars everywhere criticizing suburbia, much of the public seems vaguely uneasy about it. Suburban comedy has moved from the affectionate *Don't Eat the Daisies* genre of good-golly follies to the caustic contempt expressed in the *Graduate*. Gentrification, Black urban political muscle and liberal breastbeating are three of the many signs that many disparate segments of American society no longer want to live with Ozzie and Harriet.

Bruce C. Daniels  
Department of History  
University of Winnipeg

---

*Outaouais*. Hull: L'institut d'histoire et de recherche sur l'Outaouais (IHRO), January 1985. Pp. 104. \$4.00.

Hull, Quebec has literally as well as historically lain in the shadow of Ottawa. Equally, this 'capital' of western Quebec has been much slighted in terms of both research activity and publication in the province itself. This inaugural number of the review of L'institut d'histoire et de recherche sur l'Outaouais (IHRO) is, to say the least, a revelation of the possibilities.

The first issue, edited by Pierre-Louis Lapointe, focusses on "Industrial Hull" of the twentieth century. It is comprised of thirteen articles from Lapointe's "Le grand feu de 1900" to "Un témoignage prophétique. Les problèmes de Hull, tels que perçus par Aimé Guertin, en 1940."

The new review is the product of a number of influences, foremost among them the activity in the last decade of IHRO, which has done much through its meetings, conferences and the like to raise historical consciousness in the Hull region. More than half the articles in the number, including three from editor Lapointe, can be attributed to IHRO activities.

But this particular issue also owes much to Prof. Andrée Levesque, who, while at the University of Ottawa, directed students to the study of the social and economic history of

Hull. Five articles represent this work, while a sixth, by Edmond Kayser, "The Evolution of Industry in Hull, 1900-1960," is an adaptation of his University of Ottawa master's thesis.

Finally, the project was underwritten by the community in the form of financial (and moral) support from the mayor and council of the City of Hull. It is a mixed menu that is presented, from Kayser's analytical study, to various "testimonies" from the times, such as that of the politician Guertin. There is room in the pages of the review for both academician and chronicler. And they are not uncomfortable together. Editorial control is good and the selection of numerous photographs, many unique, is excellent.

Much of the work here represents beginnings: on tramways, conditions of workers, the depression, hygiene, the poor, and intemperance and prostitution. It is not definitive, but it is a fine start. For urban historians, another Canadian city has, finally, come into view. Orders can be made through IHRO, C.P. 1875, Succ. B, Hull, Quebec, J8A 3Z1.

\* \* \*

Careless, J.M.S. *Toronto to 1918: An Illustrated History*. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1984. Pp. 223. Illustrations. Paper \$19.95. Lemon, James. *Toronto Since 1918: An Illustrated History*. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1985. Pp. 224. Illustrations. \$19.95 paper.

Both Toronto volumes of the "History of Canadian Cities" series are now available in paperback editions. This first major synthesis of the history of Toronto brings to six the number of volumes in the series. For a review of the Careless volume, see the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine*, XIV (June 1985): 74-76. For the Lemon volume, see the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine*, XIV (February 1986): 285-288.

\* \* \*

Legget, Robert. *Rideau Waterway*. Second Edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986. Pp. 312. Illustrations, maps. \$30.00 cloth; \$14.95 paper.

This updated version of the original 1955 edition incorporates many more illustrations, but more important, some of the extensive research carried out by Parks Canada in the last generation. It remains a useful introduction to one of Canada's first canal projects, one that joined Kingston to newly-created Bytown, and ultimately Montreal.

It is essentially descriptive, however, and for the academic reader, flawed by the absence of footnotes. The reader