RICE UNIVERSITY

Southern Landscapes in the City's Shadow:
Environmental Politics and Metropolitan Growth in Texas and Virginia, 1900-1990

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the twentieth-century connections between city and countryside within the metropolitan South. Popular myths of suburbanization, reinforced by much of suburban historiography, envision a “crabgrass frontier” inexorably spreading suburbia into a static and defenseless countryside. This myth serves the ends of environmental, slow growth, and open space advocates. It does so, however, by obscuring the transformations, some imposed by the city and some endogenous to the countryside, that reshaped these rural landscapes into metropolitan hinterlands. Highways, airports, reservoirs, and early commuters bound these rural landscapes to the city before the arrival of suburban sprawl. This dissertation uses the histories of two southern metropolitan counties, one outside Houston, Texas, and the other in Northern Virginia, to examine the history of these rural counties as they simultaneously developed into metropolitan hinterlands and countryside, a reflection of urban conceptions of rural life.

This project integrates rural, environmental, and agricultural history into the history of the metropolis in a way that calls urban historians to explore the city’s impact beyond suburbia and that challenges rural historians to allow these dynamic metropolitan rural areas to destabilize their larger narrative of a rural America left behind. Additionally, it examines the gentlemen farmers, historical preservationists, and nature-seeking suburbanites who abandoned the city to live in this countryside. These privileged white newcomers formed the vanguard of the anti-growth movement that defined metropolitan fringe politics across the nation. In the rural South, these activists obscured the troubling legacies of racism and rural poverty and celebrated a refashioned landscape whose historical and environmental authenticity served as an implicit critique of the alienation and ugliness of suburbia. Green pastures, historical preservation, horses, and white privilege defined this metropolitan fringe landscape. Using a source base that includes
the records of preservation organizations and local, state, and federal government agencies, and oral histories, this project explores the distinct roots of the environmental politics and the shifting relationship between city and country within these southern metropolitan fringe regions.
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During my time in Montgomery County, Texas, I became a fixture of the county courthouse in Conroe. The county court and district court staff was friendly and helpful as I sifted through dust-covered court records. Jodi Chaney at the San Jacinto River Authority was a model of hospitality as she retrieved dozens of yard boxes of material for me to sift through. The staff at the Oak Ridge North and Woodloch town halls were also welcoming. My thanks to those who freely shared their memories of the county. Grants from the Rice University history department and the East Texas Historical Society made my reverse commute along I-45 possible.
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ABBREVIATIONS

ASCS  Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service
BWER  Board of Water Engineers Records
C&O   Chesapeake and Ohio
CAA   Civil Aeronautics Administration
CCM   Montgomery County Commissioner Minutes
CCR   Montgomery County Commissioner Records
CDC   Conroe Courier / Conroe Daily Courier
CECC  Citizens Environmental Coalition Collection
CFS   Cubic Feet per Second
ERS   Economic Research Service
FEMA  Federal Emergency Management Administration
FHA   Federal Housing Administration
HC    Houston Chronicle
HGAC  Houston-Galveston Area Council
HISD  Houston Independent School District
HMRC  Houston Metropolitan Research Center
HP    Houston Post
ICPRB Interstate Commission on the Potomac River
KAB   Keep America Beautiful
KLB   Keep Loudoun Beautiful
LCOHP Loudoun County Oral History Project
LCSA  Loudoun County Sanitation Authority
LEICA Loudoun Environmental Improvement Citizens Association
LTM   Loudoun Times Mirror
LUT   Land Use Taxation
LWV   League of Women Voters
MGD   Million Gallons per Day
NIMBY Not In My Backyard
NSLM  National Sporting Library and Museum
OHP   Oral History Project
ORN   Oak Ridge North
PEC   Piedmont Environmental Council
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<td>Post</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
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<td>PSLC</td>
<td>Preservation Society of Loudoun County</td>
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<td>RLMP</td>
<td>Rural Land Management Plan</td>
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INTRODUCTION

Roy Harris emerged from the Big Thicket of East Texas in the fall of 1958 to challenge Floyd Patterson for boxing’s heavyweight title. Harris was born and raised in Cut ’N Shoot, Texas. Fight promoters flew some two-dozen New York City sportswriters to Houston and drove them through the county seat of Conroe and up the dirt road to Cut ’N Shoot. There they experienced the Harris homestead for themselves. The clan filled the eager ears of reporters with tales of vendettas, night-riding, and death-defying practical jokes. They told of the time Uncle Jack had felled sixteen men with an axe handle and the time Uncle Bob literally cut a man’s head off after being stabbed himself thirteen times. They showed reporters their pet alligators and offered them moonshine. As the Manhattanites walked past the sleeping hound dogs and rooting hogs, photographed the barbed-wire-roped boxing ring and the engine block the Harris boys lifted for strength training, and talked with the barefooted and coon-skin-capped members of the clan, they had their preconceptions confirmed. Cut ’N Shoot really was a place of backwoods violence and rural toughness: a place where “[t]hey farm, fish, raise a few piney woods rooter hogs—and fight,” and where the forests were so dense that, as Harris himself put it, “sometimes it’s noon before it gets to be daylight.”

The reporters wallowed in the backwoods authenticity of Cut ’N Shoot. As Milton Gross of the New York Post explained, “No longer do I feel that this is all makeup for one of the most fabulous fight buildups in history. The outside privy is real, the insects are genuine, and so are the people, after their own fashion. They are a back country folk who have suddenly found the

outside world thrust upon them.”² As a backwoods Tarzan, Harris mesmerized boxing fans across the nation. In the process he reinforced a popular image of East Texas and Montgomery County in particular as a place of primeval forests where natural splendor, hillbilly backwardness, and frontier virtues persisted. Yet even as Roy Harris was training for his title shot, Houston residents began purchasing farmland and timberland within the county, constructing second homes and lakefront cottages, taking up part-time ranching, and commuting into the city. This trickle became a stream in the 1960s and a flood by the 1970s, as the construction of two major highways and Houston’s continuing expansion shrunk the distance between the city and surrounding rural communities. Montgomery County was one of the dozens of counties across the South and the nation whose demographics, politics, society, culture, and landscapes transitioned from rural to suburban during the postwar decades.

Rural people were not the victims of these changes, as the rest of Harris’s story suggests. After losing to Floyd Patterson in Los Angeles during the twelfth round, Harris returned to Cut ’N Shoot with a $100,000 check. He wisely invested in local real estate and secured his broker’s license. He then opened an office in Spring Branch, in northern Harris County, thereby joining the county’s growing ranks of commuters. From here he led the local development community in repackaging and rebranding the forests of Montgomery County as a privatized recreational and suburban retreat for Houstonians. Even Cut ’N Shoot, culturally and environmentally enmeshed as it still was in the Big Thicket, saw rural subdivisions, some of them built by Harris, nestle in among the pines. From his large house and landholdings in Cut ’N Shoot, Harris continued to pursue his love of hunting, fishing, and camping even as he packaged and sold this lifestyle to Houstonians hoping to escape the city. Harris also leveraged his local popularity into a position

as County Clerk, which he held for more than twenty years. He spent the rest of his working life literally signing off on every parcel of development in the woods he had roamed as a child.  

Understanding people like Roy Harris and places like Cut ’N Shoot requires placing the metropolitan fringe, in this case the postwar southern metropolitan fringe, at the center of the story. Only then can historians capture the complex interactions between suburban, urban, and rural, between agriculture, recreation, and development, and between the rural South and the rising Sunbelt. Places like Cut ’N Shoot were profoundly reshaped by their relationship with the nearby cities, yet to this day, few would consider casting the community in the role of American suburb. Cut ’N Shoot is and has been simply too rural to fit well within a suburban historiography whose primary focus is on the flight from the city and its causes and broader political, social, and cultural implications. Yet at the same time it is too metropolitan and

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suburban to fit within rural and agricultural historiography. Historians in these fields usually exclude metropolitan rural areas from their studies because they distract from the decline of the family farm, outmigration, and the contested rise of agribusiness. A subset of rural America dominated by commuters, rural factory workers, recreation, and hobby farmers is out of place in a subfield focused on the fate of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century family farm.\(^5\) The shadow of the city obscures the picture they are trying to paint. Rural historians have ceded metropolitan rural areas to urban and suburban historians who have had difficulty fitting them into suburban narratives.\(^6\)

Journalists, rural sociologists, and geographers have been the first to point out the distinct characteristics of the metropolitan fringe.\(^7\) Urban historians are only now beginning to appreciate the significance of rural areas and their histories in the shaping of suburban history. The first stirrings came in a 1996 article in which James Wunsch pushed historians to grapple with the

\(5\) This narrative of modernization and resistance has dominated the “new agricultural history” of the 1990s and 2000s. In his 2000 state of the field essay, David Vaught cited four seminal works that he saw as representative of the “new Agricultural history.” All four had accommodation and resistance to modernization as their central theme. David Vaught, "State of the Art—Rural History, or Why is there No Rural History of California?" Agricultural History 74 (Autumn 2000): 759-774. It remains unclear what long-term impact the field’s environmental turn will have. In Claire Strom’s Making Catfish Bait out of Government Boys: The Fight against Cattle Ticks and the Transformation of the Yeoman South (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), the battle between modernizers and resistors wages on. Kendra Smith-Howard, in contrast, emphasizes the active and assenting role played by dairy farmers confronted with improved production methods. Kendra Smith-Howard, Pure and Modern Milk: An Environmental History since 1900 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). In either case, however, metropolitan rural areas receive little more than a passing mention.

\(6\) The essays in Emery N. Castle’s The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995) are exemplary of this point. The first few essays go to great lengths to draw the distinction between metropolitan and rural areas and to emphasize the diversity of rural experience. The remainder of the book turns to rural policy issues from economic development and education to public health and local government. These chapters focus almost exclusively on rural poverty and backwardness in non-metropolitan areas. The issues of metropolitan rural areas, these authors implicitly argue, are the purview of urban planners.

diversity of suburban landscapes. “Suburbanization,” he reminded his readers, “did not take place in the forest primeval, but amidst a welter of towns, satellite cities and industrial areas, some as old as the city itself.” This call went largely unheeded, for in 2009 Andrew Needham and Allen Dieterich-Ward, reflecting on the scholarship of the past decade, observe that “[w]hile the new suburban scholarship has succeeded in incorporating suburbs into postwar historiography, it has also implicitly reinforced an artificial boundary that obscures far-reaching effects of metropolitan growth. That boundary lies at the suburban fringe.” A major cause of this divide, they argue, is the fact that “rural and urban historians have barely acknowledged the existence of the other, let alone understood themselves as co-investigators on the same social and cultural landscape.” If historians were, the authors argue, to integrate the study of city, suburb, and hinterland into a conglomeration they term a “metropolitan region,” then the narrative that would emerge would be one of increasing interdependence rather than urban decay and suburban sprawl. Such an approach would also reveal the substantial and meaningful conflict on the fringe.  

This project examines two metropolitan fringe counties in the South as part of this metropolitan history. In doing so, it represents a direct response to Needham and Dietrich-Ward’s observation that “little historical research has been undertaken to explore the expansion of ‘suburban’ areas into the rural periphery from the perspective of local residents.” The metropolitan fringe is an inherently transient designation, for as suburban expansion has continued to move outward, it continues to push the fringe farther into rural areas. Rather than

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9 Needham and Dietrich-Ward, “Beyond the Metropolis,” 960.
chasing the fringe as it has expanded outward, this study grounds its analysis in a set political and geographic frame. In doing so it adds chronological depth to the ties that bound city to countryside. In telling the twentieth-century history of Loudoun County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Texas, this study explores the way the transformation of agriculture and rural life coincided with and often reinforced metropolitan development and the expansion of suburbs and exurbs. This framing also encourages a more eclectic mix of topics and historical actors that together give a fuller, if sometimes more cluttered, picture of the transformation of these areas than a topically defined history of exurbia or the metropolitan fringe could provide. The result is a history of the southern metropolitan fringe that injects contingency back into the story. Suburbanites had significant impacts on county budgets long before they made up a majority of the population, yet they did not achieve political dominance until long after. Cultural dominance was even more difficult to achieve. In terms of landscape, suburban areas achieved a perceived dominance long before suburban land uses had taken hold on the majority of the land. In many cases perceptions of dominance and rhetorical claims of dominance were a far cry from the reality on the ground within metropolitan fringe.

Before proceeding any farther, a definition of terms is in order. This study adopts the standard census definition of the metropolis as a core urban area of 50,000 or more population and the surrounding counties that have a “high degree of social and economic integration” with the urban core. Both counties officially joined the metropolitan areas of their respective cities during the 1960s. The metropolitan fringe refers to those areas within metropolitan counties that either have not yet or are only beginning to see extensive urban and suburban development. The fringe includes rural land uses such as agriculture and forestry, vacation homes and industry.

It also includes exurban land uses such as rural subdivisions, landfills, and hobby farms. This project also follows suburban historians in drawing a distinction between suburbs and suburbia. The former is a land use and settlement pattern primarily consisting of single family homes in developments, usually outside of the incorporated city, largely, although not exclusively white, middle class, and car dependent. The latter is a prominent cultural myth, a set of stereotyped images and social expectations. Both contemporary critics and current popular memory portray suburbia as a place of radical conformity, limited culture, child-centered lifestyles, pervasive consumerism, artificial landscapes, and bland architecture. This image has perennially reinforced critiques of suburbanites and development and empowered those fighting to preserve both cities and the countryside. This study uses the term suburbia to consciously invoke this suburban critique. Suburban and suburb are intended to be ideologically neutral.

This is a study of metropolitan landscapes. Conceptually, a focus on landscapes combines the cultural meanings and significance that historical actors have ascribed to particular places with an environmental historian’s interest in what is happening on the ground, as it were. As Anne Whitson Spirn explains, “landscape is not a mere visible surface, static composition, or passive backdrop to human theater.” Nor is landscape merely a particular ecosystem. In both Montgomery County and Loudoun County, the land was a factor of production and a site for development. It was a natural system and ecology. It was also was a locus of cultural meaning.

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11 Such a description goes against the efforts of the new suburban history to uncover suburban minorities, working-class suburbs, and suburban social conflict more generally. My work in no way draws into question the accuracy or importance of this scholarship. It does, however, question its applicability to my two counties. The suburban growth that took hold in both counties between 1950 and the 1980s was uniformly white and middle class. Hispanic migration, beginning in the 1980s, would significantly change this racial makeup. Kruse and Sugrue, New Suburban History.
and value. Landscape attempts to capture this intersection between place and people.\(^{13}\) These counties were rural; they were part of each city’s metropolitan hinterland; and they were an embodiment of the cultural image of the countryside. Exploring these three overlapping conceptions of the metropolitan fringe, this project uncovers the ties that bound city and country, metropolis and metropolitan fringe.

The rural history of these counties and the South in general is the most easily overlooked part of the history of the metropolitan fringe. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed systemic changes in agriculture across the South. From 1945 to 1990, the percentage of people involved in agriculture within the region fell from 40 percent to only 5 percent. Over the same period there was an 80 percent drop in the number of farms, as landowners turned marginally productive farms into timber, pasture, or recreation land. Over the same period, southern agriculture, as an industry, continued to expand.\(^{14}\) Rural historians have been slow to make sense of the declining importance of agriculture in rural areas and the simultaneous rising importance


of the metropolis. Rural most often historians treat the postwar South as a region caught in the aftermath of historical processes. The essays in R. Douglas Hurt’s *The Rural South since World War II* exemplify the dangers of placing cultural adaptation and historical memory at the forefront of the study of the rural South. The people who inhabit Hurt’s collection read like characters in a post-apocalyptic novel. They live in the shadow of the past. History was something that had happened to them. It might not happen any more, nor had it been something they had a hand in making.

A study of metropolitan rural areas provides a means of escape from this historiographical dead end. These areas accounted for a significant proportion of the nation’s agricultural production. As late as 1989, metropolitan areas comprised 16 percent of the nation’s land area, but had 29 percent of the nation’s farms, 30 percent of farm sales, 20 percent of harvested cropland, and 16 percent of land in farms. Metropolitan farms also produced 40 percent of the nation’s dairy, 50 percent of its specialty livestock, and 75 percent of its nursery and greenhouse crops. At the same time rural people on the fringe often had a large measure of

15 Anne B. W. Effland, “When Rural Does Not Equal Agricultural,” *Agricultural History* 74 (Spring, 2000), 489-501 and John Fraser Hart, especially “‘Rural' and 'Farm' No Longer Mean the Same Thing” in Castle, *Changing American Countryside*, 63-76.
16 Metropolitan expansion is not mentioned in the Hurt collection after page 3. Hurt, ed., *Rural South since World War II*. This is not to say that these essays have no sense of chronology. Rather the essays relegate historical processes to the background. Rural southerners are only agents in their molding of their cultural, religious, and political heritage to meet the needs of the present. Anthropologist Peggy, F. Barlett takes a similar stance in *American Dreams, Rural Realities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Much of this trend should also be seen as a byproduct of the increased emphasis on oral history within rural historiography. As Melissa Walker points out in *Southern Farmers and Their Stories*, interviewees use their stories to construct “communities of memory” that praise the virtues of the past and serve as a means of coping with rural change. A reliance on such oral histories and analyses of memory, for all their benefits, has locked the historical gaze onto the period between the New Deal and the 1950s. What follows is aftermath rather than a subject of historical scholarship in its own right. Melissa Walker, *Southern Farmers and Their Stories: Memory and Meaning in Oral History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 4-7. Linda Scarbrough’s *Road, River, and Ol’ Boy Politics: A Texas County’s Path from Farm to Supersuburb* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2005) is one of the few studies to take seriously the influence of rural residents in shaping suburbanization. While her study is based on a tremendous depth of research, she frames her study as local history and therefore does little to contextualize it more broadly.
social, political, and economic power. Here they interacted with suburbanites and developers in ways that shaped the history of these landscapes. Rural politics and rural culture retained much of their power here, a fact that complicates narratives of rural poverty, marginalization, and cultural homogenization. The rural history in metropolitan fringe areas is less a declension narrative and more a story of the adaptation and celebration of a particular vision of rural life and rural landscapes even as others faded and were forgotten.

The second framework this study employs is that of metropolitan hinterlands. Cities exert power over their surrounding rural areas. This is most clearly seen through the way cities use their economic and political power to reshape the production and landscapes of the surrounding areas. The metropolitan fringe areas in this study were subject to the same urban demands. Most important of these was the demand for water—a demand that led many cities to assume an imperial stance toward upstream regions. In the case of Houston and Washington, D.C., however, this type of imperialism faced significant limits. Conflicts between these cities and their hinterlands over reservoir development shaped the development of both city and country. This hinterland relationship also played out in the cultural realm. In both counties, urban conceptions of the meaning of rural life shaped the cultural image of these rural areas. This was

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especially the case in Montgomery County, where Houston took the lead in articulating a western identity for the entire metropolis.21

This redefinition of the cultural meaning of rural life is the central concern of the third framework. Because of their proximity to the city, these counties were directly subject to the imaginations of city people—especially those within the white middle class. These people projected their values and expectations on rural landscapes—sometimes in line with and other times in direct contradiction to the land’s historical pasts. As Raymond Williams has demonstrated, middle-class conceptions of the meaning and significance of the countryside have their own history that reflects their bourgeois unease with the urban, industrial world they had created. These conceptions of the countryside as a place of leisure, health, permanence, and virtue, as Williams points out, ignored the reality of agrarian social history in which labor, displacement, and disharmony have been the rule.22 This project uses Williams’ critique as a starting point for an exploration of the changing urban conceptions of the meaning and value of rural landscapes and lifestyles. Rather than focusing, as most urban and suburban historians have, on what these middle-class migrants were running from or what their new suburban world lacked in comparison with the city, this study focuses on what they hoped to get from the bargain: the opportunity to live in the countryside, to put down roots, and to escape the noise and clutter of modern, urban life.

In practice, urban conceptions of rural landscapes took three related forms within these two counties. The first was a reiteration of the British pastoral countryside as promoted by Andrew Jackson Downing, Frederick Law Olmstead, and other Anglo-American cultural

21 On cultural hinterlands, see Stradling, Making Mountains, 12-13, Peter J. Schmitt, Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), and Williams, The Country and the City. Williams sees this as the project of an urbanized middle class more generally.
22 Williams, The Country and the City. See also Schmitt, Back to Nature.
trendsetters. This was the pastoral landscape that drew the most attention in Loudoun County. A 1953 magazine article, for instance, described the county as blanketed in “bluegrass fields where... vast acres of rich soil...furnish healthful living and [w]here children run and play.”

The second conception celebrated the rural landscapes of the West. This western vision of rural life celebrated white masculinity, individual strength, and open spaces. Both the British countryside and the iconic west celebrated horses and equestrian leisure. The former, however, prized gentility while the later celebrated independence and daring. The third conception looked to forests as places of solitude and recreation in wild nature. Where the other two idealizations of rural landscapes embraced cultivation as part of the improvement of nature, these newcomers expected unmanaged if not necessarily pristine nature.

The commonalities among each of these conceptions of the meaning and value of rural land are more significant than their differences. Each was supported by a distinct historical and environmentally defined landscape. These visions could never be a complete imposition of the ideal on the land. Yet each depended on, in Raymond Williams’s words, “the suppression of work in the countryside, and of the property relations through which this work is organised

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Each obscured the significance of rural history, even as they naturalized the landscape and embraced a lifestyle in harmony with nature that the city could not provide. Each also obscured the extent to which industrialization and modernization had already transformed rural areas. Finally, these conceptions also largely obscured the presence of African Americans within these southern landscapes, substituting instead whitened landscapes of leisure, health, and beauty. These conceptions undergird efforts within each county to preserve and to develop these rural landscapes for urban consumption. Newcomers refurbished worn-down homesteads and decaying historical buildings and refashioned them into commuter villages, country retreats, and horse farms. As with urban gentrification, this economic investment combined with new lifestyle- and aesthetic-based property values to make it more difficult for locals to maintain their stake in the community.

Through the examination of these three overlapping conceptualizations, this project constructs a history of the southern metropolitan fringe. In doing so it contributes to two historiographies outside of urban, suburban, and rural history. The first relates to the question of southern distinctiveness. The debate over southern distinctiveness is stuck in a geographic

27 Williams, City and Country, 46 (quotation), 125.
28 In her history of the dairy industry, Kendra Smith-Howard emphasizes the dissonance between urban idealizations of dairy production and the modern, technologically sophisticated agribusiness it had become by the postwar period. David Walbert pursues a similar strain of argument in his examination of countryside tourism in Amish Country. Laura Barraclough, a historical geographer, takes this dissonance in a different direction. She examines the cultural, racial, and political implications of rural lifestyles that continued to rely on cultural and policy supports for agriculture even as they abandoned any economic connections to modern agriculture. Smith-Howard, Pure and Modern Milk, David Walbert, Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Barraclough’s Making the San Fernando Valley.
quagmire. Those arguing for the end of distinctiveness ground their studies in the region’s sunbelt metropolises, where middle-class migrants dominate and therefore where color-blind conservatism, meritocratic individualism, and residential segregation reign. Their opponents, in turn, point to the persistence of social conservatism and racial paternalism in the South’s rural areas—areas caught in the shadows of the sunbelt. This study does not directly address the relative cultural and political strength of sunbelt or South. Rather it explores on a micro level changes in southern identity, culture, and landscape within these two counties. Both maintained deep and extensive ties to the South into the 1960s. The southernness of each was, by the turn of the twenty-first century, severely in doubt. Loudoun and Montgomery Counties lost many of the cultural, political, visual, and social markers of southern identity during the postwar period. This process was not exclusively the project of suburbanites and newcomers. Rural people often joined them in transforming their county’s regional identity. Locals and newcomers obscured their county’s ties to the racialized power structures and landscapes of the rural South. In Loudoun’s case this meant highlighting and embellishing their county’s Quaker villages and Cavalier legacy—a legacy that bound the region to the mythical British countryside and to notions of gentility. For many parts of Montgomery County this meant leveraging their Texanness into a full-blown adoption of western identity with its wide-open spaces, rodeos, and celebration of freedom and white masculinity. For the county’s more wooded areas, this meant celebrating life in the forest—a nation-wide embrace of contemplation and recreation in the

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woods. In each case, these new regional identities obscured the interracial past of these counties and instead put forward a whitewashed rural social world.

Secondly this study speaks to the historiography of environmentalism. Adam Rome, Christopher Sellers, Hal Rothman, and Samuel Hays have each found a taproot of environmentalism and environmental activism among socially progressive, middle-class, suburban white families angered over the destruction of nearby forests and creeks and the pollution of their air and water. Suburbanites moved out of cities to be close to nature and thereby to enjoy health and a privileged quality of life. When their suburban dreams did not match the reality around them, these suburbanites mobilized to fight for the earth and their own suburban slice of heaven. These homegrown environmentalists railed against the bulldozer’s destruction of suburban nature. The cornfield, even under industrial monoculture, joins the second growth forest, the terraced hillside, and the mowed field as part of a landscape whose claim to preservation rests on tenuous claims to environmental authenticity. Such accounts, common among preservationists and environmental activists at the time and up to the present day, use rural space as a stand-in for the natural world. In doing so, they obscure the historical processes that have made these rural areas into second nature. Naturalizing farms, fields, woods, and pastures has been an important step in presenting these land uses as endangered species within the metropolitan fringe. Such accounts embellish its power to lay waste to the

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35 On second nature, see Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, especially 265-269. The concept of hybridity has largely replaced Cronon’s concept of second nature. By hybridity, environmental historians mean the way human actions
countryside and eliminate any vestiges of past land uses. The fact is that perceptions of the speed and extent of suburban sprawl were always worse than the reality. Such accounts give far too much power to the bulldozer to destroy rural social worlds. These practices often persisted and coexisted within metropolitan fringe counties for decades after bulldozers cleared the land for the first developments. These social practices often survived the bulldozing of collapsing sharecropper cabins and thick underbrush. At the same time, because this bulldozer critique was the product of suburban newcomers, it ignored the extent to which the bulldozer had already been active for decades transforming rural life. Bulldozers cleared land for stock ponds. Bulldozers erected dams and cleared land for the reservoirs that spread rapidly in the postwar decades. Bulldozers cleared brush and hardwoods to make way for loblolly pine plantations. These transformations were especially pronounced in the South, where postwar agricultural change was rapid and extensive. The novelty of these new landscape forms served, at least in Montgomery County, as a significant barrier to environmental preservation.

Narratives of suburban environmentalism have described the movement as the product of consumer culture and affluence. Recent works have criticized this thread of scholarship for focusing on suburban environmental activists and thereby obscuring the involvement of conservatives, minority populations, the working class, and conservationists. This project takes

\[^{36}\] Rome, *Bulldozer in the Countryside*, illustrations 9-12. Christopher Sellers has identified this trap. His solution to these “city building” and “nature erasing” narratives, as he defines them, is to take seriously the natural world that persisted in these suburbanizing areas and the way developers packaged and sold this natural world as part of their developments. While this approach incorporates natural landscapes, it does so with little sense of the largely-rural social and cultural structures that accompanied these rural areas. *Crabgrass Crucible* describes a landscape that was as much found and created as it was inherited. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*, 41-42.


\[^{38}\] The most succinct summary of these groups is Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 9-56. On the working class and minorities, see Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana,*
a different tack. By focusing on two tightly bounded geographic frames, it is able to explore the broad interplay between historical preservation, conservation, open space activism, and environmentalism. In Loudoun County, these groups, each of which drew its members from the same groups of people, combined to form a metropolitan fringe preservation culture. The central tenet of this preservation culture was a deep commitment to the protection of rural land—the countryside. The ecological value of rural land added another set of justifications for a preexisting commitment tightly bound to aesthetic and status. The shape of anti-sprawl activism within Loudoun was as much dependent on local factors as it was on the unfolding of a national environmental movement.\textsuperscript{39} Emphasizing the high-brow nature of preservation movements within these counties risks fueling a persistent line of conservative, anti-environmental rhetoric that writes off the movement as a cover for elitism and white privilege.\textsuperscript{40} Yet for parts of Loudoun County, especially, this critique holds a great deal of truth. Only by taking this criticism

\textsuperscript{39} Here I am building on the work of Angela C. Halfacre, who uses the concept of conservation culture to characterize the shared commitment to protecting land, wildlife, and cultural heritage from unregulated development that she finds in the South Carolina Lowcountry. In her telling this particular constellation of conservation and preservation ideas sustained a commitment to the environment within a deeply entrenched social and political conservative culture. Halfacre, A Delicate Balance: Constructing a Conservation Culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{40} One of the most successful contemporary strategies to discredit environmentalism was to paint this complex movement as merely a tool used by the nation’s upper-middle class to protect their interests and promote their values. See, for example, Aaron Wildavsky, “Aesthetic Power or the Triumph of the Sensitive Minority Over the Vulgar Mass: A Political Analysis of the New Economics” in Roger Revelle and Hans H. Landsberg, eds., America’s Changing Environment (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970); William Tucker, Progress and Privilege: America in the Age of Environmentalism (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982); and Bernard J. Frieden, The Environmental Protection Hustle (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1979). Some of the most important work on environmentalism in the past two decades has taken up this critique, but with the purpose of uncovering the ways dominant environmentalist discourse has obscured fundamental class and racial differences in the way Americans have sought to protect nature. Ironically, one of the effects of this recent focus has been to reaffirm the aforementioned conservative attempts to discredit the environmental movement. On the dangers of the elitist critique, see Bron Taylor, “‘It’s Not All about Us’: Reflections on the State of American Environmental History,” Journal of American History 100 (June 2013), 140-144.
seriously can preservationists begin to articulate and develop an approach to the very real problems of sprawl in a way that takes seriously the social and economic dislocations and prejudices so often implicit within preservation movements. Farmland preservation in particular, like the organic food movement, united environmental protection with elitism and class exclusivity and a limited and limiting conception of agricultural production and rural people.41

At the same time Loudoun’s preservation culture, for all of its problems, stands in stark contrast to the general lack of environmentalism or preservation within Montgomery County. This Texas county had all of the prerequisites that Christopher Sellers and Adam Rome connect to environmentalism—septic overflows, flooding, sprawling developments, and air pollution—but there remained almost no organized activism. The county’s history, therefore, provides an important counterexample to these studies and raises interesting questions about popular conceptions of the South as a region hostile to environmentalism. At least part of the explanation for the failure of environmental activism in Montgomery County lies in the persistence of the county’s political institutions, social structures, and culture—each of which remained deeply East Texan well into the 1980s, forcing suburban frontier families to contend with an environment and a society that often resisted their expectations. Managing suburban private governments, fighting for passable roads, and negotiating an often corrupt county government

41 Mark Friedberger’s 2000 article on Washington County, Texas, is a case in point. His environmental commitments lead Friedberger to side with rural elites fighting to defend the landscape against developers and rural landowners hoping to sell out and profit from suburban expansion. Friedberger, “The Rural-Urban Fringe in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Agricultural History* 74 (Spring 2000): 502-514. Daniels, *When City and Country Collide*; Benfield, Raimi, and Chen, *Once There Were Greenfields*; and Pradyumna P. Karan, “From Horse Farms to Wal-Mart: The Citizens’ Movement to Protect Farmland in the Central Bluegrass Region of Kentucky” in Pradyumna P. Karan and Unryu Suganuma, *Local Environmental Movements: A Comparative Study of the United States and Japan* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 145-164, make a similar stand for open space preservation. Kathleen A Brosnan and Adam Rome are both more nuanced in their examinations of open space preservation. Both celebrate the movements to preserve farmland and open space, but each also addresses the complex motivations behind these movements as well as some of their costs and limits, especially on smaller-scale landowners and potential homebuyers. Brosnan, "Crabgrass or Grapes: Urban Sprawl, Agricultural Persistence, and the Fight for Napa Valley" in Char Miller, ed., *Cities and Nature in the American West* (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2010), 34-56; and Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*, 119-52.
consumed much of the civic energy of suburban residents. Environmental activism was often a luxury in comparison. Ultimately it would be The Woodlands, a nationally recognized “new town,” that would provide residents with the state structures, the planning, and the environmental harmony that was so lacking in Montgomery County. Yet, by providing the goals of environmentalism for a fee—without the grass-roots fervor and activism upon which the environmental movement was based—The Woodlands did little to bring environmentalism to the county.

Examining the twentieth-century histories of Loudoun County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Texas, within the same study brings into focus both the commonalities among metropolitan fringe counties in the South and the range of trajectories of growth that were available to each distinct community. Each county was part of one of the most rapidly growing metropolises in the postwar period—Houston and Washington, D.C. Both enjoyed a wave of postwar prosperity—Houston’s fueled by the oil industry and Washington’s fueled by federal spending, especially on defense contracts—and both attracted highly educated, white-collar workers from outside the South. The population of the region that made up Houston’s metropolitan area grew from 936 thousand in 1950 to 2.9 million in 1980. Over the same period the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area grew from 1.5 to just over 3 million. Even as both areas grew, both cities faced rampant white flight during the 1960s and 1970s. In Houston, rapid and aggressive annexation policies kept much of the new suburban growth paying city taxes. Although the middle class fled the urban core, many did not choose to flee beyond the city line. Washington’s boundaries, in contrast, were essentially set in stone. As a city caught between two states and entirely dependent upon Congress, annexation was never a live option for Washington.

An urban riot in April 1968 and resistance to integration both took their toll on the capital city’s white population. As one article in *The Washingtonian* put it, “two major factors overshadow all considerations about the District: It is black and the streets are unsafe.” The city experienced a level of white flight unsurpassed across the nation. The city’s population peaked in 1950 at 802,178, at which point 35 percent were African American. By 1975 that figure was up to 70 percent and over 97 percent of the city’s public school population was black.\(^4\)

Metropolitan fringe counties became the proverbial Canaan for this white, middle-class exodus from urban blight, crime, pollution, and integration. Both Loudoun and Montgomery Counties were geographically situated in the path of this development. The distance from the White House to Leesburg, Loudoun’s county seat, was a mere 36 miles. From Houston’s city hall to Conroe, Montgomery’s county seat, was 39 miles. From each of these points to the nearest suburban developments in each county were only 26 miles and 30 miles to Loudoun County and Montgomery County respectively. Even Middleburg, the center of Loudoun foxhunting country, and the Lake Conroe dam site, the beginning of Montgomery County’s resort area, were less than 50 miles from the city centers. The forces for development were especially strong in Montgomery County, where the opening of two major highways from Houston to Montgomery County during the 1960s depressed travel times. The county also benefited from fears that Houston would annex all of neighboring Harris County, subjecting white families there to busing, urban control, and urban taxation. Fairfax County faced no such threat from Washington and therefore served as a buffer between Loudoun and the city. This fact combined with Loudoun’s relatively undeveloped transportation networks to limit its attractiveness for large developments. That was the case until the construction of Dulles Airport

in 1962 and the extension of urban sewer services thereafter. The Houston Intercontinental Airport that opened just south of Montgomery County in 1969 and the opening of Lake Conroe, Houston’s reservoir, in the county in 1972 each had a similar impact on Montgomery County. Each county saw the first influx of development in the 1950s, the first large-scale subdivisions in the 1960s, and runaway growth in the 1970s. The population of Loudoun more than doubled between 1960 and 1980. The population of Montgomery County did the same by 1970 and again by 1980. It was only by this point that each county saw the ultimate decline of rural political power and social influence. Development within both counties was the product of direct urban investment, migration from the city, and federal policies that encouraged growth outside of city centers.44

![Population Graph](image)

**Figure I.1**

44 U.S. Census of Population. Montgomery County’s land area (1042 sq. mi.) was more than double Loudoun’s (515 sq. mi.). For this reason, population density is often a more effective measure of population growth. Area figures from State and County Quick Facts, U.S. Census Bureau, quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/48339.html and quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51/51107.html (accessed March 27, 2014).
In each case this growth, and the leisure-focused exurban growth that preceded it, took place within counties that maintained strong ties to the rural South. Loudoun’s political institutions and social structures remained deeply Virginian in 1962. The county’s courthouse gang was an appendage of the infamous Byrd political machine that had run the state for decades. Harry F. Byrd was the iconic Virginia conservative. He and his political supporters stood for low taxes, weak government, rule by the better sort, and white supremacy. He opposed unions, government spending, communism, and integration, each with equal fervor. Rural Loudoun was every bit as conservative as Byrd was. Political power in Loudoun rested in the

![Population Density (per mi. sq.)](image)

Figure I.2


46 There were a few exceptions to Democratic dominance. Republicans retained small footholds in the Quaker villages and Blue Ridge foothills of the county. These areas had little impact on county-wide elections. The only local threat to Byrd’s power within the party came from Leesburg resident and one-time governor Westmoreland Davis, whose political ambitions made him a perennial opponent of the Byrd machine. From Davis’ death in 1942 until the mid-1960s, however, Byrd’s rule went unchallenged.
hands of farmers, whether they farmed as gentlemen or for their living. Like the Virginia planters of old, many of the county’s leaders were lawyers, doctors, and bankers whose orientation and self-conception were, first and foremost, agrarian. These white men kept taxes low, jealously guarded their sources of agricultural labor, and solved problems through personal politics rather than through bureaucratic or governmental power. As a governing body, the board of supervisors reflected these commitments. Literacy tests and voter apathy kept elections predictable and allowed the supervisors to maintain the status quo. Their collective hands were wrapped tightly around the county’s purse strings. In 1947, for instance, the county ranked fifth in the state in its ability to pay for public education but was ninety-first in its outlays for education. Loudoun’s political leaders were staunch segregationists. Harry Byrd could still draw 800 people to Loudoun County High School into the 1960s to hear him rail against the NAACP and the amalgamation of the races. He won the county 2 to 1 in 1961. Loudoun was very much a part of the Virginian political mainstream into the early 1960s.47

Montgomery County, for its part, continued to be dominated by a “good ol’ boys” system of governance in which landowning rural white Democratic elites used their positions to keep taxes low, services sparse, and political favors flowing to supporters. These political leaders enjoyed a relatively stable relationship with timber and oil companies that operated within the county. These industrial interests were most concerned that the local government kept taxes low and did nothing to disrupt their labor supplies. Local politicians were happy to do so. The only real political strife in the county came from Conroe elites who resented the political influence wielded by rural voters and their county commissioners, many of whom the local newspaper

branded as corrupt political bosses. While Montgomery County politicians tended to be more rough around the edges, more willing to resort to personal violence and personal favors, they shared the same core political beliefs as rural political leaders within Loudoun County. Both were committed to white supremacy, maintaining labor supplies, small government, and anticommunism.

The political, social, and cultural worlds within each county were the product of a particular landscape and history. Loudoun County’s rich soils and proximity to urban markets made it one of the most consistently prosperous agricultural counties in the South throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. Where much of the South depended on tobacco and cotton, Loudoun farmers, both Quakers and cavaliers, grew wheat and corn and raised cattle and horses throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the twentieth century farmers added to this a focus on dairies and orchards and eventually wines and Christmas trees. The vast majority of Loudoun’s deciduous forests had been felled to make way for agriculture long before the twentieth century. Because its climate was similar to those faced by northerners, Loudoun farmers were able to adopt many of the most progressive methods of cultivation and horticulture coming out of northern universities. The economic downside of this agricultural prosperity was that Loudoun attracted none of the rural industries that were the economic lifeblood of so many rural southern counties. The only industry to speak of was related to either farming or infrastructure.

Because of its geology and history of settlement, Loudoun developed strong regional differences within the county. The areas west of Leesburg, most notably within the Loudoun Valley, which ran north to south from the Potomac down through Western Loudoun, were blessed with some of the finest soils along the eastern seaboard. These soils supported a more
densely populated countryside. Many of these areas were also the site of extensive Quaker settlement. These Quaker communities had rejected slavery, welcomed free black settlement, and opposed secession. The county’s southern and eastern sections tended to have clayey, less-productive soils and therefore tended toward larger holdings and a more southern system of farm labor and tenancy. These areas had been fervently secessionist and embraced the cultural symbols of the cavalier and the Virginia gentleman. A postbellum exodus of many Quakers from the area and the firm establishment of segregation and disenfranchisement extended a common social world across the county. Yet even so, these intra-county regional distinctives continued to shape the county’s development into the postwar period. Postwar Loudoun County was prosperous, almost completely dependent on agriculture, thoroughly southern in its politics and social systems, and maintained deep historical roots.48

Montgomery County, Texas, included its own distinct regions. Here, too, soil played a role. The northwest section of the county includes a small section of fertile, so-called black waxy soils that are the farthest extension of the Washington Prairie. These areas, along with the county’s bottomlands, were most likely to be farmed intensively. The bulk of the county’s land is a transitional region between the Big Thicket in the east—with its poorly drained lowlands and its sandy, Loblolly-pine filled uplands—and the Postoak forests beginning in the west. The county, like most of East Texas, is subject to searing heat and rapid flash floods and therefore erosion, leached soils, and agricultural pests.49

Montgomery County’s history has been driven by a series of booms and busts. Antebellum Montgomery County was at the cusp of the cotton frontier. The promise of cheap land and quick profit drew southern migrants to the thick forests and frontier conditions of the region. These southerners brought with them a system of agriculture and animal husbandry based on a scarcity of labor and an over-abundance of forested land. They put the forests into production, sending 8,000 bales of cotton to Galveston each year by 1860. The woods became the home of free-range cattle and piney-woods hogs. This semi-feral breed of hog trampled across the open range, feeding on acorns, roots, and small animals and evading the wolves, bears, cougars, bobcats, and alligators that persisted in the nineteenth-century woods of East Texas. Extractive timber had replaced cotton cultivation as the primary industry beginning in the 1880s as northern capital and new rail lines fueled a fifty-year cutout of the county’s forests. The timber companies brought with them low-paying jobs, sawmills, and company towns. Even as the Great Depression sent the timber industry into decline, the discovery of oil near Conroe in 1931 marked the beginning of an economic resurgence. Almost overnight, Conroe became a bustling boom town. The local population mushroomed from 2,500 to perhaps as high as 15,000 within thirty days of the strike. The oil boom provided jobs for displaced timber workers, taxes


for county coffers, and profits for those lucky enough to be holding title to nearby land. Oil prosperity would underwrite their booster dreams well into the 1960s.52

Even with this oil boom, the timber industry continued to exert a powerful influence. The county had the third highest number of timber workers of any county in the state in 1940. This number went up over the following decade, leaving the county at the top of this list by 1950.53 In the Loblolly-dominated forests of Montgomery County, Texas, logging reinforced and expanded a patchwork quilt pattern of landscape use that included small farmsteads, forest grazing land, dense thickets of scrub hardwoods and pines, and better-established second-growth pine forests.

Pastures and cattle ranching began their own resurgence during the 1950s. By the time suburban expansion reached the county, timber harvesting, cattle, and oil—the three iconic pursuits of Texas—each made up a large portion of the economic health of the region. For residents in these counties, the family homestead was often more significant as a supplement to off-farm income than as the core of family finances. Battles between cattlemen and county boosters flared up from time to time, but a pro-growth, entrepreneurial sprit tended to subsume what anti-development, agrarian conservatism there was in the region. This workforce, both black and white, was highly mobile, often leaving their parents on the family farm while seeking work in Houston, Texas City, and Galveston. Rural industry, rather than agriculture, was the most important segment of Montgomery County’s economy. Timber and pastureland, however, would both play significant roles in attracting suburban development.

Growth brought similar pressures to each county. Increasing demands for services, rising property valuations and taxes, land speculation, and political realignment each made local

53 They were also number one on this list in 1870 and 1880, a sign of the county’s deep and persistent dependence on timber. Allen, East Texas Lumber Workers, 29.
government a hotbed of conflict and controversy. When these local governments turned to state legislatures, they found little help. Richmond was dominated by rural politicians and Austin by a coalition of industrial and business elites from city and countryside. Both were deeply conservative, and neither had any interest in extending local power to cope with these issues except where absolutely necessary. It took a new generation of political leaders to respond to the challenges of metropolitan growth.

This study is arranged into four thematically defined sections, each with a chapter on Loudoun County and a chapter on Montgomery County. These sections proceed roughly chronologically. The first set examines the earliest interactions between these rural counties and their nearby cities. These interactions began the process of reshaping rural landscapes to more closely match urban expectations. The second set follows the attempts to construct large-scale infrastructure projects in these counties, namely reservoirs and an airport. Such projects were the most obvious examples of cities refashioning their hinterlands, yet, as both chapters demonstrate, these particular cities never enjoyed the type of urban imperial power that is so often ascribed to them. The third set deals with the shifting economics and cultural meanings of agriculture within these counties. Changes within the industry combined with exurban migrations and suburbanization to bind both agriculture and rural life more tightly to the city even as many continued to rhetorically cast them as fundamentally in opposition. The final set examines the divergent preservation impulses within the two counties. Within Loudoun, a subset of newcomers joined blue-blooded locals in organizing to preserve and protect the county’s historic structures, open spaces, and farmland. This movement drew on the popular environmentalism of the day, but also developed its own particular brand of activism that addressed wider concerns about the spread of suburban development and its cultural significance. In contrast, Montgomery
County residents did little to organize to preserve or protect local environments or historic structures, of which there were admittedly few. Here locals organized within their communities to put forward local solutions to the failure of developers and local government to protect their new homes and landscapes from trash, floods, and sewage and to provide basic services. For these residents the primary issue was how to carve out a stable suburban space within these rural landscapes and political structures.

Ultimately these chapters argue that the metropolitan fringe has a long history of engagement with the city and its people. At the same time they emphasize the centrality of rural and agricultural history to the history of the expanding metropolis. By treating the fringe as its own object of study, rather than as watered-down suburbia or as a dysfunctional rural world, historians can more fully appreciate what made it unique and what brought residents there. It was here that the battle lines over growth and land use were forged. It was also here that sunbelt conservatism and rural conservatism came face to face. Finally, it was here that the intertwining of rural life and white privilege was most pronounced. If, as geographers, sociologists, and journalists seem to be arguing, de-centered metropolitan expansion and exurbia is the future of much of the rural South, then historians need to uncover the distinct history of these areas.
CHAPTER 1
BEFORE SUBURBIA:

THE GENTRIFICATION OF LOUDOUN COUNTY, VIRGINIA, 1880-1960

Writing in 1908 for *Country Life in America*, the premier magazine for turn-of-the-century suburbanites and gentlemen farmers, Walter A. Dyer sketched a vision of Loudoun County, Virginia that spoke to deep-seated concerns among American elites. The nation’s Northeastern suburbs were in a period of social transition, as middle-class commuters had begun moving their families closer and closer to the countryside enclaves of their social betters. Loudoun County promised a haven from this suburban invasion. Loudoun, Dyer explained “is not a suburban community, but distinctly a country community, and derives its sustenance from the soil.” “Leesburg is only forty miles from Washington, there being three trains a day each way,” he continued, “but not a soul in Loudoun County ever dreamed of becoming a Washington commuter. If a man moves out from Washington, he moves out to stay, and to settle on the land and possesses it.” Loudoun, in other words, was not a place for businessmen who wanted to dabble in country life. It was for gentlemen with the means and the inclination to be serious about their hobby farming. Agriculture in Loudoun was the vocation of an “aristocracy” of farmers “removed as far as possible from the traditional hayseed.” Here in northern Virginia, “gentlemen and ladies of the old school—the ‘quality’ of the Old Dominion—the fit who have survived” held the land. For Racial purity and social exclusivity defined Loudoun’s rural social world. The dominance of landownership by elites ensured that the county, in Dyer’s mind at least, “exemplifie[d] country life in about the purest and pleasantest form that I have yet found in the United States.” The county’s rural beauty was matched only by the successes of its horse and cattle breeding operations, which were some of the most accomplished in the U.S. Dyer advised
his esteemed readers that anyone interested in buying a Loudoun farm should bring large sums of money (over $50,000) and a willingness to invest more. The price was worth it, for, as Dyer boasted, “there are other communities in Virginia and elsewhere that are worthy of eulogy, but I know of none that surpasses Loudoun in the dignity, sincerity, naturalness, completeness and genuine success of its country life.” Not content to let the matter rest at that, Dyer went on to claim that the county’s rural landscapes were as close as one could on this side of the Atlantic to the “world-famous” country life of England.¹

Such glowing descriptions of Loudoun County’s agricultural prosperity have been common throughout Loudoun’s twentieth-century history. In the battles over farmland preservation and open space that came to dominate the county’s political landscape beginning in the 1960s, variations of this image of agrarian prosperity and bucolic country life would serve as an Edenic image of a rural utopia before the coming of sprawl and the destruction of paradise.² Loudoun sparkled like an emerald, a verdant agrarian paradise whose only tragic flaw was to be forty miles from Washington, D.C. and therefore whose fate it was to be swallowed up by the expanding city. As Dyer’s article reveals, both local boosters and outside commentators explicitly contrasted Loudoun’s ostensibly “authentic” country life with suburban areas whose pastoral landscapes were a cheap, middle-class imitation. Loudoun, in this image, was an agrarian county, a land of gentlemen farmers, quaint villages, and prosperous dairy farms. Its country life had little if anything to do with the city or urban America more generally until the opening of Dulles Airport in 1962 and Sterling Park in 1963 sucked the county into the vortex of metropolitan Washington.

This tragic tale of an agrarian world swept away in a wave of shopping malls, housing developments, and highway interchanges within a few short decades resonates with many people’s lived experience of metropolitan expansion. Yet this narrative of sprawl obscures the far more complex and longstanding relationships that have bound counties like Loudoun to nearby cities. In Loudoun’s case, interactions with the city had been steadily transforming the county’s rural society and agrarian landscapes for decades before Dyer penned his apotheosis of Loudoun’s country life in 1908. In fact, Dyer’s work was itself as much the product of these forces as a cause of them. *Country Life in America* published his article in order to promote the county’s authentic country life to urban, industrial men of wealth seeking to buttress their social status by moving to where men of leisure and wealth maintained their country estates. Dyer took pains to emphasize the agricultural productivity of rural life in Loudoun, yet he praised precisely those aspects of Loudoun’s agriculture that were the most attractive to gentlemen farmers for whom a steady return on their investment was secondary to the social and cultural benefits of country life.

This image of country life attracted an eclectic mixture of industrial and political elites, country gentlemen, and urban professionals who settled in the county, reshaped its landscapes and social life, and more closely bound the county to Washington, D.C. and the urban Northeast. These were not the only people to discover Loudoun County. Throughout the twentieth century, vacationers, sportsmen, historical preservationists, and eventually Washingtonian commuters and suburbanites would each appropriate Loudoun’s landscapes as places of leisure, historical authenticity, and country life. Each group embraced its own distinct flavor of the broader romanticized image of Loudoun’s rural landscapes. As the postwar period dawned, each did so, whether explicitly or implicitly, in opposition to the supposedly crass, mass-produced imitation
lifestyle that was D.C.’s ever-encroaching suburbia. What united these newcomers was a deeply class-encoded desire to live in, enjoy, and protect Loudoun’s countryside. These gentrifiers would ultimately square off against suburbanization.  

The type of commuting country life and gentlemen farming that dotted Loudoun’s countryside in the half a century before the 1960s, and its western portion in the decades that followed, has been pigeonholed in suburban historiography as a stage in suburban development—a late-nineteenth-century precursor to postwar suburbs. Kenneth Jackson, Robert Fishman, and Dolores Hayden each look to this movement to the country to define the ideological taproot of later suburban expansion before abandoning the topic for the more controversial and ultimately more nationally significant postwar “sitcom suburbs.” The “new suburban history” has more recently complicated the standard image of lily-white, middle- and upper-class suburban landscapes by exploring the way working-class and minority Americans also participated in suburbanization beginning in the early twentieth century. An unfortunate side effect of this important scholarly trajectory is that, by bringing the insights of urban history to bare on suburbs, the new suburban history draws attention away from the important rural aspects of suburban development in general and suburban country life in particular.  

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3 Rural gentrification best describes the way wealthy foxhunters and historical preservationists interacted with the county and its residents. These newcomers refurbished worn-down homesteads and decaying historical buildings and refashioned them into commuter villages, country retreats, and horse farms. As with urban gentrification, this economic investment combined with new lifestyle- and aesthetic-based property values to make it more difficult for locals to maintain their stake in the community. Mark Friedberger, “Mink and Manure: Rural Gentrification and Cattle Ranching in Southeast Texas,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 102 (January 1999): 269-293; Martin Phillips, “Rural Gentrification and the Process of Class Colonisation,” *Journal of Rural Studies*, 9, no. 2 (1993):123-140.

By examining Loudoun’s engagement with Washington, D.C., and its suburbs over the entire twentieth century, this chapter uncovers the complexity of suburban forms and the persistence of early-twentieth century articulations of suburban life throughout much of the twentieth century. This chapter further explore the ways that urban residents, in their appreciation and appropriation of Loudoun’s agrarian landscapes and historical imagery, underwrote, consumed, restored, purchased, celebrated, farmed, developed, hunted, defended, and subdivided rural Loudoun County. In the process, these newcomers crystallized this nineteenth-century suburban image and lifestyle even as they bound the county more tightly to the city during the half century before mass suburban development and suburbia, the social and cultural world such development supported, first arrived on the county’s doorstep in the 1960s.

This chapter explores four distinct forms of development in Loudoun County, each of which brought urban people to the countryside. It begins with the fifty-year rise and fall of Blue Ridge tourism. From 1880s to the 1920s, summer trains brought Washingtonians to the county’s western reaches to soak in the scenery and enjoy the healthy mountain environment. Next Northern sportsmen claimed southwestern Loudoun beginning in 1905. Over the following decades they would transform the region into Hunt Country, an internationally known center of foxhunting and equestrian sports whose social and economic ties bound it to urban centers of the Northeast and whose cultural ties bound it to England. Historical preservation became the third type of development. Beginning as an informal hobby among a group of Washington commuters in the small town of Waterford during World War II, preservation fueled a county-wide subculture which restored and repurposed decaying farm homes as suburban country homes. Finally, a small number of Loudoun developments, both railroad suburbs in the 1920s and,
beginning in the 1950s, car-dependent suburbs, packaged the county’s healthful agrarian landscapes for the more traditional suburban commuter. These four types of development, combined with the steady movement of retired military brass, politicians, diplomats, and Washingtonian commuters, to bind agrarian Loudoun to the city.

Like a honeysuckle vine slowly shading out the tree it climbs all the while presenting an image of brilliant green, these early developments maintained the look and feel of agrarian Loudoun even as they replaced it with a fundamentally different country life. These developments never inspired the same level of opposition and resistance that the planned communities of the 1960s and 1970s would. In fact, many of those who participated would become agrarian Loudoun’s fiercest defenders. Yet these four types of development did, at times, provoke bitterness and resentment. More commonly, in their efforts to restore and protect they reshaped, refined, displaced. Rural blacks, working farmers, and white laborers all had to renegotiate their place in this changing social landscape.

The earliest Washingtonians who journeyed to Loudoun County did so not as commuters but as summer tourists. Gilded-Age city dwellers endured the noise, the filth, and the clamor that permeated industrial cities. Asthma and neurasthenia, the period’s catch all nervous disorder, were only two of the most common ailments that drove the nation’s urban middle class to seek refuge in nature. Contemporary medicine believed that health was intimately bound up in the environment. Doctors prescribed for their patients to seek a “travel cure” by journeying into the hinterlands of the major industrial cities. Railroad companies, seeing the possibility of filling empty cars, promoted and in some cases developed tourist destinations among the mountains and the shores of the East Coast. Here visitors could soak up the fresh breezes, pure water, and

In Washington, D.C., the enervating environment had less to do with industry than it did with the city’s location. The nation’s capital lies on the banks of the meandering lower reaches of the Potomac River within the Tidewater. Here the city’s residents suffered under the sweltering heat, stifling humidity, and diseases that marked summers in the city. Washingtonians looked to the

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Map of Loudoun County, Virginia, 1883. \textit{Hardesty’s Historical and Geographical Encyclopedia: Special History of the Virginias}}
\end{figure}
mountains and countryside to their west for relief. The first tourists rode the rail line to stay at the simple boarding houses and country homes in eastern Loudoun. It was western Loudoun, nestled at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains and still only fifty miles from the White House, that became the county’s most popular destination for urban health seekers. With the extension of the Washington and Ohio Railroad line (later the Washington and Old Dominion) to Round Hill in May 1875, the travel time from the city to the foot of the Blue Ridge dropped to only two hours. Washington’s professional class took notice. White families from D.C. rented summer

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homes or took out rooms in newly opened boarding houses while the husband commuted to the city for the week’s business. By the 1890s, the area’s small towns, both in the rural countryside and in the Blue Ridge foothills, enjoyed a thriving summer tourist trade that culturally and economically bound them to the city.  

The town of Bluemont was the most popular of these small rural hamlets turned tourist towns. Visitors to the village, originally called by the unfortunate name of Snickersville, came to breathe the healthful mountain air, ramble over the mountain ridges, and gaze down at the Shenandoah Valley and distant Washington. Unfortunately for tourists, the price of beautiful vistas was a four-mile carriage ride up poorly maintained country roads that jostled and rattled.

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tourists before depositing them in the sleepy mountain town. Enough made the trip for the town to have three small hotels in operation by 1885. The tourist trade continued to grow at a steady pace until 1893, when Jules De Monet, a prominent chef and businessman from D.C., opened the Blue Ridge Inn and put Snickersville on the city’s social map. De Monet was widely known in Washington social circles for catering White House events, and unsurprisingly, his new hotel did excellent business. More importantly, it added a level of sophistication the small resort town had lacked. Railroad managers smelled profits to be made. In 1900 they extended the line to the town and took the liberty of replacing its ill-fitting moniker with Bluemont, a name that called up images of natural beauty and exclusivity. Ticket sales climbed as Washingtonians filled train cars for the short journey into the mountains. During the height of summer, six trains pulled into the Bluemont station from Washington and Alexandria each day, with up to twelve coaches full of summer residents, vacationers, and day tourists. Sunday trains brought 25 to 30 people just for afternoon dinner. Urban professionals sipped tea, took carriage rides, played croquet, and socialized with other members of their class. The more daring hiked to Bear’s Den or hunted quail and turkeys in the surrounding fields and woods. The number of boarding houses ballooned, offering accommodations to those who could provide proper references. Some vacationers purchased land and had private mountain cottages and second homes built along the hillside overlooking the town. For those who preferred to build a more modest home in town, Charles B. Turner, a local physician, offered lots near town for sale for $100 each. There Washingtonians could turn a summer vacation into a year-round lifestyle by commuting to city jobs and living in the health and beauty of the countryside. The summer demand for maids, cooks, and carriage drivers supported a small black community “up the hollow,” whose residents provided the labor for this service industry.⁸

Hot springs and mineral springs offered enterprising county landowners another way to attract city visitors. Springs in upstate New York and the Blue Ridge Mountains had been favorite summer refuges for tidewater planters and urban elites from both North and South since the early antebellum period. In the decades after the Civil War, expanding railroad networks and fattened northern pocketbooks brought even larger numbers of northern society types to health resorts, the most popular of these were in West Virginia. The popularity of these resorts created a market for mineral springs closer to urban centers and therefore more accessible to the city’s middle class. When Theodore Milton and his wife, Lydia, first noticed a mineral spring on their Loudoun County farm along the rail line a few miles northwest of Leesburg, visions of resort profits danced in their head. Here they could offer spring water without the long journey into the mountains. After securing financial backing from business connections in Leesburg and Washington, Milton launched the Paeonian Spring brand of mineral water in 1891 and began promoting the site. Ads boasted that the water healed everything from kidney complaints and dyspepsia to diarrhea and irregularity. Like any skilled patent medicine salesman, Milton secured the good word of an “eminent chemist” from New York City in support of his product’s miraculous powers. Milton sold Paeonian Springs water regionally with some success. The bottling business offered free advertising for the planned Paeonian Springs resort where residents could daily enjoy this “fountain of health, flowing out of the deep rock ribs of the Catoctin...
Mountain.” Milton and his partners submitted a plat to the county for the town of Paeonian Springs on July 13, 1891. The plans called for 219 suburban lots surrounding a five-acre lake and connected to Washington by a rail platform in town, a hotel, and a boardinghouse. By 1898 Milton had sold 100 lots in what was Loudoun County’s first railroad suburb. As with so many suburban ventures, constructing the development proved far more difficult than selling the lots. In the seven years after it opened, only ten lots had homes and the lake was nowhere to be found. Caught in a financial bind, the company’s owners eagerly accepted an offer by a Denver railroad promoter to buy the development, the spring, and the property for $5,200. They sold just in time, as the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906 forced the bottling plant to close. Even though spring’s miraculous powers had been discredited, the town continued to grow, reaching 112 residents by 1908. The company sold the last lot in 1916, and Paeonian Springs settled into the life of a small Piedmont town, albeit with a more developed connection to the city than most.  

The summer resort towns and the suburban developments that grew up alongside of them were small affairs. Their clientele came almost entirely from Washington D.C. and their reputation reached only a little farther. The beauty of Bluemont’s scenic vistas and the healthfulness of Paeonian Springs’ water paled in comparison with what could be found further into the Blue Ridge. Even still, these mountain villages brought a measure of prosperity to what would have otherwise been isolated crossroads towns. As the automobile redefined the American vacation beginning in the 1920s, sublime mountains and lofty vistas lured tourists further west. The Great Depression forced most of western Loudoun’s struggling boarding houses and hotels

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10 Advertisement, Folder Paeonian Springs, Vertical Files, TBL (first quotation); Robert and Ruth Boley. Interview by Janney Wilson, August 26, 1998, Folder 2, Box 1, Loudoun County Oral History Project (hereinafter LCOHP), TBL, 3; Scheel, Loudoun Discovered, vol. 4, 7-16, 8 (second quotation); Lewis, “Loudoun Settlements,” 11. Another local aspiring mineral springs venture folded when residents caught the proprietor clandestinely dumping minerals into the spring. Lewis, “Goose Creek Historical Preservation Area District: A Brief History,” TBL, 6.
to close down. As with any such venture, the tourist trade placed these towns in a subservient role as they catered to urban desires. The limited scale and short lifespan of this tourist industry, however, protected Loudoun from the crass commercialism and image promotion that characterized later rural tourism across the South. This left Loudoun’s summer tourist towns to quietly transition into exurban homes and villages for Washingtonian commuters. Quaintness, historical charm, and seclusion, not the bustle and commercialism of the tourist trade, would sell these villages as the county entered the post–World War II period. During their heyday, these mountain resorts had sold the healthiness and natural beauty of the county’s landscapes as an escape from urban life. As the popularity of the resorts faded in the 1930s, government bureaucrats, military brass, and diplomats, frustrated by the city’s housing crisis, would look to the area as a country alternative to urban life.11

As Loudoun’s Blue Ridge tourism reached its high point at the turn of the century, a far more exclusive and geographically extensive landscape of leisure took root in the county’s southwestern corner. Wealthy northerners bought up old plantations and farmsteads and attached themselves to the local sporting scene. These migrants grafted northern foxhunting traditions and breeds, most of which they had imported directly from England, onto local southern foxhunting roots. By the 1930s the area had gained national renown as Hunt Country. Hunt Country, buoyed through northern money and embracing the mystique of “Old Virginia,” became a staple of sporting magazines and society pages across the Northeast. For Loudoun, Hunt Country became the most important factor in crystallizing the county’s image as an exclusive garden playground for the wealthy—a foxhunting print come to life.12

12 The boundaries of Hunt Country are difficult to pin down. Presently, a conservative definition would include all of Loudoun County south of Route 7 and west of Route 15, roughly the southwestern third of the county. Up to the
Hunt Country was a model of rural gentrification. Outsiders chasing pastoral beauty, agrarian authenticity, and social status inflated the cost of living, marginalized local power structures, displaced local residents while employing others, and irrevocably altered the cultural world they had hoped to join. Hunt Country’s suburban qualities are less obvious but still significant. The area was intimately connected to urban America. For all their posturing as landed gentry, these foxhunters were urban, industrial elites who regularly commuted between their Loudoun horse farms and their corporate offices in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Hunt Country was not exclusively a suburb of Washington D.C. because it was a suburb of the entire urban Northeast. As Washington’s power and population expanded throughout the twentieth century, Hunt Country more clearly entered the capital city’s orbit, but it remained, first and foremost, an enclave for wealthy sportsmen seeking repose from their normal lives as residents of the urban power centers of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. Hunt County also shared with more traditional suburbs a set of deeply held cultural longings to live in the British countryside and to pursue class-segregated leisure. In this, the expansion of Hunt Country represented a chronologically and ideologically parallel development to suburbanization; it was a different branch from the same cultural trunk. That trunk was the Anglo-American love of green grass, homes nested in country settings, rural privacy, and a leisured country lifestyle. Loudoun’s pastureland, stone walls, and farm cottages perfectly matched Anglo-American conceptions of

1950s, Hunt Country’s reach was much more extensive. The Loudoun Hunt’s excursions frequently took it to the banks of the Potomac and as far east as the Fairfax County line. Hunt Country also includes most of Fauquier County, extending southward from Upperville through Warrenton, as well as parts of Rappahannock County. For the sake of simplicity, this study treats Hunt Country both as a cultural, social, and economic unit and as a part of Loudoun County. While this approach overemphasizes Loudoun’s importance in the region’s development, it is necessary to fully appreciate the role Hunt Country has played in the county’s history.
the picturesque and the pastoral. Here, on this most British of American landscapes, Virginians pursued the most exclusive and iconic of that nation’s field sports: foxhunting.¹³

For all they shared, however, foxhunting and suburbanization spoke to distinct cultural needs within the turn-of-the-century Anglo-American elite social world. Suburbanization soothed evangelical fears about the corrupting power of cities, solved the problem of unhealthy urban environments, and provided the segregation that middle-class families desired.¹⁴ Foxhunting’s popularity, in contrast, grew out the need of America’s nouveau riche to demonstrate their status and quality to their culturally superior British cousins. Within Anglo-American culture, foxhunting was a time-honored means to perform respectability. In foxhunting, the way a rider carried himself throughout the chase demonstrated his courage and honor as well as his gentility and social graces. Foxhunting both developed and revealed these qualities. The social decorum of the field, the formal attire of the hunt, and the lavish hunt breakfasts that followed made foxhunting as a social event as it was a sport. The hunt was an effective social gatekeeper, for it did more than prove the depth of one’s pockets, it proved a sportsman’s character and breeding.¹⁵

Beginning in the 1890s, wealthy sportsmen organized foxhunts in the rural countryside surrounding the centers of financial and cultural power: New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. Unfortunately for committed sportsmen, the hunting season in most of these areas was short. The trampling of horses had to wait until crops were harvested

¹³ As Raymond Williams pointed out, the popularity of field sports was built upon the “profits of industrial and imperial development.” Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 282.


in the fall. Snow brought the hunt to a standstill. Climate, then, sent serious hunters looking below the Mason-Dixon Line for winter hunting grounds. The Red Hills of Georgia, the South Carolina and Georgia coasts, and parts of Florida had played host to northern sportsmen since the 1870s. In each of these places, northern elites had refurbished old plantations and passed days of leisure hunting quail and turkeys in the southern woods.¹⁶

Virginia’s Hunt Country began later and with far more drama than these other elite sporting enclaves. From November 1 to 15, 1905, Loudoun and neighboring Fauquier Counties hosted what became known as the Great Hound Match. During the winter of 1904 and 1905, Harry Worcester Smith and A. Henry Higginson, two Massachusetts sporting gentlemen, had bandied over the relative merits of English and American (largely southern-bred) foxhounds within the pages of Rider and Driver. Higginson challenged Smith to choose a time and place to settle the matter. Each man put up $1000 and selected a judge. The two judges selected a third. The first pack of hounds to kill a fox would be the winner. Smith selected the Virginia Piedmont to host. Journalists from the Boston Herald, the New York Herald, and London Daily News arrived in Middleburg, in southwestern Loudoun County, to see the issue settled for good. The sporting world looked to Loudoun for the answer to one of the most heated questions in Anglo-American field sports.¹⁷


Western Loudoun was not the most obvious choice for such an important match. The region had a deep-rooted equestrian and foxhunting tradition, but few northern sportsmen had hunted in the area. Smith was one of those who had. After riding in a steeplechase near Upperville in 1898, Smith spent a day following a small pack of Virginia foxhounds. He was instantly smitten with the countryside and waxed eloquently about the Piedmont’s sporting possibilities in The Rider and Driver once he returned to Massachusetts. Like so many industrialists of his day, Smith was a man of enormous ego and grand plans. These traits had served him well as an entrepreneur and inventor in the New England weaving industry. He now set his sights on the countryside surrounding Middleburg and Upperville. As Smith later recalled, “I at once saw the opportunity of establishing hounds and hunting in what I felt was the best hunting country in the United States, and, if the sport which I anticipated could be shown, that it would not be long before lovers of the chase would come from the North and, choosing their domiciles, learn to love the Old Dominion with its courtesies, kindnesses and carefree ways.” The Great Hound Match gave Smith the opening he had been waiting for. He had already made a habit of hunting in western Loudoun when Higginson laid down the gauntlet in 1905. Local foxhunters had made Smith the Master of Foxhounds (MFH) of the Piedmont Hounds. With

(see Higginson, “Is there an American Hound?” The Rider and Driver, February 11, 1905, p. 10 in Match Scrapbook. For the match rules, see “The Foxhound Match to be a Go After All,” The Rider and Driver, [undated], Match Scrapbook. Gochnauer, advertisement, Sprit of the Times, June 9, 1900 and untitled clipping, June 23, 1900, Sprit of the Times, Folder 4, Box 1, Upperville Colt and Horse Show Papers, 1857-2003, NSLM; For a description of Virginia foxhunting before the Great Hound Match, see Ella Loraine Dorsey, “How We Came to Hunt the Fox,” Outing, October 1892, 13-16 and Margaret Nelson Barry and Mary Randolph Hicks, “Southern Women who Ride to Hunt,” Outing, February 1902, 513-18.)

18 Local horse breeders had put on the Upperville Colt and Horse Show just across the Fauquier County line almost every year since 1853. By the turn of the century, it was the oldest horse show in the nation and was beginning to develop a national reputation. P. S. Gochnauer, advertisement, Sprit of the Times, June 9, 1900 and untitled clipping, June 23, 1900, Sprit of the Times, Folder 4, Box 1, Upperville Colt and Horse Show Papers, 1857-2003, NSLM; For a description of Virginia foxhunting before the Great Hound Match, see Ella Loraine Dorsey, “How We Came to Hunt the Fox,” Outing, October 1892, 13-16 and Margaret Nelson Barry and Mary Randolph Hicks, “Southern Women who Ride to Hunt,” Outing, February 1902, 513-18.


20 Henry Worcester Smith, quoted in Mackay-Smith, American Foxhound , 94.

21 The Master of Foxhounds was responsible for managing the pack, enforcing decorum among riders, compensating landowners for damage done to their properties, and ensuring the quality of the hunting. As MFH, Smith gained
this local sanction, he spent months training his hounds to hunt the Virginia countryside. The day before the match, gawking crowds greeted Higginson and his entourage of hounds, horses, and servants as they pulled up to the rail station at The Plains, five miles South of Middleburg. For the next two weeks anywhere from three dozen to over a hundred riders galloped off at dawn, following the hounds as they bounded across stone walls and pastures in pursuit of the red fox. Neither pack made a kill, leaving the decision up to the judges. They unanimously declared Smith’s American hounds the winners.

The event was a watershed in the history of Loudoun County. It attracted urban elites from across the nation and treated them to the Piedmont’s finest hunting and hospitality. Those riding with the hounds included members of twenty-six registered hunts, a cross section of sportsmen and sportswomen the like of which had never before been assembled this side of the Atlantic. The national papers embellished the excitement and danger involved. In the first ten days of hunting, they reported forty-two falls, including one gentlewoman who had a front tooth knocked out. Smith rode with a broken foot he received in a fall during one of the first days. Higginson arrived at the match with broken ribs from an earlier fall. Virginian foxhunting was indeed a gentleman’s sport, but it also appealed to a class of people fearful that modern life had made them over-civilized. The danger of Virginia foxhunting was as attractive as its social exclusivity.
When Smith later bragged, “[t]he Match, and its publicity, made Virginia,” he exaggerated only slightly. Papers in New York, Boston, and London each carried daily reports, spreading the Piedmont’s fame as a fast-riding country around the Anglophone world. A. Henry Higginson proposed a toast on one of the last days of the hunt: “[t]o the Piedmont Valley—the finest hunting country I’ve ever beheld!” With that declaration and its subsequent reprinting in the papers, Higginson validated Smith’s booster rhetoric in front of a national audience. The region’s sporting possibility had now become a sporting reputation.

Harry Worcester Smith may have brought the Great Hound Match to southwestern Loudoun and lent the region his forceful personality, showmanship, and tireless boosting, but Hunt Country took root in Loudoun because the county’s Piedmont landscape fit the newcomers’ cultural expectations and sporting needs. Foxhunting placed a particular set of demands on an agricultural region. The ideal hunting countryside had open pastures divided by stone walls and wooden fences for jumping and wooded hollows for the foxes. The climate had to be cool in the fall, but with little snow or ice. Foxhunting also required sympathetic and engaged landowners willing to open their property to the hunt. Finally, northerners required easy rail access to the major urban centers of the Northeast. Western Loudoun met all of these requirements. Foxhunting was a local tradition, and therefore landowners were accustomed to the hunt, even if they sometimes chafed at the damage it did. Stock and dairy farms dominated the area, making pastures the most prominent land use. The historical prosperity of the region and the legacy of fertile soils and slave labor made large holdings with old stone walls and picturesque homes

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common. They also made it easy for outsiders to purchase large swaths of Piedmont hunting territory.

Hunt Country’s cultural image was at least as significant as its practical value. From the moment they stepped off the train, it seems, northern journalists waxed eloquent about the countryside’s pastoral charms as well as its sporting promise. In one of the more florid descriptions of the region to come out of the Great Hound Match, a journalist explained:

It is a beautiful hunting country. Twelve miles to the west, the Blue Ridge heaves up its rounded breast, mottled with woodland and cultivated fields. . . . Between the Blue Ridge and Bull Run mountains stretches away, twenty-five miles broad, a rolling country, free from stone and checkered with green fields of winter wheat, now in its tenderest hues, corn fields stacked with heavy harvest, and grass land taking on the sober garb of late autumn. Here and there the bronze of oak woods lends a splash of color, but there is little woodland and the fox, once routed from cover must run for his life.28

The region’s popularity drew on the South’s national cachet as a place of romanticized leisure for northern elites weary of the rapid pace of their home region. In Loudoun, northern sportsmen found a rolling countryside that industrialization, urbanization, and immigration had left untouched. Here, they believed, was an opportunity to enjoy the lifestyle that their social and economic status entitled them to. The Piedmont landscape met this need.29

Even as they celebrated western Loudoun as a southern landscape, northern sportsmen and journalists also rhetorically tied it to the British countryside. Loudoun was more than simply pastoral; it was an American reincarnation of the Fertile Crescent of the Anglo-American pastoral: the British shires. This was no minor point. Anglophilia was rampant among the northeastern middle and upper classes during the progressive era. Socialites reveled in tales of lords and ladies. Extended visits to England were a rite of passage in northeastern social life.

Northern sportsmen knew the British countryside and celebrated its lush beauty, its rich heritage,

29 Silber, Romance of Reunion, especially 69, and McIntyre, Souvenirs of the Old South.
and the quality of its sport. It was not simply a rhetorical flourish, then, when journalists and sportsmen labeled the region the “Leicestershire of America.”

Some quibbled about the finer differences between the Piedmont and the English Shires, but they did so as connoisseurs debating the relative merits of two fine vintages. No one doubted the worthiness of the country or its commonalities with rural England. American sportsmen were anxious to prove the quality of their horses and hounds, as the Great Hound Match demonstrated. They hoped to do the same with this hunting landscape that lay within a few hours’ train ride of their New York and Boston offices.

The people of rural Loudoun were also part of the region’s popularity. In a period when industrial cities were supposedly awash with unruly and racially suspect immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, northern elites spent their leisure time in places where their racial and class prejudices and privileges would be scrupulously observed and unquestioned. England was the ideal destination for this reason. When crossing the Atlantic proved difficult, northerners found the next best thing in the Virginia Piedmont. Here they could wrap themselves in the warm, comforting cloak of southern gentility and social hierarchy. In Virginia social hierarchy meant racial hierarchy. Northern foxhunters relished the opportunity to step back into the romantic plantations of old where deferential blacks served white sportsmen as they galloped across the countryside. They soaked up images of decaying tenant cabins and African American laborers looking up at the baying of the hounds and gazing out from the rolling pastures to catch

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a glimpse of the hounds and hunters as they raced past.\textsuperscript{31} The visibility of subservient blacks reaffirmed northern foxhunters’ white mastery and racial hierarchies.\textsuperscript{32} It also, as Harry Worcester Smith put it, reminded northerners of “the olden times.”\textsuperscript{33}

Yet black labor made the Piedmont hunts possible. Black field hands maintained the Piedmont’s landscapes over which the hounds raced. A black servant held the reins of his employer’s prized hunter. Black whippers-in managed the pack during the hunt. Black stable hands cared for the horses and hounds after the day’s hunt was through. African Americans might ride accompany their betters as faithful servants, but they could never ride alongside them.\textsuperscript{34} Black servants marked the landscape and the experience as southern and therefore added to the experience’s cultural authenticity and romanticism for northerners.\textsuperscript{35} Smith was so smitten with the racial aspect of southern foxhunting that he took seven black servants with him when he served as the first American MFH in Great Britain in 1912. In doing so he demonstrated that authentic American foxhunting was racialized.\textsuperscript{36}

As with the Blue Ridge tourist spots, Hunt Country servants came from the African American villages that still doted the countryside. St. Louis, the county’s largest African American community, became dependent on jobs from these northern migrants. St. Louis also became an African American center of equestrian sports that belied white foxhunter’s racial

\textsuperscript{31} See, for instance, “English Hounds Kill,” \textit{Boston Transcript}, and Allen Potts to Higginson, November 6, 1905 in Match Scrapbook.

\textsuperscript{32} The use of black hunting servants provided economic opportunities for blacks who would otherwise have remained agricultural laborers, but it did so by putting their subservience on prominent display. On the role of black labor in southern hunting, see Giltner, \textit{Hunting and Fishing in the New South}, 78-108, especially 82-83.

\textsuperscript{33} HWS, “Old Foxhunting Friends,” Unmarked Folder, Box 1, MC 0041, NSLM, 21-22; Smith, “Christmas Run,” 27.

\textsuperscript{34} A series of Currier & Ives lithographs published in the popular press in the late nineteenth century imagined for readers what a farce would occur if southern blacks ever tried to foxhunt. Van Urk, \textit{Story of American Foxhunting}, vol. 1, 156 [opposite], and Giltner, \textit{Hunting and Fishing in the New South}, 69.


\textsuperscript{36} Slater, \textit{Hunt Country}, 20.
The love of horses was as deep and all-consuming in St. Louis as it was in Middleburg. The local black community hosted the St. Louis Colored Colt Show beginning in 1898 as an alternative to the white-controlled Upperville Colt and Horse Show. The St. Louis show allowed these Virginians to demonstrate their skills as riders and breeders. Unlike the Upperville show, which rode northern foxhunting money to national prominence, the St. Louis show did not survive the Great Depression.\(^{37}\)

The pall of romanticism that hovered over “the plantation darky” also stretched to his foil, the Virginia cavalier. When northern foxhunters journeyed to Loudoun County, they came to chase the fox alongside America’s closest approximation in to the British aristocracy. In turn of the century national culture, the Virginian cavalier’s cultural image stood for a “purity of emotion and decisiveness of deed” that embodied all modern, industrial men had lost. This image had its roots in the sectional debates of the antebellum period but gained even more traction as defeat humbled the South and social and economic change refashioned the postbellum North.\(^{38}\)

Even before it had become Mosby’s Confederacy, a region of daring cavalry raids and Union reprisals, Loudoun had been widely known for its plantation gentlemen, its equestrian breeding operations, and its passion for foxhunting. Northern journalists assigned these passions to the innate character of the Virginia gentleman.\(^{39}\) The national popularity of the Cavalier figure

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\(^{39}\) Foxhunting became a staple in romantic portrayals of Piedmont plantations. Thomas Nelson Page, *In Ole Virginia, or Marse Chan and Other Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 50-53, and John Williamson Palmer, “Old Maryland Homes and Ways,” *The Century*, 49, no 2 (December 1894): 244-261; This connection became even more romanticized once hunt country became established as a national elite enclave. *Fortune Magazine*, November 1930, reprint Warrenton Antiquarian Society, *Jericho Turnpike: The Storied Route of*
reached its height in 1902 with the publication of Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*. This novel had become one of the most popular books in America by the time northern foxhunters made their way to the Great Hound Match in November 1905. The novel’s title character personified the period’s masculine ideals. He was chivalrous and self-possessed, a man of honor and of action who believed reaffirmed social hierarchy. The Virginian embodied all that made the southern aristocracy so appealing to a generation of urban white men fearful modern life had pacified them. In *The Virginian* a nation that had not yet begun its love affair with the cowboy celebrated a gentrified version of this myth through the foxhunting cavalier.40

Northern hunters found their iconic Virginia cavalier in Loudoun’s Colonel Richard Hunter Dulany. In his eighties by that point, the Colonel fit the image perfectly. He was descended from a long line of Tidewater planters. Cultured and well traveled, Dulany had spent time both in the North and in Europe. In his agricultural pursuits, he was the model planter gentlemen. Having gained substantial wealth from the labors of his slaves, Dulany had devoted his energies and fortune to improving the quality of cattle and horses in the region. When Virginia seceded, he served the Confederate cause gallantly. Shrewd planning had protected the Colonel’s finances from the ravages of war, and in the decades following Appomattox, he continued to maintain his pack of fine foxhounds on his plantation. During his leisure hours, the Colonel would join his fellow veterans in riding to the hounds across the Piedmont, reliving the region’s antebellum glory days.41 When northern foxhunters arrived at Welbourne, Dulany’s

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40 Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York: MacMillan, 1902), and Silber, *Romance of Reunion*, 188-195; For more on northeastern elites looking to the South for a American model of landed aristocracy see McIntyre, *Souvenirs of the Old South*, 152-166.

41 Barbara K. Lindauer, “Did You Know That. . . A Morgan Helped Establish America’s First Horse Show?” [undated], Box 1, Upperville Colt & Horse Show Memorabilia, NSLM, 10-11, 14-15, Audrey Windsor Bergner, *Old Plantations and Historic Homes around Middleburg, Virginia, and the Families who Lived and Loved within their Walls*, vol. 2 (Charlottesville, Va.: Howell Press, 2003), 132-155, Margaret Ann Vogtsberger, *The Dulanys of...
plantation home, they found the Colonel to be every bit the Virginia gentleman. He hosted lavish hunt breakfasts and impressed the northern guests with his gracious hospitality and daring riding. He cut wire fences on his property to improve their sport and made himself personally responsible for any damage done to his neighbors’ properties during the hunts.\footnote{Whitney, “Blank Day for American Dogs,” Boston Herald, Match Scrapbook.} Colonel Dulany, representing the best of the idealized Old South, welcomed the northern sportsmen to Virginia.\footnote{For a list of prominent Virginian landowners that welcomed the northern foxhunters, see Slater, Hunt Country, 25.}

At the same time, northerners hunted alongside the children of Virginia’s cavaliers, who met their northern cousins as social and cultural equals. New South elites like R. Hunter Dulany, Col. Dulany’s son, and Westmoreland Davis joined northerners in celebrating the legacy of the Old South. These men were two of Loudoun’s most active and free-spending foxhunters. They also belonged to a restored Virginia gentry whose members were nearly as comfortable in the northeastern centers of urban power as they were in the Loudoun countryside. These men had retained or regained their fortunes in the same world of high-finance and industrial capital as their northern counterparts.\footnote{Davis was a Virginia native who had made his fortune on Wall Street. Jack Temple Kirby, Westmoreland Davis: Virginia Planter-Politician, 1859-1942 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1968).} During the Great Hound Match close to half of the field was made up of members of this Virginian elite, who entertained members of the national elite in the spirit of Old Virginia even as they supported their family plantations through their success in the modern industrial world.\footnote{Half the field on the first day was Virginian. This proportion declined as northern hunters continued to arrive as the match proceeded. “English Hound Fail First Day,” Boston Herald, Match Scrapbook.}

As the Great Hound Match receded into memory, these foxhunters set about the work of fulfilling the journalist’s spectacular predictions of the region’s future. In the process, they created Hunt Country. In the years after the Great Hound Match Middleburg and Leesburg both hosted hunt breakfasts, teas, fancy dinners, and dances. The goings-on in the two Loudoun towns

graced the society pages in Washington, Boston, and New York. Wealthy northerners filled boarding houses and leased or purchased farms, bringing both prosperity and prominence to the county.

With the Great Hound Match fresh in everyone’s mind, the Loudoun Hunt convinced A. Henry Higginson to manage the hunt beginning in the fall of 1906. Higginson arrived in town with two freight cars loaded with twenty horses, eighty hounds, and an ego to match. He spent two years attempting to teach the Virginians how to hunt like Englishmen before giving up and returning home. When Higginson left in 1908, the Loudoun Hunt secured Harry Worcester Smith, who had stormed out of Middleburg the year before after a dispute over hunting territory. With customary energy, Smith poured himself into developing Leesburg’s accommodations. He filled the Leesburg hotel with the finest furniture from New York and promised northern sportsmen hunts six days a week, including a Saturday hunt near the railroad station to ensure that gentlemen could catch the 5:32 train back to D.C. Under Higginson and Smith, the Loudoun Hunt gained popularity among the northeastern and Washington social sets. Ultimately, though, it was Middleburg, not Leesburg, that would become the center of hunt country. When Smith left in 1909, the Loudoun Hunt was never able to find a suitable replacement. Westmoreland Davis’s time was increasingly taken up by his political ambitions. By World War I, the hunt had gone dormant and Davis had been elected governor. Local foxhunters resurrected the hunt in the 1920s, but it never achieved the same level of national attention that the Middleburg hunts did. Like the neighboring Fairfax Hunt, the Loudoun Hunt became an extension of Washingtonian society as well as a de-facto country club for local elites.46

Middleburg, in contrast, achieved a greater fame. In the two years after the Great Hound Match, Harry Worcester Smith worked quickly to capitalize on the area’s newfound publicity. He announced in *The Sportsmen’s Review* that “the desire of the Piedmont Hunt is to make Middleburg the fox-hunting center of America.” The quiet southern town was, Smith boasted, quickly becoming a “Mecca for all those who delight to follow the red fox over hill and dale,” a resort where gentlemen sportsmen would enjoy the finest of southern hospitality, fellowship with their social equals, and the thrill of the hunt. With Smith as their agent, Virginia landowners opened their hunt country to the nation’s sporting class. The response was overwhelming. In the decades following the Great Hound Match, wealthy northerners bought up large tracts of land, turning the region into one of the wealthiest rural areas in the country.47

Organized foxhunting was a gentleman’s sport, requiring a gentleman’s purse. During the early years, the hunts leaned heavily on the support of wealthy northern hound breeders and MFH’s like Daniel Sands and Joseph B. Thomas. The lavish spending of these vulpine philanthropists kept the hunts going. Thomas, who earned his money as an architect and financier in Boston, personally footed the bill for kenneling and breeding the Piedmont Hounds at Huntland, his Piedmont estate, throughout the decade before the U.S. entered World War I. He did so at a cost that eventually approached $20,000 per year, exclusive of the payments for labor, land, animals, and improvements northern foxhunters had made in the region. Thomas estimated in 1916 that these northern expenses amounted to a $1.4 million investment in the Loudoun and Fauquier economy.48 Even for the more modest foxhunter, riding with the Piedmont Hounds cost


48 Figures are based on Thomas’ personal estimates. Thomas to Henry T. Oxnard, April 5, 1916, Folder 1, Box 1, Piedmont Fox Hounds Archives, 1915-1930 (hereinafter PFHA), NSLM. For Thomas’ justification of these
$3500 per season by 1921, still far outside the reach of any but the wealthiest.\textsuperscript{49} Spending by foxhunters provided employment for local craftsmen and laborers, buoying the local economy. Daniel Sands, for instance, purchased and operated four stock farms and a dairy farm that employed thirty-five hands. He also paid seven house servants, a maid, a valet, a parlor maid, pantry boy, two cooks, and a chauffeur.\textsuperscript{50} Foxhunters funneled the profits of northern banking and industry into the landscapes and livestock of the Virginia Piedmont.

This rapid influx of northern money and northern society into Hunt Country was not without friction. Lingering sectional bitterness compounded the standard conflicts that came with rural gentrification. Within a year after the Great Hound Match, three hunts, each with distinct sectional characters, claimed territory in the countryside around Middleburg. The Orange County hunt was the most suspect. Northerners transplanted the hunt from Orange County, New York, in March 1905. Its ranks were populated exclusively by northerners who maintained the hunt as a private club into the inter-war years. Only then did strained relations with the local landowners and new leadership pushed them to more fully integrate themselves into the community.\textsuperscript{51} The Middleburg Hunt splintered off of the Orange County Hunt in 1906. Its membership was mostly northern, a fact that exacerbated conflicts over hunting territory with the neighboring Piedmont Hunt, which remained strongly southern.\textsuperscript{52} The Piedmont Hunt’s leadership responded to perceived Middleburg Hunt incursions into their territory by decrying the “foreign element... from the north” and restricted their leadership to only “native” Virginia land-owners. This did

\textsuperscript{49} Piedmont Hunt Meeting Minutes, September 20, 1921, Folder 3, Box 1, PFHA.
\textsuperscript{50} Scheel, \textit{Middleburg}, 129. For more on Sands’ background, see Slater, \textit{Hunt Country}, 71-782.
\textsuperscript{51} Fletcher Harper, “Orange County Hunt Club,” Folder Orange County, Young Collection; R. Moses Thompson, \textit{Entries from an Orange County Hunt Journal}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., (Maizemoor Publishing, 2005), Folder Orange County, Young Collection, 1; For an extended discussion of the sectional makeup of each of the Virginia hunts, see \textit{Jericho Turnpike}, 4-13.
\textsuperscript{52} Harper, “Orange County.”
not stop the Piedmont Hunt from playing host to dozens of northern elites every year, but it
demonstrated their commitment to doing so on their own terms and under their control.  

Sectional tensions also colored the relationship between the hunts and landowners. In the first two decades of this second northern invasion, county farmers grumbled against the privileges claimed by their new neighbors. The class-exclusivity of organized foxhunting in Virginia was a sensitive issue. More than any other field sport, foxhunting was difficult to confine to certain parcels of land privately owned by the participants. Quail hunters could reasonably contain their sport to land they controlled. Foxhunters depended on the good graces of local landowners as they followed the wily fox for miles across fences and pastures owned by former Confederates. It was a situation ripe for social conflict. Virginia landowners first asserted themselves under the banner of the Piedmont Protective Club when, during the Great Hound Match, they had A. Henry Higginson arrested for trespassing. Working farmers in Virginia had often chafed at the riding of local foxhunters. That Yankee sportsmen would also claim the privilege of riding rough-shod over local farmland six days a week was simply too much for some to take, no matter how much compensation was offered. This simmering resentment posed a serious threat to the future of Hunt Country. As a member of the Dulany family explained in 1921, local landowners “are merely tolerating fox hunting out of consideration for

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53 The two hunts had combined during the lean years of U.S. involvement in World War I. Internal conflict led to the Piedmont dissolving the relationship soon after. The Middleburg Hunt refused to relinquish its claim to some of the Piedmont Hunt’s territory, much of which had been purchased owned by northerners. The Masters of Foxhounds Association had to intervene. Richardson, July 28, 1922, and Richardson to Thomas Atkinson Jr., November 28, 1922 (first and second quotation), Folder 5, Box 1, PFHA. For examples of northerners riding with the Piedmont Hunt, see Folder 7, Box 1, PFHA, passim. The Piedmont Hunt dropped the sectional provision in 1945. “Piedmont-Middleburg Controversy,” Folder 30, Box 1, Mackay-Smith Papers.


55 On the social significance of foxhunter’s use of the land, see Howe, “Fox Hunting as Ritual,” 289; On the frequency of the hunts, see Advertisement, Rider and Driver, 1912, reprinted in Mackay-Smith, American Foxhound, facing p. 152. On the continuing strength of sectional bitterness, see Caroline E. Janney, Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013)
their friends and neighbors, but. . .would welcome any pretext for prohibiting it.” Northern money and traditions of southern paternalism both smoothed over some of the class conflicts in Hunt Country, but they could never completely eliminate them.57

The hunts these newcomers established transformed not only the economics but also the social and cultural world of southwestern Loudoun. They also exerted control over the shape and use of the landscape. For northern sportsmen, the value of Loudoun’s rural landscapes came as much from their aesthetic and recreational uses as from their agricultural productivity. Where suburban development in eastern Loudoun would later leverage northeastern capital to develop the county’s farmsteads into suburban homes on quarter acre lots, Hunt Country residents used their access to the same sources of capital to develop these landscapes into country homes and gentlemen farms, all with the larger goal of ensuring the finest foxhunting sport would be had by those with the wealth, connections, and skill to take part.

By the 1930s it was clear that northern foxhunters were there to stay. Conflicts with local landowners faded as the northerners demonstrated their commitment to the region’s agricultural prosperity and as a burst of land purchases filled the pockets of formerly recalcitrant farmers now humbled by the depression.58 The more money flowed into Hunt Country, the greater its national profile became. Journalists scrambled over each other to meet the demand for stories of lavish spending and high living. In one of the more crass examples, an article described Middleburg as a “Valhalla of the young married Valkyries, who drink, dance, and overbid from dinner table to next morning’s meet” and a place where “fledgling millionaires are completely

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56 H. Rozier Dulany to Thomas Atkinson Jr., September 28, 1921, Folder 3, Box 1, PFHA.
57 On the class exclusivity of the hunts, see “Piedmont Hunt’s Invitation,”177-178. See also Julian Street, American Adventures: A Second Trip Abroad at Home (New York: The Century Co., 1917), 169-185.
58 Paul Mellon, the most prominent of these new landowners, ultimately purchased 4,500 acres in the area and poured a great deal of money into the further development of what was becoming an equestrian industry in the county. Paul Mellon, with John Baskett, Reflections in a Silver Spoon: A Memoir (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992), 258-261.
exonerated from all affections about work.” Similar accounts fueled the region’s popularity, even for those with little interest in foxhunting. Hunt Country became Jay Gatsby’s home in the southern Piedmont.59

Beneath the glitz and glamour, wealthy breeders and foxhunters from both North and South fashioned the area into an international equestrian center. The Upperville Colt and Horse Show, begun by Colonel Dulany in 1853, became one of the most important equestrian events in the nation. Foxhunters organized steeplechases beginning in 1911. The American Foxhound Club began in Middleburg in 1912. Charlotte Noland, a daughter of local planters, opened a British-style boarding school in 1914. She named it Foxcroft and dedicated it to turning daughters of privilege into southern gentlewomen who could ride with the hounds. Middleburg had a polo club by 1920. By the 1930s, the county had attracted racehorse breeding operations owned by wealthy businessmen from Washington, D.C., New York, and Chicago. Land values and hunt expenses continued to rise as the area’s popularity boomed. Promoters advised northern sportsmen to expect to spend anywhere between $5,000 and $50,000 per year on their hunt country properties, in addition to the cost of their horses, hunt subscriptions, and personal expenses. As Leesburg conservationist B. Powell Harrison would later describe it, the horse “became an economic and cultural engine, spawning nationally and internationally recognized racing stables, thoroughbred breeding farms, art colonies and museums, prep schools and colleges, and even banks of consequence in the villages.”60

59 Jericho Turnpike, 7.
Western Loudoun became economically bound to this equestrian industry. One contemporary calculation found that 143 landowning foxhunters in Loudoun and Fauquier counties owned more than 103,000 acres assessed at $2.8 million. These landowners employed thousands with a yearly payroll that surpassed $630,000. Even during the depth of the depression and before the widespread adoption of the tractor, more than half of the horses in Loudoun, Fauquier, and Rappahannock counties were for sport or pleasure. By this point, many northern property owners had integrated themselves into the community, serving in local politics, promoting economic growth, and subsidizing infrastructural improvements.  

Hunt Country landowners invested large amounts of money and labor in producing and maintaining the country image of their properties. A description of the region from 1938 is instructive on this point. The author praised the county’s “well-tended, manicured appearance” that “takes on the appearance of a well-landscaped park.” Here “almost every home is reached up a long, shady lane,” and the landscape most clearly resembled “Old England.” Middleburg’s wealthy farm owners expected their properties to provide country leisure and beauty as well as prize-winning horses and fodder. On paper, the agricultural productivity of the vast majority of these farms never returned more than a fraction of the investments owners poured into them. The British country life was the region’s most important product, and it was priceless. 

By the 1940s, newcomers and elite Virginians had erected a world-class hub of the equestrian industry. In the process they had fashioned an elite enclave of rolling pastureland, equestrian worship, and high-brow society overtop of the quaint, slowly modernizing Piedmont

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62 Christine Sadler, “Loudoun County Today is Much Like it was in Revolutionary Times,” Washington Post (hereinafter Post), September 25, 1938, B4, B6.
town. Hunt Country elites created a social world whose escapades titillated the nation through gossip columns. They purchased, revitalized, and gentrified the county’s agrarian landscapes. They crafted a rural world that seamlessly mixed the southern cavalier and the British shires into a landscape of open space and gentlemen farms only forty minutes from Washington D.C. and right in the path of Hunt Country’s supposedly boorish ideological cousin, suburbia.

The 1890s brought summer migrants from Washington to Loudoun’s Blue Ridge slopes. The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed northern foxhunters lay the foundation of Hunt Country. With the 1930s came the first stirrings of a third form of urban-driven development in Loudoun: historical preservation and restoration. In the wake of FDR’s election, educated, middle-class professionals descended upon Washington to staff the halls of newly formed New Deal agencies. Housing shortages sent many across the Potomac to the new suburbs in Arlington, Alexandria, and Falls Church. Others looked farther out. Over the following decades, these government workers would form the nucleus of a loosely structured movement of artists, authors, politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats, lobbyists, and retired military officers who settled in historical homes within commuting distance of the city. The initial summer tourists had come to the county for health, cool weather, and leisure. Foxhunters had come for sport, society, and the English countryside. These newcomers came for the adventure and romance of restoring historical homes in Loudoun’s decaying villages, rural hamlets, and rolling countryside. Quaintness, historicity, and beauty were the major selling points for these newcomers. Many also came in search of a sense of rootedness and belonging that inner suburbs could not offer. They came in search of the picturesque English village.63

The 1930s was a period of renewed interest in historical preservation and restoration across the nation. The dramatic success of Colonial Williamsburg was the most prominent factor in inspiring historical preservation across Virginia. Small Piedmont towns embraced the restoration of old buildings and neighborhoods as a way to attract tourist dollars. Middle- and upper-class Washingtonians scoured the Loudoun countryside looking for homes and villages to restore. Once they found their diamond in the rough, these newcomers spent their after-work and weekend hours pouring over the historical pedigrees of their new purchases and meticulously restoring their new homes.

The Quaker village of Waterford, nestled in the countryside northwest of Leesburg, was one of the first and certainly the most prominent of these villages. Its story is representative of the tensions and conflicts that accompanied restoration. Waterford was the quintessential rustic village. It had an old mill, a tavern, a small jail, a weaving house, cottages and small shops. Waterford’s Union sympathies and legacy of anti-slavery made it one of the few southern villages with a history that socially progressive northern migrants could embrace without reservation. The town’s preservation was the project, the hobby really, of a handful of amateur preservationists and social progressives—a “stumbling, bumbling group,” as one of the founders, Polly Rogers, remembered. These commuting preservationists formed the Waterford Foundation as the focal point of their efforts. The foundation’s board promoted a hodge-podge of

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65 This chapter draws a distinction between the terms town and village. It uses town to as a general term for an unincorporated settlement. Village, in contrast, is an ideologically loaded term that retains strong romantic and pastoral overtones within Anglo-American culture as well as connotations of timelessness, rootlessness, and agrarian simplicity. The Waterford Foundation discovered the town of Waterford and transformed it into a village. On the cultural image of the village, see Williams, The Country and the City, 68-86, 165-181.

66 Rogers continued: “we knew not where we were headed. . . . [and] Poor, dear Frieda Myers, who was a Board Member for years, went to her grave still saying, ‘If I only knew what the Foundation was and what it is trying to
preservation activities that created tension between rehabilitating the village’s built environment and restoring the fortunes of local residents. The two goals were not mutually exclusive, but, in practice, they chafed and groaned like two poorly matched mules plowing side by side. The Waterford Foundation struggled to mitigate the tendency toward social exclusivity that lay at the heart of its historical preservation, yet the village’s gentrification remained one of the

foundation’s legacies. The town’s new-found identity as a historical suburban village could not long coexist with its past as a stagnant rural small town.\(^\text{67}\)

Waterford was first settled in 1733 by a Quaker from Pennsylvania named Amos Janney. By 1741 a bustling town had grown up around a new Quaker meeting house and water-powered mill. The town thrived over the next century, becoming a manufacturing and agricultural marketing center as the nation entered its “Era of Good Feelings.” Fertile soils, progressive farming practices, and high wheat prices brought prosperity to area farms and therefore to Waterford. The town’s fortunes held until the outbreak of the Civil War. Partisan conflicts burned hot, and the Loudoun Rangers, many of whom were Waterford Quakers, clashed with John Singleton Mosby’s Confederate cavalymen. In the war’s aftermath, many of the town’s Quakers opted to move rather than rebuild. Even more destructive to Waterford’s economy was the decision by the Washington and Ohio Railroad to bypass the town in the years after the war. Cut out of the transportation network and therefore regional markets, Waterford’s economy stagnated over the following sixty years, and the town gracefully slid into decrepitude. The Waterford of the 1930s was a mess. The only residents left were those who hadn’t found a way out. The old houses were crumbling, and the old mill had closed. Only a few years before, the town council had disincorporated in exchange for the county performing the most basic of infrastructure repairs.\(^\text{68}\) The National Park Service used New Deal money to photograph its buildings as part of its Historical American Buildings Survey. The images they captured are

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striking. Waterford was in its dotage, a town whose built environment reflected a population that had abandoned any hope for the town. But of course this poverty and stagnation had protected the town’s old structures from being torn down and replaced and thereby made them ripe for restoration.69

The first glimmer of things to come came in 1937 when Edward and Leroy Chamberlin hired local laborers and artisans to repair a property they owned in the town. The brothers had family ties to the town, roots in the North, and access to New York money.70 They had initially hoped only to inject some much needed income into the town’s economy during the Great Depression. They did much more than that. Their work became a model for a group of Washingtonians and locals who took up the task of saving and restoring Waterford. In September 1943 four couples met with Edward Chamberlin’s wife and son to form the Waterford Foundation. The town’s sorry state had captured their attention and wartime gasoline rationing had limited their social outlets. Their stated goal was to “re-create the town of Waterford as it existed in previous times with its varying crafts and activities, and to restore as many buildings as possible in the town of Waterford in like manner in which they were originally constructed.”71

For these residents, Waterford was the “deserted village” out of popular memory: a place of safety, belonging, peace, and social and environmental harmony. At the same time it was a town in danger of collapse.72

The group selected Allen B. McDaniel, a prominent Washington architect, as their president. McDaniel had purchased and restored the Quaker Meeting House and was brimming

70 The Chamberlin’s father had been a Union soldier stationed at Point of Rocks, just across the Potomac, during the Civil War. While serving with the Southern Claims Commission, he fell in love with the town and settled there soon after. Bronwen Souders, Interview by Author, March 27, 2013, Waterford, Va.
72 Rogers, “Early Days,” 3.
with ideas for additional projects. Other members were equally inspired. Polly Rogers, who had moved with her husband to an old farmhouse between Waterford and Leesburg, exemplified the spirit of these early exurban preservationists. Looking back on that time in 1975, she remembered, “[i]n my rides through the country I happened upon Waterford and lost my heart. I grew up in the western part of Kansas and probably had never seen anything in the way of buildings more than fifty years old.” In contrast, Waterford was ancient. Her fascination with the town grew into an obsession. “Waterford haunted me,” she recalled, “it was like finding an abandoned child. You wanted to take it home, love it and try to save it from complete disintegration.” Rogers and her co-conspirators got to work doing just that.\footnote{Rogers, “Early Days,” 2 (first quotation), 3 (second quotation).}

Both individually and corporately, the members of the Waterford Foundation poured themselves into restoring the town’s decaying homes. One of the first properties the foundation purchased was the defunct mill, a building whose decay symbolized the town’s slide into obsolescence. The restored mill, in turn, would mark the beginning of the town’s renaissance. The foundation proceeded to purchase and restore a series of town properties. Some it resold to outsiders wanting a restoration project of their own. Some, like the mill, it kept to house the foundation’s expanding operations. When the foundation often could not afford to buy a property outright, it used its funds to coax others to do the restorations. Locals shook their heads in bewilderment as such outsiders returned each evening from their city jobs to pour their time and money into their Waterford ruins.\footnote{For a sampling of these restorations, see Grace Brooks, “Quaint Waterford Prepares for Handicraft Exhibit,” Post, September 28, 1946, p. 3.} A chasm came to separate the Waterford these newcomers saw and the Waterford most of its residents knew. Locals saw decay and inconvenience. They would have traded the Waterford Foundation for any chance at securing a local industrial employer or the convenience of a chain store. To newcomers, such things were not merely
unsightly or base; they were anathema. For Waterford’s historical preservationists, restoring old houses and revitalizing the town in the image of its nineteenth-century prosperity was a near-religious commitment. Through their Waterford homes, these rootless children of the modern, urban, industrial world grafted themselves onto the town’s deep historical roots and rich heritage. A preserved and restored Waterford promised them a sense of place, of permanence, and of belonging. As the United States entered the age of conformity and suburban tract housing came to define middle-class life, these potential suburbanites grounded themselves in a village. Waterford looked and felt organic, in the broadest sense of the word. Its “lackadasical charm” came from its “haphazardness,” as one visitor explained. The closer Waterford resembled a living village, the more attractive it was to prospective homebuyers. The romance of restoration and historical memory drove the revitalization of Waterford.75

From its inception, the Waterford Foundation also demonstrated a concern for the social character of the town that rivaled the enthusiasm of even the most active suburban homeowners’ associations. One of the reasons the board invested its money in restoration was to ensure that these decaying properties did not become, in the words of one board member, “slum” rentals.76 Many lower-class Waterfordians were African American, adding a racial element to the standard class conflicts that came with gentrification. The issue of dispossession reared its head with the very first property the foundation bought. Towney Ferrell, a black carpenter, lived in this decaying home with his family. The foundation spent a year trying to get him to fix up the property, to no avail. It ultimately kicked him and his family out, opting instead to sell the property to Major Macon Williams for a substantial profit. One of the many retired military

76 Crook, “Informal Review”
officers who came to the area, Williams fixed up the home. House by house, outsiders purchased, refurbished, and improved the town of Waterford.  

What made the Waterford Foundation distinct from other preservation efforts in the county was the extent to which it attempted to preserve not only the village buildings and landscape, but the village people and their “folk” skills as well. The foundation did so as part of the wider craft revival movement. This loosely structured, national movement, the project of progressive, urban, middle-class whites, included under its umbrella everything from the primitivism of simple-life communes and back-to-the-land farms to highly organized businesses that employed rural whites in craft production as a means of uplift. The movement especially focused on uplifting the impoverished “folk” of Appalachia whose backwardness had supposedly preserved their authentic Anglo-Saxon culture. Many of the original members of the Waterford Foundation adopted a similar set of goals for the local Loudoun population. A group from Waterford traveled to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, in 1948 to learn from the Southern Highlanders Craft Guild (SHCG), one of the most successful of these programs. The SHCG gave foundation members a model for both teaching crafts to locals and for mediating between producers and the shifting tastes of urban consumers. The Waterford Fair had been the brainchild of foundation president Allen McDaniel. During World War II, McDaniel had spent time in Sorrento, Italy. While there, he had been fascinated by the role craft fairs and folk festivals played in preserving

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77 On the issue of race, the Waterford Foundation was, for the most part, a socially progressive outpost within a thoroughly conservative county. From its outset, the Foundation worked to involve and include African Americans in the yearly fair, both as demonstrators and as visitors. Yet the larger impact of their restoration efforts was to drive black Waterfordians from the village. John and Bronwen Souders, Share With Us: Waterford, Virginia’s African-American Heritage (Waterford, Va: Waterford Foundation, 2002).


folk traditions and uplifting the industrious poor.\textsuperscript{81} Waterford had been a regional center of craft production in the 1830s. McDaniel and other foundation members believed that a fair could revitalize the town’s weaving, blacksmithing, boot making, and other early nineteenth-century trades by luring post-industrial consumers with money to spend on artisanal goods. In McDaniel’s view, the foundation’s responsibility was to uplift the town’s residents in addition to repairing its buildings. He even recommended that the foundation consider prospective members “solely on demonstrated interests in and capacity for arts and crafts work.”\textsuperscript{82} An economy based on craft sales to Washingtonians, he dreamed, could pay for a fire department, recreational facilities, and healthcare, and thereby rebuild Waterford as a living town.\textsuperscript{83}

From its inception, the foundation held an annual fair to showcase the products of the town’s craftsmen to discriminating buyers in the D.C. metro area and beyond. The first fair took place in the homes of foundation members. Close to a hundred local producers exhibited their quilts, rugs, hot pads, pots, pans, jars, and artwork. Six hundred people showed up to peruse and purchase these goods. Two years later 1,300 people came. Within a few more years the fair was drawing tens of thousands of visitors to visit the quaint village, tour the old houses, soak in the town’s history, and purchase the arts and crafts. Cars from across the Washington metro area lined up along the town’s dirt roads, giving Waterford a yearly rush hour that rivaled what many of the town’s residents faced on their weekday commutes.\textsuperscript{84} A \textit{Good Housekeeping} article celebrated the fair for drawing American consumers “to behold the handiwork of a resourceful and rejuvenated people, to buy their wares like hungry locusts, and to place orders that keep the

\textsuperscript{81} Rogers, “Early Days,” 5.
\textsuperscript{82} McDaniel to Members of Waterford Foundation, April 19, 1951 and Paul V. Rodgers, Memo, 1951, WFR; On Waterford’s nineteenth-century industrial history, see Strong, “In Virginia,” 283.
\textsuperscript{83} McDaniel to the Board of Directors, March 19, 1945, WFR.
handicrafters busy until another gala open house is held.” The article went on to profile some of the craftsmen and craftswomen. One 85-year-old woman who made string gloves for the fair exclaimed, “I declare it’s a tonic being useful. . . I feel buzzy as a young bumblebee.” A widowed polio victim had learned to braid rugs to pay her daughter’s way through college. George Cox, an African American broom maker and basket weaver had earned enough money at the fair to remodel his home and make a better life for himself. By 1951 a board member proudly outlined the fair’s successes to his colleagues, “[t]he Foundation has paid thousands of dollars to people in the county for goods sold at the annual exhibits. . . [representing] a substantial contribution to the economy of those families.” The “therapeutic value of hand craft work for others interested,” he continued, “cannot be underestimated.” The fair, in short, had provided the “useful, constructive and profitable employment” that McDaniel had hoped to bring to rural Loudoun. The foundation was uplifting the villagers of Waterford.

Waterford’s craft revival had its share of ironies. In spite of the town’s history as a center for artisanal production, the local people still had to be taught appropriately traditional craft production. Developing a national reputation for weaving, basket making, furniture building, rug making, and lamp shades meant establishing classes and workshops to keep local craftsmen abreast of the latest trends and techniques in artisanal production. The foundation members, some of whom had little craft experience themselves, began holding year-round classes in the foundation’s properties, sometimes learning themselves as they went. One of the founders learned rug making from the local extension office and began teaching courses. Another couple transformed their garage into a cabinetmaking shop and spent their evenings after their commute.

85 Best and Hillyer, “Town of the Month.”
86 Chamberlin to Anthony, 5-6, Rogers, “Early Days,” 6, Rodgers Memo, (first, second, and third quotations), and McDaniel, Memo, November 22, 1948 (fourth quotation) all in WFR.
87 McDaniel to Board, March 19, 1945; Kelly, “Quaint Village Preserved,” 24; Chamberlin to Anthony, 8.
home teaching locals how to make bookshelves, cupboards, knife boxes, chairs, and tables.  
These classes taught the “pleasant and profitable” occupations McDaniel and the other 
foundation members believed would uplift the local population while keeping the town secure 
from modernity.  

The fair brought tens of thousands of visitors and national attention to this small 
Piedmont town. In the process, it established Waterford as a metropolitan tourist destination. The 
Waterford of the popular media was a quaint village, a place where “[t]he vigorous commerce of 
yesteryear is gone, but the inhabitants still cling to the gracious, leisurely mode of living of a 
century ago.”  
The foundation saved Waterford from decay by transforming its streets into a 
marketplace where outsiders came to purchase historical crafts. Locals, both black and white, 
came to town to sell their wares to outsiders.  

As with Amish Country, rural landscapes also 
became a product for consumption by urban tourists. The event turned locals into “folk” and 
Waterford into a craft Mecca.  

The prosperity the fair brought these locals was genuine. It was not, however, 
sustainable. Over the fair’s first three decades, gentrification transformed the event from local 
uplift to a celebration of the village’s historical preservation. The fair was the most effective, 
albeit unintentional, advertising campaign in the county’s history. Artists, historians, retired 
government workers, and commuters spent increasingly lavish amounts of money to buy into the 
village. These newcomers restored the remaining old houses, in the process making Waterford 
one of the most exclusive enclaves in metropolitan D.C. The town may have looked and felt like 

88 Best and Hillyer, “Town of the Month,” 374.  
89 McDaniel to Verona Chamberlin, July 12, 1947, WFR.  
91 McDaniel to the Members of the Waterford Foundation, September 15, 1947, WFR.  
92 David Walbert, Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America (New 
Colonial Williamsburg during the weekend of the fair, but, unlike the famous historical site, most of Waterford’s homes remained privately owned. For this reason the village never completely made the transition into a tourist town. The foundation never opened a gift shop. The town had no real commercial district. It did not even have any restaurants. The foundation opened the town to tourists for one weekend a year. The rest of the year it was a fashionable suburban village whose property values rivaled those of urban gentrified neighborhoods like Georgetown and Old Town Alexandria. Gentrification priced local artisans out of the town, driving them to neighboring communities or out of the county all together. At the same time, the craft demonstrations became more polished and professionalized. Home demonstration groups from Washington and its suburbs got involved with the fair. The well-established market brought national craftsmen to Waterford, displacing those locals who could not keep pace. The logistical demands of running the fair and the quality of the goods made the foundation’s craft classes less appealing, and they gradually faded from its list of activities. By the early 1960s, the fair’s original goal of uplifting local residents had been buried in the event’s success. The new Waterford was a place where memories were preserved as much as made and where craftsmanship was as much about leisure as work.

For all this, the Waterford Foundation’s achievements were substantial. As one newspaper article put it in 1950, “[t]en years ago Waterford was at death’s door—an unkempt, derelict ragamuffin of a spot on the map.” Now the town had “a gallant old-time splendor” and was “pulsing with a civic fervor remarkable for a community so small.” The foundation’s

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93 Waterford was commonly referred to as “Little Williamsburg.” Strong, “In Virginia,” 280.
95 Best and Hillyer, “Town of the Month,” 4.
preservation of the village of Waterford became a regional model. It reshaped this sleepy town into a historical tourist attraction and a prosperous bedroom community. The Waterford Foundation wore the often-conflicting mantles of a historical preservation organization dedicated to interpreting the town’s history to the public and of a homeowners’ association of a highly exclusive and fragile village committed to preventing “sloppy and unsightly” growth. As Waterford faced off against encroaching suburban developments, the foundation would become a standard bearer in the fight to preserve open space and resist sprawl.

Into the 1970s historical restoration in Loudoun was the province of this type of enthusiastic amateur, for whom the financial benefits of restoration, though often substantial, were secondary to the personal rewards. Yet every home that newcomers restored raised property values and attracted more harried urban migrants to the area. The result was higher prices, greater class exclusivity, and stronger ties to the city. In the historical villages and rural hamlets of Loudoun County, historical preservation, gentrification, and suburbanization were all different facets of the same process; a process that furthered the county’s status as an enclave for wealthy and privileged commuters.

Waterford became a model for other Loudoun County towns and villages. Leesburg took steps to preserve its historical downtown beginning in 1949. Other towns did so in the 1960s and 1970s. As early as the 1950s, the county had a well-established reputation for its prosperous country life, quaint historical villages, and pastoral scenery. This reputation lured a steady stream of privileged, white migrants seeking everything from a historical tenant cottage to a thousand-

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96 Crook, “An Informal Review.”
97 In contrast, one historian described urban historical preservation as a process whereby developers and boosters “brought back the past as an atmospheric, boutiqueish habitat for a relatively young and prosperous upper middle class. . .” Michael Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 537-570 (quotation on 534).
acre horse farm. Unlike later suburban migrants, these newcomers preferred dirt roads and had little interest in improving education and expanding county services. This allowed the rural-dominated board of supervisors to do what it did best: keep government small and taxes low.

Some of these newcomers lived in the county full time, commuting either daily or weekly to the city; others came only for the summer. Some retired to the area to remain close to social life in Washington; others tried their hand at gentlemen farming. Some families who lacked the time, money, or inclination to relocate to Loudoun sent their children to board with Loudoun rural families during the summer. The county became a favored retreat among military brass and the Washington diplomatic set. George C. Marshall outlined his plan to rebuild Europe from his home in Leesburg. Patrick J. Hurley, Herbert Hoover’s secretary of war, owned the Belmont Estate just east of town. Loudoun’s prestige reached its zenith when John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy rented the Glen Ora estate near Middleburg while the couple occupied the White House from 1961 to 1963.

Loudoun County entered the post–World War II era of rapid metropolitan growth and suburban sprawl with a well-earned reputation for prestigious country life. Loudoun was a land where the historical memory of cavalier plantations and anti-slavery Quaker villages combined within a broader celebration of open space, equestrian leisure, gentlemen farms, country leisure, and historical restoration. Here polo fields blended seamlessly into pastures and stone cottages. This gentrified rural life combined with a prosperous agricultural economy to bring substantial

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wealth to the county. In 1937, at the tail end of the depression, Loudoun was the third wealthiest county in the state. Much of this wealth came from its national reputation within equestrian circles. Much of this prosperity, however, was the result of the county’s proximity to the city. Blue Ridge tourists from Washington fueled the rise of the towns of Western Loudoun. The dairy industry relied on urban consumers. Foxhunting daily lured elite Washingtonians to the county, reinforcing the already strong ties that bound elite Loudoun landowners to the halls of national power. Beginning with FDR, the federal government began a period of expansion that has yet to slacken. Job growth in Washington brought federal bureaucrats, lobbyists, diplomats, and military officers to Loudoun, where they invested their government paychecks into the county’s historical homes, farmsteads, and mountainside cabins. The county enjoyed a reputation among Washingtonians as a place where historical buildings gave “a romantic past to almost every area” and where “good living, fine horses, and happy hunting” were the daily fare.

With this explosion of growth in Washington and its inner suburbs came a surge in the development of rural suburbs. Loudoun’s reputation and its proximity to D.C. brought to the county not only the wealthy, but also the merely well off. This process of stratified diffusion, as historian Kenneth Jackson has termed it, has been nearly constant in suburban history. Whether because they too sought to rub shoulders with their betters or because they simply desired a better life for their children, middle-class Washingtonians came to Loudoun County. Here they found developers willing to sell them inexpensive subdivision lots in this finest of

100 This was in terms of its personal property valuation. Sadler, “Loudoun County Today” B4, B6.
101 In 1937, Loudoun farmers shipped 13,000 gallons of milk to Washington every day. Sadler, “Loudoun County Today,” B4; On Washingtonians participating in Loudoun hunts, see Clipping, Washington Times, Sept 12, 1934, Young Collection.
103 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 11.
rural counties. Where popular memory within the county paints suburbanization as an alien invasion that began with the opening of Dulles Airport in 1962, the reality is more complex.

Loudoun County experienced the picturesque enclaves and streetcar buildouts that characterized pre–World War II growth in the decades before Dulles. Reliable railroad service, a Washingtonian middle class eager to escape the city, and local landowners willing to subdivide their properties led to the creation of the first rural subdivisions in the county not in the 1960s, but in the 1890s. As these developments opened periodically in the decades to follow, their residents found acceptance within the larger Loudoun community of newcomers. In many ways these early subdivisions represented the shape of things to come in the county. Yet, at the same time, their small scale, the limited demands their residents placed on county services, and their embrace of country life separated these early suburbs from those that came in the 1960s.

The county’s first subdivisions were part of the tourist development of the Blue Ridge foothills. The first railroad suburbs opened in the 1920s. Their advertisements followed a well-worn path. Advertisements for Valley View Estates, a subdivision on the outskirts of Leesburg, promised residents health, natural beauty, and the opportunity to grow their own food. Lot sizes ranged from one to four acres, with “plenty of room for large gardens and spacious lawns and playgrounds for the children.” From their suburban lots, residents would be able to soak up the “healthful and invigorating atmosphere” and gaze out at the “mountains rising in the distance beyond rolling fields, tree-clad hills and lively woodlands.” Valley View Estates targeted city people. Ads emphasized how far the houses sat back from the road, with its “germ-laden dust” and “nerve-wracking noise of automobile traffic.” Seven trains a day from D.C. would ensure that harried businessmen could make it to the office. Advertisers combined this 1920s-era suburban appeal with a more targeted sell that capitalized on Loudoun’s reputation. Purchasing a

104 These labels are taken from Dolores Hayden’s suburban taxonomy. Hayden, Building Suburbia.
lot in Valley View Estates was not just a way to escape the city; it was a way to take up residence in “the Westchester County of Virginia,” a county that crawled with people of wealth and status and where pastures and quaint villages added charm and status to the natural environment. Loudoun was a county for “discriminating persons,” a fact that, once stated in print, ensured that those merely hoping to be discriminating would buy into the area.105

Railroad suburbs were few and far between in Loudoun County, which was still far removed from the city at this point. The postwar years belonged to the automobile.106 The end of more than a decade of depression and war set off a housing boom that took over eastern Fairfax County in a few short years. Loudoun County had long been, in the words of a member of the board of supervisors, “the park for the District of Columbia.”107 Homebuyers who had earlier found country life in Fairfax County were now finding themselves being pushed westward by development. James and Nellie Ryder set up the first county subdivision with racially restrictive covenants in Sterling in 1949.108 Development spread to Middleburg. Franks Schaefer came to town during World War II. In 1953 he convinced his neighbor to join him in subdividing his land. The Leith Village and Aspen Hill subdivisions were the result. These developments offered discriminating suburbanites racially restrictive covenants and homes starting at $10,000 in Leith and $15,000 in Aspen Hill.109

Broad Run Farms was the most successful of the 1950s subdivisions. Fittingly, the development was the result of a failed attempt at gentlemen farming. Robert and Barbara Young purchased the 706-acre Miskel Farm along the banks of Broad Run in eastern Loudoun County

107 “Loudoun’s Board of Supervisors,” Virginia and the Virginia County (January, 1953), 15.
109 Scheel, Middleburg, 175.
in 1950 and moved into the historical home soon after. Robert had worked as a lawyer for the U.S. Senate and wanted to try his hand at dairy farming. Within a year the couple abandoned the enterprise. Instead, the Youngs partnered with a Leesburg real estate man to subdivide their farm and sell lots to Washingtonians willing to drive the fifty miles to D.C. in exchange for a home in the country. Where the 1920s suburbs had emphasized health, gardening, and family, Broad Run Farms ads spoke to the fears and desires of the suburban residents of the 1950s: low taxes, good schools, natural beauty, and recreation. Young dug a lake along Route 7, the main road into D.C., and began selling lots by waving down any car that drove by and offering to show them around. The Youngs’ advertising method reveals an important but easily overlooked facet of the county’s relationship with the city. Beginning in the 1920s, Washingtonians took weekend excursions into the county’s pastoral countryside. They motored along its back roads, gazing out at the horses and cattle, soaking in the scenery, and admiring the hard-working country life of Loudoun farmers. Philadelphia had its Amish Country. Washington had Hunt Country. It was these weekend country drives that brought the Youngs their customers.¹¹⁰

Demand was strong. By 1953 the Youngs had sold 100 lots and had eighty houses under construction. The typical mixture of government workers, politicians, and retired military men took up residence in the moderately expensive neighborhood where lots ranged from a half an acre to ten acres.¹¹¹ Broad Run Farm’s success inspired imitators. By 1953 the county had approved more than dozen plans for small subdivisions in the eastern part of Loudoun.¹¹² At the same time the county’s economically stagnant rural hamlets and backwater towns saw both an uptick in visitors and a steady influx of new residents who bought and fixed up the county’s old

¹¹¹ For a example of the type of people that settled in Broad Run Farms, see Jack Eisen, “New Airport and Suburbia Perk up Loudoun County: Real Estate Men Busy,” March 21, 1960, B1 and Berta Mikesell, “Formula for a Rich Life,” LTM, undated, Folder 2, Box 5, Keep Loudoun Beautiful Collection, TBL.
houses. Between 1950 and 1960, all but one of Loudoun’s six magisterial districts experienced substantial population growth. Broad Run, the easternmost district, led the way with a 31 percent increase, but the population of the county’s three western districts also each increased by 10 or 11 percent. Locals continued to share the politics and social mores of Richmond and the Shenandoah Valley, but the county’s economy and population was decidedly shifting toward Washington by the 1950s. This agricultural county that had long served as Washington’s rural backyard was now becoming part of its metropolitan area.

Newcomers established this refined, suburban countryside in a county that was home to a highly productive agricultural economy. These two visions of Loudoun shared a commitment to the agrarian countryside and the freedoms and privacy of country life. They valued these things, however, for different reasons. Farmers valued land for its productivity; outsiders valued it for its aesthetics and cultural value. Loudoun farmers remained tried and true southern Democrats opposed to any attempt to expand the reach of government, mitigate their personal property rights, or interfere with segregation. Outsiders were slow to question the county’s racial system, but they were far more willing to enlist government to defend the countryside against undesirable land uses, even if that meant ceding some control over property rights. These tensions first appeared in the skirmishes over county planning in the 1940s, but they did not gain widespread traction until the 1960s. A brief history of these early efforts to limit growth and protect the countryside reveals both the county’s deep preservationist roots and the common ground shared by foxhunters, local gentry, preservationists, and early commuters.

Local garden clubs were the breeding ground for Loudoun’s early preservation movement. These tea-drinking ladies focused their activism at the destruction of their sworn

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113 See, for instance, Lake Van Sickler, “Round Hill,” *Virginia and the Virginia County* (January, 1953), 33-34.
enemy: the roadside billboard. The national anti-billboard movement, of which the women of Loudoun’s garden clubs were but a local iteration, promoted pastoral scenery—usually seen from the window of an automobile—as a means of social uplift and reform for urban dwellers. The campaign was highly gendered, pitting the masculine world of commerce against the feminine world of beauty. The assault on billboards in Loudoun reflected these larger trends, but with a more socially exclusive bent. Loudoun’s garden clubs targeted billboards because they undermined the county’s image as a landscape separate from commercialism and industry. A Loudoun with roadside signs could not be the country retreat from the industrial world that these elite women needed it to be. The county’s farmers and laborers had always understood the countryside to be a working landscape where value was closely tied to urban markets. As such, the anti-billboard cause had little appeal to them. This was a movement led by those for whom the value of the countryside was inexorably tied to its aesthetic purity.115

The anti-billboard movement in Loudoun began with two local ladies who had few qualms about taking the law into their own hands. Edith Kennedy Sands, the wife of foxhunter Daniel Sands, and Eugenia Fairfax, who had moved to the historical Oak Hill mansion with her husband in the 1890s, formed the County Conservation Committee in October 1930 with the express purpose of preserving the country “as Nature wrought it.” Well-tended pastures and wheat fields were natural. Crass commercialism was unnatural. These two women, and the half a dozen others who joined them, waged a guerrilla campaign against placards and billboards. Late at night, the ladies would have their chauffeurs drive them across the county. Once they had spotted their prey, the chauffeurs would then wait in the car while the women ripped up, tore out,

and hacked the offending signs to pieces. There was little doubt who committed these acts of righteous vandalism. At each of the committee’s luncheons, the place settings included a small hatchet to aid the ladies in their efforts. Edith Sands became a state leader in the cause, becoming president of the Associated Clubs of Virginia for Roadside Development. Under her leadership, the group lobbied for and eventually won passage of the Virginia Outdoor Advertising Act of 1937, which put modest restrictions on roadside signs. With this victory achieved, the County Conservation Committee disbanded, its members taking their fervent hatred of billboards to the county’s garden clubs.\footnote{On Loudoun’s garden clubs, see Samuels, \textit{Loudoun County Virginia}, 24. For the battle against billboards, see Scheel, \textit{Middleburg}, 141-143 (quotation on 141), Lewis, \textit{Ladies, Liquor, & Laughter}, 69-70, and Scheel, “Loudoun County’s Anti- Billboard and Sign-Control Ordinance: It’s Forty Years Old,” Eugene Scheel Research Collection, TBL.}

The movement to preserve rural beauty now began its second stage. Vinton Liddell Pickens claimed the mantle of leadership over the next decade. Pickens and her husband had moved from Washington D.C. to a farm east of Leesburg in 1935. Here they could enjoy the country life while retaining their Washington society connections. Pickens was quickly accepted into Loudoun society. Within a few years, she was representing the highway committee of the Leesburg Garden Club at state events. At one such meeting, she became fascinated with the possibilities of zoning and county planning. Armed with a pamphlet prepared by the State Planning Board and the phone number of the Division of Planning office in Richmond, she returned to Loudoun and went to work. As the representative of the county’s garden clubs, she took her cause before the county supervisors and received a cold reception. After months of presenting her case, in 1941 the supervisors appointed a planning commission with her as the chairwoman. The commission supported Pickens’ recommendations. With her tireless leadership, the county became the first rural county in the state both to pass a zoning ordinance
and to restrict the use of billboards, both in the fall of 1942. The wartime experiences of other Virginia counties had convinced some of the county supervisors of the need for zoning to prevent the spread of tasteless commercial development. With the support of these men, Pickens was also able to get a subdivision ordinance passed in February 1948. She would spend the next twenty years working to enforce both from her position on the county planning board.117

The 1942 and 1948 ordinances drew little interest from Loudoun’s general population. Large suburban developments had not yet come to Loudoun, and few realized the significance of what these women had accomplished. The only opposition came from a handful of Leesburg lawyers who opposed these measures on principle for undermining the rights of individual property owners and as inappropriately expanding the powers of the local government. Lucas Phillips, a Leesburg attorney, was one of the most vocal critics. He was the first in a long line of pro-growth voices in the county to decry efforts by the county supervisors to control growth. Speaking against a building code that Pickens brought before the county board in the early 1950s, Phillips warned the supervisors, “You are imposing an unreasonable dictatorship on landowners.” “When the law makes the building of a home prohibitive,” he went on, “you have sown the seeds of socialism.” During its first decade, Pickens and her secretary ran the county planning office out of her home. The office would expand rapidly in the 1960s. Loudoun led the state and the South in passing both zoning and billboard ordinances, a testament to the strength of the local garden clubs and the importance they placed on the county’s country image.118

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117 As late as 1951, only 173 counties nation-wide had rural zoning in place. Erling D. Solberg, “Rural Zoning in the United States,” USDA, Agricultural Information Bulletin, No. 54, January 1952, 8-9; J. Terry Hirst and Vinton Liddell Pickens, Interview by Eugene Scheel, June 21, 1977 and Vinton Liddell Pickens, Interview by Eugene Scheel, June 20, 1977, Folder 1, Box 1, TBLOHP, TBL; Vinton Liddell Pickens, Interview by Barbara Dutton, July 25, 1990, Folder 35, Box 2, LCOHP; Mrs. Vertnon L. Pickens to Dorothy [unreadable], Janelia Farm, Ashburn, VA, TBL; Raflo, Iron Gates, 188-195; Sarah Huntington and Gale Waldron, eds., In Their Own Words: Recollections of an Earlier Loudoun (Lincoln, Va.: Meeting House Press, 2002), 61.

118 Raflo, Iron Gates, 192.
Later preservation groups would look back on Pickens and her garden club colleagues as “indomitable enviromentalist[s].” Such labels are anachronistic and distort the historical realities of the local preservation movement of the 1940s. For these women of leisure, the fight for rural zoning and against billboards was part of a larger commitment to protecting the county’s rural landscapes from the stain of commercialism. These women had moved to the county to enjoy the countryside. Advertisements calling on drivers and their passengers to consume their products obstructed these women’s consumption of the agrarian landscape. Billboards and zoning were about more than the individual’s appreciation of rural beauty. The issues spoke to the county’s identity. As one historian of the anti-billboard movement explained, removing billboards was a way to preserve “veneers of gentry civility.” The county’s garden clubs defined, defended, and etched into local laws a particular vision of Loudoun County that privileged rural aesthetics over economic development and consumption over production. The countryside, in this vision, was a public good, and therefore something the county government had a duty to protect. In this way, the garden clubs of the 1940s laid the groundwork for the open space and preservation movements that took hold in the county by the 1970s. Groups like Keep Loudoun Beautiful, the Piedmont Environmental Council, and the Catoctin Valley Preservation Alliance would build on this foundation. Their efforts would also be hampered by them, as this type of open space activism carved deep ideological ruts in the county that channeled the national surge of environmentalism into relatively conservative channels. In Loudoun, even into the 1980s, environmentalism always played second-fiddle to preservation and beautification.

Each of the four types of pre-1960s development discussed in this chapter shared elements of gentrification, tourism, and suburbanization, for they are complementary processes.

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119 Harrison, Protecting Virginia’s Piedmont, 2.
120 Jakle and Sculle, Signs in America’s Auto Age, 135.
The differences between them are less important than their similarities. Gentrification explains the displacement and some of the class conflicts that accompanied the transformation of Loudoun, but it does not capture the extent to which these changes were tied to the deeply engrained suburban ideal. These people desired to surround themselves with pastoral beauty in the vein of the English countryside, to live removed from the city’s problems even as they continued to earn their living from it, and to enjoy leisure and security in landscapes of white privilege. These people were not part of the back to the land movement, with its calls for the simple life and subsistence agriculture. They were sportsmen, gentlemen farmers, tourists, commuters, and preservationists who looked to Loudoun for status, beauty, repose, and belonging. Each redefined Loudoun’s productive agricultural lands as places of aesthetic value and leisure. Even when these outsiders celebrated the county’s lack of industrial development, they did so not because they rejected the fruits of modern industry, but because they sought a refuge from its effects. Residents of the early developments and settlements in the county defined their homes and lifestyles in opposition to suburbia, which they saw as the city’s tentacles reaching out to corrupt and violate the countryside; yet their way of life was, itself, economically, socially, and culturally tied to the city. They did have a strong conservative streak, but they embraced historical preservation and pastoral landscapes more out of a search for personal authenticity in an increasingly consumerized world than out of a belief that the nation as a whole should return to the simple life. Exclusivity, historical rootedness, and refinement were the most salient values for these Loudouners. It was these three factors, more than any others,

121 For more on the contrast between the back to the land movement and the back to nature movement, see Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969). Christopher Sellers recent study of suburban nature outside Los Angeles and New York brings into question the wisdom of dividing newcomers based on their productivity. He instead emphasizes the way suburban country life during the first half of the twentieth century seamlessly combined small-scale agricultural production with a more aesthetic appreciation for nature. Suburban country life, as Sellers describes it, did become prominent in the rural subdivisions that popped up in Loudoun the 1920s. Gentlemen farmers, horse lovers, and historical preservationists, were more prominent in Loudoun than suburban homesteaders were. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*, 11-35.
that tied these four diverse groups together. It was their commitment to these values that inspired the highly conservative preservationist politics that began in the county in the 1930s and eventually defined the county’s environmental politics in the 1970s and beyond.

For all the changes that the influx of outside money and outside residents had brought, Loudoun County retained agrarian image. A 1949 Chamber of Commerce pamphlet exemplifies this point. If any organization in the county had an interest in promoting the county’s industrial possibilities it would have been the Chamber, yet the organization reaffirmed the county’s commitment to the “peculiarly Virginian ideal of culture wedded to agriculture.” Loudoun, they explained, “grows rather than gets.” They celebrated the fact that the county had no large industries, that it had banned commercial advertising, and that agriculture and country life ruled in the county. The Chamber believed that Loudoun’s future “lies as always with her land and those who come to live upon it.” Where the 1908 description that began this chapter emphasized the lack of suburban development, the Chamber’s pamphlet praised the fact that sportsmen, farmers, and suburban residents could each enjoy the Piedmont’s landscape of rolling hills and small farms. They celebrated the discovery by Washingtonians of Loudoun’s “fertile possibilities in land and living.” These newcomers, the Chamber believed, would embrace the “creative conservatism” that characterized the county’s social stance and way of life. The outsiders who bought land and settled in Loudoun County in the more than half a century before the opening of Dulles Airport moved to the county precisely to share in the country life, class exclusivity, and rural beauty. They poured their own resources into revitalizing the county’s historical and agrarian landscapes and atmosphere. Their actions crystallized the county’s agrarian landscapes into a beautiful image of productive agrarian landscapes. The fight to preserve agriculture in the county that defined much of the county’s political history in the 1970s and 1980s was inspired more by the
preservation of agricultural landscapes than by the preservation of agriculture itself. In the
process they developed the foundation of an environmental politics that would pit them and their
image of Loudoun against the sprawl and development of Eastern Loudoun. ¹²²
CHAPTER 2
THE CLOSING AND THE OPENING OF THE PINEY WOODS

A half dozen men sitting around a camp fire on a crisp autumn night in East Texas, ears poised to hear the hounds bay. Having caught the fox’s scent, the hounds take off. The hunters close their eyes, in rapt attention to the sounds of the chase as they echo through the moonlit pines. Each one listens, hoping that their prize hound will take the lead. Each one traces the path of the hounds by their baying as they range over creeks, across pastures, through old homesteads, and past decaying lumber camps. These hilltop foxhunters would be out well into the morning, traveling across the countryside searching for lost hounds. The sport bred a complex and obscure subculture. It combined the lure of a secret society— with its clandestine meetings, its private rituals, and its code of conduct— with the drama of the hunt. Hounds pursued the fox in Arkansas, the Northeast, and almost everywhere in between. The sport took deepest root in the piney woods of East Texas, where marginal cotton agriculture and cutover timberlands provided the ideal landscape for the hunt and where hounds were a deeply-rooted part of the culture and agriculture. Well into the postwar period, as one Texas Game and Fish article explained, visitors to the area would “find ‘coon-hound and fox hound headquarters’ in every small town barbershop.” In East Texas, “nearly every farm boy has at least one good hound tied out back of the barn.” The sport attracted hunters from farms and sawmill towns. The sport brought together men across the lines of class and race in a type of clandestine, late-night meritocracy where the achievements of the hound superseded any other social achievements. Foxhunting certainly was no egalitarian paradise. The demands of deference and subservience continued to hold sway, even around the camp fire, but the achievements of one’s hounds gained a hunter

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1 “Night Hunting,” Texas Game and Fish (March 1946), 4-5, 30-32.
respect, if not honor, even across racial lines. 3 Local backwoodsmen, small town professionals, and even big-city lawyers from Houston came out to join the wide-ranging hunts. 4 Foxhunting was neither modest nor contained in its use of the Montgomery County woods. Its practitioners were devoted to their sport, and their sport depended on an open landscape without fences, hunting preserves, or housing developments. For nearly a hundred years, the sound of hounds at bay had echoed across the woods of Montgomery County unconstrained by the property lines on record with the county clerk. As one historian put it, “few types of hunting better illustrate the once cohesive rural community than foxhunting. . . only the game and the hounds determined the boundary of the chase.” Few rural practices better illustrate the transformation in the uses and legal structures surrounding the Montgomery County landscape as metropolitan expansion loomed. 5

Foxhunting was only one of the open woods uses that defined the landscape of Montgomery County, Texas, in the decades before development. Whether the hounds chased foxes or raccoons, whether the rambling sportsman sought mourning doves or simply a secluded fishing spot, county residents and an increasing number of Houstonians looked to these open woods for their outdoor recreation and, in the case of backwoodsmen, part of their livelihood. Both law and custom supported the use of company- and privately owned woodlands as a recreational and hunting commons. The county’s open range law protected the right of residents to forage their cattle and hogs on any unfenced land. Local custom protected poaching and

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3 T. J. Peel, “Old Lip,” Texas Game and Fish (March 1944) 6, 15-16, 18.
4 While it never has as high a profile in the foxhunting world as Center, Texas, Montgomery County could boast that Robert W. Henderson, a prominent Houston businessman and one-time president of the Texas Fox and Wolf Hunters Association, maintained a lodge in the county and, presumably, hunted there with his sixty hunting dogs. “Robert Wilson Henderson,” The Henderson-Wessendorf Foundation, http://hw-foundation.com/index.php?id=2.;
freedom of movement for hunters, and popular opinion sided with fence cutters over fence erectors. The persistence of these century-old land-use practices had a substantial bearing on the landscape and social world that new residents inherited. Anyone who set off for a walk in the woods in the county during the 1940s and 1950s seeking solitude, silence, and a chance to commune with nature would be disappointed. The woods were inhabited.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) With the expansion of the field of environmental history over the past two decades, the concept of the commons has become reinterpreted and qualified so many different ways that it is in danger of losing its explanatory power. Katherine Newfont has done the field a great service by tackling the issue in Blue Ridge Commons: Environmental Activism and Forest History in Western North Carolina (Athens: University of Georgia, 2012). I mean by commons a legally or extra-legally supported claim to the use and management of a resource by members of a given community. Commons systems are dependent upon interlocking systems of local custom and law that protect the rights of access and appropriation of these resources. In this case, the resources in question include the harvest of game, recreation, or the grazing of cattle. Merchantable timber was never included in the Montgomery County
The destruction of this social world in Montgomery County was part of a larger national trend. Across the nation, conservationists, timber companies, and private landowners enclosed, intensively managed, and leased their rural landscapes for recreational use and sustained harvests. This movement that began in the early years of the twentieth century gathered steam in the decades following World War II. Increasing leisure time, economic prosperity, and improved highway systems all stoked consumer demand for recreational opportunities close to metropolitan centers. For rural communities across the nation, chasing recreational and tourist dollars became a fervent passion as well as an economic necessity. What historians of both conservation and suburbanization have left unexamined is how these attempts to develop rural landscapes formed the background for suburban development. Narratives of suburbanization as a process of “nature erasing” or “city building,” as Christopher Sellers has termed the common approaches, both paint an image of rural life that existed outside historical processes. Only recently have suburban historians, including Sellers, begun to rediscover the complex social, economic, and environmental world of the suburban fringe.  

This chapter argues that the transformation of rural landscapes was a central part of the development of the suburban fringe. For all the bravado surrounding the bulldozer’s ability to lay waste to the countryside, developers never had the power to completely destroy rural social commons. While environmental historians have tended to focus on the management of publicly-owned national forests and parks as the center of twentieth-century battles over the commons, I focus on the closing of the commons on the privately owned landscapes of suburbanizing Montgomery County, Texas.

Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature & the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 41 (quotation). Sellers’s work does more than any before it in taking seriously the ties between suburbia and agrarian and rural landscapes and social practices. Where his work traces the role of a suburbanized nature in crafting grass-roots environmental politics, however, this chapter focuses on the process of turning rural nature into suburban nature. Both, however, should be seen as part of this larger effort to understand the interactions between suburbia, the metropolitan fringe, and the natural world surrounding both. The rediscovery of Harlan Douglass’s *The Suburban Trend* (New York: Century, 1925) has inspired much of this line of inquiry. See, Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*, 24-35; Raymond A. Mohl, "City and Region: The Missing Dimension in U.S. Urban History," *Journal of Urban History* 25 (November 1998): 3-21; and Andrew Needham and Allen Dietrich-Ward, "Beyond the Metropolis: Metropolitan Growth and Regional Transformation in Postwar America," *Journal of Urban History* 35 (November 2009): 943-969.
worlds or landscapes. Some rural practices persisted and coexisted within metropolitan fringe counties for decades after bulldozers cleared the land for the first developments. Others acted as barriers to suburban and recreational development and were increasingly out of sync with the image and development plans of local elites. These boosters moved with vigor to eliminate these practices once they realized the economic benefits of such development. As subdivisions sprang up in the county’s woods and along its streams, county leaders were shaping and tailoring that landscape for suburban enjoyment. Yet rural social practices could not be bulldozed away along with the collapsing sharecropper cabins and the thick underbrush. The history of the transformation from rural South to suburban South in Montgomery County is one of social conflict, shifting local politics, and gradual change instead of stark discontinuities and inexorable development. The older ways showed stubborn persistence. New development packaged and sold landscapes forged from these rural social conflicts.

In Montgomery County, these social conflicts centered on hunting and fencing, freedom of movement and the rights of property ownership, and ultimately on contesting visions of the county’s future. A coalition of small-town boosters, local developers, state conservationists, and rural landowners closed the woods. Between 1950 and 1970, they enacted a fence law, undermined the culture of benign neglect surrounding game laws, and closed off much of the countryside. While these issues had strong class elements, they also exposed a deep divide

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8 While suburban residents quickly come to outnumber rural residents in suburbanizing counties, the relative density of these developments meant that their impact on the county’s landscape was proportionally smaller and only became pronounced after the social and political balance of power had already shifted. Suburban and commercial developments only covered a small percentage of the land area of these developing counties well into the 1990s.

9 Christopher Sellers takes more seriously than any other suburban historian the natural world that persisted in these suburbanizing areas and the way developers packaged and sold this natural world as part of the image of their developments. *Crabgrass Crucible* boldly argues for the dominant place of the natural world within the lives of suburban residents and its importance in the development of their environmental activism. Because he centers his study within the boundaries of the subdivision, however, the nature that Sellers examines is one that was as much imported as adopted and that therefore represented as much discontinuity as it did continuity with the past landscapes. For all the hype surrounding it, this suburban nature was nature delivered by flat-bed truck. The rural transformations surrounding the development of suburbia remain on the margins of his story. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*, especially 41-42.
between those promoting development and “progress” and those defending an older social structure and its landscape. For Texas small town boosters, there was no greater goal than to have one’s city considered a “progressive” model of economic growth and industrial expansion. The Conroe Chamber of Commerce never abandoned the goal of industrial development, but its members came to see recreational and suburban development as a vital part of economic development. Creating a commuter’s wooded paradise meant freeing the road of roaming cattle and freeing the woods of backwoodsmen. Creating a sportsman’s paradise meant protecting game species from the wasteful hunting of locals and Houstonians who refused to pay for the privilege. Creating a wooded suburban landscape close to nature meant protecting nature from southern land-use practices.

This chapter begins by examining the fate of the backwoodsman in Montgomery County. Attempts to close the county’s open range for cattle and hogs and later attempts to enforce state game laws both undermined the economic and social world of the backwoodsmen and refashioned the county’s forests and pastures in a way that reinforced the power of larger landowners and, just as importantly, depopulated the county’s woods. The chapter then turns to suburban development and the way newcomers repurposed the woods for their own enjoyment. These newcomers, and their dogs and children, found these seemingly primeval woods empty and claimed them for their own enjoyment. The woods that had sustained open range hogs and cattle and generations of pot hunters became suburban nature—an amenity packaged by developers and sold to newcomers.

The Montgomery County forests had long been the province of the backwoodsman. For all the myth, sensationalist imagery, and misinformation surrounding this southern folk type, the
backwoodsman was a prominent political, social, and environmental actor in the county. His social world persisted in the swampy bottomlands and company-owned forests of Montgomery County into the postwar era. These backwoodsmen utilized a set of widely held and legal as well as extra-legally enforced understandings of land-use and commons rights. They herded

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cattle and hogs on horseback without regard to property lines on the legally sanctioned open range. The enforcement of cattle dipping for Texas Fever in the late 1920s and early 1930s hurt some of the poorer ranchers but did not compromise the long-term feasibility of the open range.\textsuperscript{11} Into the 1950s, as one resident remembered, it was normal to hear a man on horseback with his dogs driving a herd of free-range cattle across the countryside to market, and some area towns fenced their borders and set up cattle guards to keep stock off the streets.\textsuperscript{12} These twentieth-century southern herdsmen would sit, rifle in hand, on top of their horse in the middle of the county’s main roads to block traffic while their hounds drove cattle to newer range land.\textsuperscript{13} Backwoodsmen supplemented their income from cattle with small-scale cotton and sugar production, labor in the timber and oil industries, and with harvests of fish and game. They were notorious for shooting any game in sight and for following their dogs wherever the chase might take them. They managed the landscape through fire and infuriated forest managers and state conservationists in the process.\textsuperscript{14} When confronted with fenced land, backwoodsmen were known to respond with a pair of wire cutters or by burning the fence down.\textsuperscript{15} On the eve of the stock law elections in 1952 and 1956, the open range in Montgomery County was widely used by an economically diverse group of ranchers and backwoodsmen who defended it as both an economic necessity and a way of life. Such a lifestyle was completely dependent on the

\textsuperscript{11} Cattle dipping required free-range cattlemen to bring gather their cattle and bring them in to be treated multiple times. This placed a significant financial and logistical hardship on backwoods cattlemen who sometimes chose to sell out rather than meet these new requirements. Claire Strom, \textit{Making Catfish Bait out of Government Boys: The Fight Against Cattle Ticks and the Transformation of the Yeoman South} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009). For the local impact of cattle dipping, see Henry Mostyn, “Grover Cleveland Mostyn” in Celeste (Gayle) Graves, \textit{Magnolia Memories}, (Conroe, Tex.: Genealogy Department, Montgomery County Library, 1993), 503.

\textsuperscript{12} Ike Barrett, Interview by Author, November 11, 2010, Dobbin, Tex. and Gary Calfee, Interview by Author, October 10, 2010, Willis, Tex. See also \textit{Montgomery County History}, 231-232; and Montgomery, \textit{Cut’N Shoot}.

\textsuperscript{13} David T. Schultz, Interview by Author, August 13, 2012, Chateau Woods, Tex.

\textsuperscript{14} District Program and Work Plan for Montgomery and Walker County Soil and Water Conservation District No. 425, 1969, Walker County Soil Water Conservation District Records, Huntsville, Tex. (hereinafter Walker SWCD).

\textsuperscript{15} William T. Chambers, “Pine Woods Region of Southeastern Texas,” \textit{Economic Geography} 10 (July 1934), 310. For an example of this in Montgomery County, see “Fence Cutters Clear Way into Green Pastures,” \textit{CDC}, June 16, 1953, p. 1, 10 and \textit{Texas v. Raymond Sallas}, September 3, 1963, #9988, Criminal Docket, 9\textsuperscript{th} District Court, Conroe, Tex.
persistence of the forested commons and fundamentally incompatible with suburban understandings of property, expectations of privacy, and images of the woods.¹⁶

This backwoods culture was deeply entrenched not only in the lives of those economically dependent on the open range but also in the broader rural culture of the county. For the bulk of the county’s labor force that worked in the timber and oil industries, company forests provided leisure and supplementary income and food. Laborers kept cattle and hogs on the open range, set fires to clear the woods, hunted and fished on company lands, listened to their hounds chase foxes across the woods, and swam in company ponds.¹⁷ The open range was not just the province of the poor. Some better-off ranchers used it as well. Eddie Joseph Damuth was an original member of the county’s Agricultural Stabilization Committee and owned a 1,200 acre ranch and peach-growing operation in the southern part of the county in the 1930s and 40s. Even with such a large piece of property, Damuth ran his cattle and over 3,000 hogs on timber company land in what would later become The Woodlands. His business supplying meat to the Texas prison system was cut short when the stock law passed for hogs in 1952.¹⁸ The family of District Judge Bridges Browder also raised cattle over thousands of acres of the open range. The family spent weekends going on “cow hunts” with neighbors throughout the 1940s.¹⁹

¹⁶ Mrs. Ray Ward remembered that on her family’s homestead near Splendora, the kids had to play inside a fenced yard because “you never knew when a big Brahma bull would be near by.” It is hard to imagine that suburban residents would have been comfortable with the need to put up their white picket fences for this reason. This was in 1943. Mrs. Ray Ward, “Ward Family,” Montgomery County History, 527-528, quotation on 528.
¹⁷ The mill pond, where logs were soaked to prevent decay, served as a popular fishing, swimming, hunting, and picnicking site. Here families socialized and young couples courted. Some of these ponds were so nice so as to attract fishermen and swimmers from town. Sitton and Conrad, Nameless Towns, 164-173. Lawrence C. Walker, The Southern Forest: A Chronicle (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 114-15. Mary Alice Hunt, Ruts to the Miracle City (Conroe, Tex.: Self Published, 1975), 24.
¹⁸ The Agricultural Stabilization Committees were elected by farmers and charged by the USDA with distributing and managing commodity subsidies and other USDA programs at the local level. Only the county’s most socially and economically powerful farmers were elected to the committees. Elizabeth Brake, “Uncle Sam on the Family Farm: Farm Policy, Rural Economic Development, and the Business of Southern Agriculture, 1946-1980” (Ph.D. Diss., Duke University, forthcoming). On Damuth, see Graves, Magnolia Memories, 401-402.
When conservationists, local elites, or state agencies challenged these rights, many rural residents, both land owners and non-land owners, resisted. Backwoodsmen cut fences, poached, employed arson and intimidation, and occasionally resorted to violence. These conflicts had occurred nation-wide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but in the piney-woods South, large absentee-owned timber holdings, a deeply entrenched open-range culture, and generally slow economic development kept the commons open much later.20 The East Texas open range remained open so long and hunting laws were enforced so spottily that, in Montgomery County, the battles over the commons took place against a backdrop of highway expansion, recreational development, and suburbanization instead of against a progressive-era backdrop of agricultural modernization. By the 1950s, the opposition had as much to do with the recreation and the defense of tradition as it did with subsistence and class conflict.

The open range persisted into the 1950s in spite of its numerous opponents. The Texas Forest Service, timber companies, Texas Game and Fish, and the East Texas Chamber of Commerce were the strongest proponents of stock laws across the region. Each of these groups had a major interest in exerting greater control over the woods and in managing the impact of livestock. In general, however, these groups preferred to work behind the scenes to encourage the passage of these laws rather than draw the ire of backwoodsmen who might retaliate with arson, fence cutting, and poaching.21 Voter apathy among town residents also undermined attempts to end the practice. The 1950s, however, brought a fresh set of circumstances. First, an

20 While southern historians have long understood the class issues involved in the management of landscapes, environmental history has been slower to appreciate this connection. Louis S. Warren’s The Hunter’s Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) was one of the first to explore the lower-class resistance to conservation. Warren’s work has inspired others on the subject. Karl Jacoby, Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and Mark D. Spence, Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

21 Sitton, Backwoodsmen, 239-40, 244-246; “Watchman on the Tower,” East Texas (October 1952), 5 and “Watchman on the Tower,” East Texas (June 1956), 7.
increasing emphasis on scientific timber management, pasture improvement, and recreational
development gave landowners a strong economic incentive to end the practice and assert greater
control over their land. Second, the spread of paved highways and the county’s subsequent
integration into metropolitan Houston made roaming cattle a more ominous threat to both local
drivers and visitors. Thirdly, the Eisenhower administration began a national push for highway
safety whose influence reached into East Texas. Fourth, and most difficult to pin down, was the
general decline in the social and economic importance of open-range herding in East Texas
following World War II. An anachronism already throughout much of the South at that time, the
next generation of Montgomery County backwoodsmen was choosing the Piggly Wiggly over
home production, off-farm labor over hog and cattle herding, and the pickup truck over the
horse.

The first victory against the open range came within the county seat of Conroe. In August
1951 voters approved a city-wide ban on free-ranging hogs, sheep, and goats. The issue here was
ostensibly one of public health, but the local police’s selective enforcement of the law and the
Conroe Courier’s booster rhetoric suggest that its passage had as much to do with racial control
and sweeping poverty under the rug as it did with public health. By December 1952 stock law
proponents had pushed through a similar ban at the county level, followed by a ban on horses

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(accessed March 27, 2014)
23 My interpretation of the stock law election in Montgomery County draws on Thad Sitton’s examination of similar
stock law battles in counties along the Neches River to the east. Sitton, Backwoodsmen, 244-255. For the broader
modernization of rural life in the period, see Jack Temple Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost: The Rural South, 1920-1960
(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), and Gilbert C. Fite, Cotton Fields No More: Southern
24 Immediately after passing the law, police raided the African American section of town and “discovered” over two
hundred hogs within a four block radius of the African American school. The Conroe Courier praised the new law
for the new flexibility it gave the city government in enforcing health code violations related to livestock. “Hogs,
Sheep, and Goats Outlawed in City Limits,” CDC, August 16, 1951, p. 1.
and mules on the county range in January 1953.\textsuperscript{25} There is little evidence that either election inspired any substantial conflict.\textsuperscript{26} The \textit{Conroe Courier} maintained a cautious editorial silence, and the Chamber of Commerce declined to take a position on the issue. Proponents hoped to push the law through without attracting attention. The final vote was 705 for and 515 against.\textsuperscript{27} Hogs were never as economically or as symbolically important as cattle in this East Texas county. An attempt to ban free-ranging cattle in the county later that year meet much stiffer resistance and failed to pass.

When stock law proponents raised the issue again in 1956, they came prepared for a more dramatic showdown. The local Chamber of Commerce board of directors came out in favor of the law in June of 1956, but kept a low profile on the subject.\textsuperscript{28} They preferred to allow the \textit{Conroe Courier} to lead the charge against the open range. Proponents submitted a petition on June 14 to the commissioners court. What followed was a series of legal missteps and procedural errors that delayed the vote for more than five months. County officials incorrectly prepared the ballots, failed to give proper legal notice, and were extra vigilant in enforcing voting restrictions in order to invalidate the signatures of petitioners. \textit{Courier} editor Ed Watson cried foul, accusing the commissioners of stalling. Whether they were incompetent or malicious in their actions, the result was the same. The commissioners court forced the proponents to submit three separate petitions, further delaying the election.\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} “Proclamation,” Commissioners Court Records January 1952; “County Stock Law Election Set for Saturday Dec 20,” \textit{CDC}, November 20, 1952; “Proclamation,” Commissioners Court Records, January 1952.
\item \textsuperscript{26} The group that had the most to lose from the passage of the stock law on hogs, African Americans, remained under persistent political repression in the county. The poll tax remained enforce as did the more personal and informal restrictions on black political activity that were common across the South. Montgomery County was a white man’s county. Black political participation remained limited well into the 1970s.
\item \textsuperscript{27} “Stock Laws Win Approval; Few Freeholders Vote,” \textit{CDC}, December 25, 1952, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{28} “Local Chamber of Commerce Joins in Stock Law Drive,” \textit{CDC}, June 14, 1956, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{29} For each of the three petitions, see “Stock Law Petition Submitted Monday to Commissioners Court,” \textit{CDC}, June 14, 1956, p. 1; “New Stock Law Petition Filed,” \textit{CDC}, August 16, 1956, p. 1; “New Stock Petition Filed,” \textit{CDC}, October 11, 1956, p. 1.
\end{itemize}
With each delay, the *Courier* increased the volume of its protests. Editor Watson had built his career crusading against what he portrayed as an entrenched rural elite that held a stranglehold on the politics and social structure of the county. For Watson, the county commissioners court was a group of “good old boys” who bent the rules for their own profit and for the benefit of their largely rural constituencies. The stock law, he argued, was vital if Conroe was going to break free of the rural backwardness that surrounded it and to claim its place among the “progressive” towns of East Texas. Industrial development, improved services, and population growth would not come until the town shook off both the image and practical dangers of free-roaming cattle. Watson’s editorials took the proponents’ 1953 claim that open-range cattle represented “a hazard not in keeping with the times” and amplified it, portraying the stock law both as an anachronistic holdover from a bygone era and as a gross exploitation of the common good by rural special interests.  

The “few cattle raisers,” a group he neglected to define in any more detail, stood for a “type of government whereby ‘the few shall dictate to the masses’.” By October, Watson was accusing the opposition of systematically harassing and misleading those who signed the petition. Watson trumpeted, “[w]e will now wage a fight based on truths, not lies; facts concerning the many accidents each week in our county because of the cattle running at large; we will tell how these few people want to continue to have their cattle run on other peoples [sic] property behind a quaint old state law of ‘free range’.”

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31 Ed Watson, “*Courier Brands Stories False,*” *CDC*, October 24, 1956, p. 1. While Conroe boosters may have chafed at rural backwardness and conservatism on issues like the stock law, this should not obscure the deeper and long-lasting ties that bound town and country together. During this period, Conroe’s economic vitality continued to depend on rural extractive industry (timber, oil, agriculture). Both embraced the political conservatism, the racism, and the low-skill and low-wage economy that defined the majority of the South. As David Goldfield has argued, southern small towns were rural in their values, politics, culture, and religion. David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).  
32 Watson, “*Courier Brands Stories False.*”
Watson and his allies mixed this brand of good-government reform with an appeal to small town voters who remained apathetic on the issue. The threat posed by cattle on roadways proved the crucial issue in drawing this group to the polls. As one letter to the editor put it, “as long as stock is permitted to wander as they please zigzagging up and down and across our highways, just so long shall we be partly responsible for the accidents, and the murder committed on our highways where stock is involved.” With a flair for the dramatic, Watson warned that “VOTING FOR the Stock Law, may be a vote...[to] not die an untimely death on our highways.” The editor went a step further, contrasting the cattle-owners’ unjust claim to the open range with car-owning citizens who ought to have the right to travel on roads “paid for by taxes from the owners of automobiles.” For town residents, the choice was clear. A vote for the stock law was a vote for social progress, safety, and democratic rule. A vote for the free range was to risk an untimely death from a car crash.  

Although exaggerated, these safety concerns were not entirely unfounded. The vast majority of timber and oil land in the county remained unfenced into the 1950s. This meant that most of the land surrounding the county’s expanding road network contained free-ranging livestock. During the years leading up to the 1956 election, the commissioners court received multiple requests to fence major roads to prevent damage to livestock and automobiles. A petition signed in 1953 by over a hundred residents living along state highway 105, the major east-west road in the county, called on the commissioners court to build a fence that would end their “severe loss in the death and crippling of our live stock” by fencing the road. In the case

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34 “Vote Saturday on Stock Law:”

35 These residents, in line with open range thought, expected the county to protect its cows on the range from danger on public highways. Petition, Commissioners Court Records, February, 1953.
of state roads, however, the commissioners’ hands were tied. The state ruled that they could neither use county money to erect fences along state highways nor establish a separate tax for that purpose. The county commissioners court could and did, however, act to fence county roads when petitioned. In 1955 they passed a resolution to fence substantial sections in one area in order to control “considerable livestock running at large along the area. . . which endangers the lives of the traveling public.” While the Courier had no tragic auto accidents to point to in order to bolster its case, its claim that “[s]everal near-fatal accidents have occurred during the past few years as a result of automobiles hitting cattle on the road” had the ring of truth. The weather also added to the impetus for the stock law. The worsening drought of 1956 forced many cattle owners to turn their stock onto the range to find what grass they could. The increased number of cattle wandering the countryside helped give the movement an added sense of urgency.

It is difficult to pin down exactly who made up the loose coalition of stock law opponents. Most of the more capital-intensive and mechanized farms already had their land fenced by this time and therefore had little direct stake in the matter. A core group of opponents was certainly made up of those who depended on the range for their livelihood, but the breadth of opponents’ voting strength points to an appeal that went beyond economics. This coalition of

37 See the two resolutions dated March 1, 1955 in Commissioners Court Records, March, 1955 and Letter from J. C. Davis Jr. asst attorney general of Texas to George W. Norris, Montgomery County Attorney, October 24, 1956, in Commissioners Court Records, November, 1956.
39 The year 1956 was the height of the drought, which led local cattlemen to apply for federally subsidized feed beginning in late October. “250 Cattlemen-Farmers Apply for ‘Drought’ Feed,” CDC, October 31, 1956, p. 6 and “News from the County Agents Office,” CDC, October 17, 1956, p. 9.
40 Dick Calfee, a prosperous dairy farmer, for instance, attended a few anti-stock law meetings but ultimately chose not to get involved in the movement. Because of the constant need to keep their cattle nearby for milking, the forty or so dairy farms in the county had little use for the open range. Gary Calfee, Email Correspondence with author, January 10, 2011. See also Pete McCrarey, “Letter to the Editor,” CDC, August 23, 1956, p. 3; The county extension agent put the number of dairies in the county in 1961 at 40. “It Has Been a Busy Year,” CDC, December 21, 1961, p. 1, 8.
cattlemen and rural residents defended the open range in both elections with a rhetoric infused with an eclectic mixture of anti-communism, agrarianism, and republicanism. They predictably painted those who would take away their rights and their cattle as representing oppressive government interference. They appealed to fellow rural residents to band together to defend an embattled, rural way of life. The open range was the last means of economic support for those who were not lucky enough to have oil under their land and those who “are still striving to obtain an honest living from this good earth by farming and raising livestock.” A prominent opponent of the stock law warned readers in 1953 that closing the range would drive poorer residents from their homesteads and therefore contribute to the rural decline already in evidence. One opponent, Pete McCrarey, also raised the specter of the poor “farmer who has a few milk cows” who would find himself unable to fence his cattle and therefore face bankruptcy due to auto damage claims. Cattle on the roads, these commentators believed, could be easily dealt with if people simply had some respect and were willing to “slow down a little for a cow sometime.” Another opponent argued that it was drunk driving, not cattle, that led to the bulk of the auto accidents.  

Even here, though, opponents overlapped these agrarian and class-based complaints with laments over the closing of the woods to all forms of access. McCrarey warned that “a lot of our fishing, swimming and hunting places have been fenced up, because the stock law was brought up before and people with cattle didn’t want to get caught without a cattle range.” One pamphlet claimed that while “[m]ost of us like to go on an outing, fishing or hunting. . . if a general stock law is passed THAT WILL BE A THING OF THE PAST.” Opponents articulated a defense of their “God-Given rights” that went beyond where their cattle would graze. The stock law was not

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just about restricting cattle; smaller ranchers and rural residents accurately saw it as an unprecedented restriction of their ability to move across the landscape as well. With the passage of the stock law, fences would multiply and trespassing signs would go up, permanently changing the way Montgomery County residents interacted with their forests, their pastures, and their neighbors.\textsuperscript{42}

The result of these clashing visions was an ugly election in 1956 where intimidation often drowned out argument, and where many saw the possibility of violence constantly hovering in the air. \textit{Courier} editor Ed Watson claimed to have received so many threats for his promotion of the stock law that he carried a gun and requested a police escort when he went to cast his ballot.\textsuperscript{43}

For all the bluster, stalling tactics, and the concerted resistance of the cattlemen and their allies, their efforts failed this time. The \textit{Courier}’s fear mongering and anti-rural rhetoric drove town voters to the polls. More than twice as many voters voted for the stock law than had three years previously. Areas with the strongest support for the law were those closest to Houston: southeast along what would become highway US-59 and along the southern border with Harris County. Conroe also, as expected, went strongly for the law. The US-59 corridor, which was just starting to experience development, shifted the most in its support, from 63 percent against in 1953 to 72 percent for in 1956. Where the 1953 attempt had gone down to defeat 905 to 1,204, the 1956 law passed handily, 2,044 to 1242. The greatest factor in its passage was Conroe’s increased turnout. Where the county seat cast only 367 votes for the stock

\textsuperscript{42} McCrarey, “Letter to the Editor” (first quotation); “Notice to the People of Montgomery County” (second and third quotation).

\textsuperscript{43} For claims of intimidation, see Watson, “The Voters Will Decide” and “Stock Law Passes by Large Majority in County,” \textit{CDC}, December 16, 1956, p. 1. Gary Calfee, who was a child at the time of the election, argued in an interview that Watson was merely engaging in a bit of journalistic bravado in order to sell newspapers. Gary Calfee, Interview by Author, July 19, 2012, Willis, Tex. The truth is likely somewhere in between.
### Stock Law Election Returns, 1956

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Figure 2.3: Stock Law Election Returns, 1956

Law in 1953, it cast 1042 for it in 1956. Without Conroe’s impact, the law would have only narrowly passed 1002 to 979. Other towns in the county remained divided on the issue. Rural areas tended to vote according to the type of agriculture that predominated. More densely wooded areas voted against the law, and more progressive farming areas voted for it. Areas opposed to the law were clustered north of the San Jacinto River, near the National Forest and in the more isolated timbered regions and bottomlands of the east and the heavily wooded areas of the west.\(^{44}\)

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\(^{44}\) For a complete listing of votes, see Figure A. A vote of only 3,286 people may sound small in a county with a population of around 25,000, but this turnout was around half of the Courier’s 1953 estimate of 6,500 possible freehold voters in the county. In the case of a stock law election, voting was limited both by the poll tax and by a freeholder requirement that allowed only registered voters who owned real estate in the county to vote. For a more
The passage of the stock law did not immediately close off the timbered landscape of Montgomery County. What it did was move the power of the law behind those who wished to fence their land and signaled the beginning of the end for the open woods. Over the following two decades, landowners would assert exclusive claims over their property, enclosing the landscape and forcing many out of the woods. Backwoodsmen protested through occasional fence cutting and continued poaching. The county experienced an unprecedented number of arson-related forest fires in the months leading up to the stock law election that, while certainly connected to the drought, were at least a little suspicious in their timing. The number of farms with cattle dropped even more precipitously after the passage of the stock law than it had before, from 1,214 in 1954 to 965 in 1959, just as the number of hogs in the county had dropped after the hog stock law had passed from 8,523 in 1950 to 4,599 in 1954. A few locals continued to hunt hogs in the Sam Houston National Forest into the 1980s. Some of these “hunters” castrated, marked, herded, and managed hogs in the forest with their dogs, intimidating other hunters and even shooting at game wardens in order to protect access to “their” hogs. Hog hunting rapidly declined with the Forest Service’s decision to place the whole Sam Houston National Forest

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detailed description of the legal requirements for stock law voting in Texas, see Vernon’s Texas Revised Civil Statutes, 1948, Title 121, Chapters 5 and 6. For 1953 election results, see “County Stock Law Defeated; Election Polls Light Vote,” CDC, September 24, 1953, p. 1. For 1956, “Proclamation of Election Results,” County Commissioners Records, December, 1956 and “Stock Law Passes by Large Majority in County;”  
45 As long as the fence law remained in effect, it was the landowner’s responsibility not only to build, but to maintain his fences. Backwoodsmen had been known to damage fences through fire or other means in order to gain access to such land for their range. Under the stock law, this would no longer be an option.  
46 Few fence cutting episodes cropped up in Montgomery County’s notoriously inefficient, informal, and lenient court system. Those that did show up were usually dismissed. See, for example, Texas v. Raymond Sallas, September 3, 1963, #9988, 9th District Court, Conroe, Tex. See also Morris Straughn, Interview by Author, July 31, 2012, Conroe, Tex.  
47 In August of that year, Montgomery County had half of the eighty-six fires in its fire district, of which fourteen (33%) had been confirmed as incendiary. The year before the district had only had two fires in that month. “Summer of ’56 May Set All-Time Forests Fire Record in Local District,” CDC, September 13, 1956, p. 1.  
48 Surcy Lee Peoples, for instance, sold off all of his 600 hogs that roamed the woods of the south county when the first stock law passed. Frances K. Peoples, “Surcy Lee Peoples, Sr.,” Montgomery County History, 431; US Census, 1950; Agricultural Census, 1954 and 1959. Because of their mobility and general lack of supervision, the census tended to undercount the number of cattle and hogs on the open range. The decline in both was likely more dramatic than the numbers record.
under game management in the 1990s. With that, the last refuge of the backwoodsman and his dogs in the county closed.49

The closing of the range was, for its opponents, a triumph of progress—a victory for the image of Conroe as an economically forward looking and “progressive” town and a victory for rural landowners asserting control over their forests. Town boosters had cleared the county’s highways of a menace to public safety and economic growth. While at this point town leaders were more interested in the industrial development of Conroe, the coming decade would see them leverage this victory as part of a broader program of recreational and suburban development. The possibility that a commuter or out-of-town vacationer might hit their cattle on the highways and sue them for damages forced farmers to fence up their cattle or sell out and move further into the countryside.50 It was no coincidence that, a few weeks after the election, the Courier declared that the city’s future was “bright” and that the “miracle city” was poised to offer “better living” to newcomers.51 The closing of the range was a vital step in preparing the county for the first major suburban developments that opened their doors in the county a mere ten years after the passage of the law. The suburban dream these developments sold did not include free-range hogs and cattle as part of their picturesque woods. The woods had to be withdrawn from the rural social world before it could be packaged as suburban nature.

Removing cattle was not enough. Suburban nature included wildlife. Recreating the county’s woods as a natural environment teeming with deer, squirrels, raccoons, songbirds, and

49 Hog hunters from counties surrounding the national forest gathered 1,000 signatures in an attempt to prevent this switch. They failed. James Scott, Interview by Author, August 17, 2012, New Waverly, Tex. Scott was an enforcement officer with the National Forest Service at the Sam Houston National Forest beginning in 1989.
50 The shift in liability put into place by the stock law was no small matter. When Mr. and Mrs. Richard McClain of Bryan hit an angus bull while driving on the highway near the posh Lake Conroe subdivision of Walden in 1972, they used the law’s provisions to sue the cow’s owner and the owner of the land it had been grazing on for $325,000. “Law Suit Filed Here,” CDC, February 25, 1974, p. 1.
other wildlife required its own set of conflict and social change. Having cleared the woods of open-range cattle, Conroe boosters and county landowners turned their attention to developing the county’s wildlife and recreational resources for their own private use and for the paid use of recreation-seeking Houstonians. In doing so, they joined a wider postwar project across East Texas, to enforce game and trespass laws, to establish commercial hunting leases, to exert a greater control over the woods, and to generally fill the woods with wildlife again. Where conservation historians have emphasized the conflicts between lower-class local hunters and elite sportsmen and their government allies, conservation in Montgomery County was led by local elites hoping to sell their county’s landscape to paying Houston hunters and suburbanites. This crackdown closed the woods to both lower-class residents and working-class Houstonians who looked to the county’s woods for free recreation.\footnote{East Texas was a relative latecomer in the national move toward intensive management of game populations and greater, state-enforced restrictions on their harvest. Historians studying this national transformation have emphasized the social conflicts between lower-class local hunters—be they white, black, or American Indian—and a coalition of elite sportsmen, fish and game agents, and wildlife biologists. Jacoby, \textit{Crimes against Nature}, Warren, \textit{The Hunters’ Game}, and John F. Reiger, \textit{American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2000).}

By the 1950s Montgomery County, like most East Texas counties, had been subject to decades of uncontrolled hunting and fishing. Backwoodsmen, sawmill workers, town residents, and even some local ranchers habitually ignored game laws as they roamed the forests during off hours looking for game and sport. Residents hunted, fished, and trapped year-round. Decades of overhunting created a landscape where the woods were vast and the game population small. Hunters shot whatever their dogs could track down. One reformed backwoodsman remembered that there was “an open season on anything.” This hunting commons was broadly tolerated by local law enforcement. As one state conservationist complained about East Texas in general in 1945, “[d]isrespect for protective wildlife laws is widespread and this attitude is strengthened by
the time-honored system of the open range and large blocks of ‘company owned’ land.” When he first arrived at his post in 1951, Montgomery County game warden Charles Kincannon remembered that the county had “the worst” reputation in Texas for poaching. People would regularly poison streams and creeks in the county to illegally catch fish. Poachers shot does throughout the year, and the public kept mum about any transgressions against game laws. The woods were open. Local lips were sealed.\(^{53}\)

When he started enforcing these laws, Kincannon faced social snubs and, occasionally, threats. He also faced apathy and sometimes downright resistance from county law enforcement agents. On one occasion in the early 1950s Kincannon came upon a group of men hunting deer with their dogs late at night. When Kincannon confronted the men and informed them that he would be taking them to jail, the leader responded, “You can lock us up, but I can’t promise I’ll stay long. I’ve got the keys.” Kincannon backed down rather than trying to arrest the county sheriff.\(^{54}\) Kincannon ran afoul of local political power again in 1965 when he confronted Justice of the Peace Bo Calfee about his alleged game law violations. Calfee responded by knocking the uniformed Kincannon to the ground and, as Calfee later admitted, repeatedly kicking him in the face. In response, Kincannon told the *Courier* reporter that he would begin carrying his gun while on duty. As he put it, “it looks like I’m going to have to enforce my own peace around this county from now on.”\(^{55}\)

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\(^{53}\) On sawmill workers, see Sitton and Conrad, *Nameless Towns*, 169. Mike Bryan, “Trapper Jake Upholding Law,” *CDC*, March 27, 1975, p. 1 (first quotation), 10 and Kenneth Kelly, “Kelly” in Graves, *Magnolia Memories*, 469; *Principal Game Birds and Mammals of Texas: Their Distribution and Management* (Austin: Texas Game, Fish, and Oyster Commission, 1945), 3 (second quotation); Ken Carr, “Men Hunted Here Nearly Every Day-and Night,” *CDC*, January 17, 1965, p. 10 (third quotation); It was common practice across the South for such fishermen to use ether chemicals such as rotenone, dynamite, or electric shocks to disable and/or kill fish wholesale. See, for example, Ken Carr, “Man does Best at Killing,” *CDC*, June 30, 1965, s. 2, p. 3, 6.

\(^{54}\) Calfee Interview, 2012. Such resistance to game law enforcement by sheriffs was common in East Texas. See for example, Sitton, *Backwoodsmen*, 263.

\(^{55}\) The sheriff’s department responded with pronounced inaction. Calfee was never prosecuted. “Calfee a Hometown Boy Who Made Good,” *Houston Post* (hereinafter *HP*), January 6, 1974, (quotation); “Game Warden Files on Judge
This persistent and uncontrolled overhunting wreaked havoc on what would have
otherwise been thriving game populations in the county. Turkeys were the first to disappear. The
last one was sighted in Montgomery County in 1939. Even after a major restocking push in the
early 1960s, there were only a few hundred in all of southeast Texas in 1965.\textsuperscript{56} As in much of the
country, deer populations that had already declined significantly by the 1920s collapsed during
the lean years of the depression.\textsuperscript{57} Even after hunting pressure slackened in the 1940s, county
deer numbers remained low. One resident remembered that a person could have gone years
without seeing deer tracks in the county.\textsuperscript{58} An entire generation grew up with squirrel hunting,
rather than deer hunting. Pursuit of the small game animal accounted for more hunting hours
than deer in East Texas into the 1960s.\textsuperscript{59} The county’s extensive woods had little to offer hunters
or wildlife seekers in the postwar decade.

As with the stock law, the transformation of Montgomery County’s wooded landscape
from the backwoodsman’s commons to a recreational and suburban haven required a concerted
effort by local elites and a shift in public support from the poacher to the game warden. When
Charles Kincannon arrived, he had neither. Rather than wasting his energy arresting residents
that popularly elected justices of the peace would not convict, Kincannon focused his
enforcement on defending the county’s game and livestock from outsiders. Working-class

Houstonians, many of them migrants from the rural South to the booming metropolis, looked to

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Calfee, “CDC, November 3, 1965, p. 1. Raymond Weisinger, a Justice of the Peace, was also beaten by a poacher after he was arrested for hunting deer out of season. “Hunter Free on Bond after Biting Judge in Local Café,” CDC, October 22, 1957, p. 1. Personal violence played a major role in preventing the enforcement of game laws across East Texas.\textsuperscript{56} Principal Game of Texas, 15-17 and “Eastern Turkey Spreading in Eastex Woods,” CDC, August 22, 1965, p. 10.\textsuperscript{57} Hart Stilwell, “Just How Good were ‘The Good Old Days’ of ‘Free’ Deer Hunting?” Texas Game and Fish (January 1956), 10.\textsuperscript{58} Ike Barrett, Interview by Author, November 11, 2010, Dobbin, Tex. The county’s closed season on deer during the period was difficult to enforce and did little to boost populations into the 1950s. House Bill 803, listed in Texas Game and Fish (August 1945); Principal Game of Texas, 91-104. \textsuperscript{59} Phil D. Goodrum, “Bushy Tails,” Texas Game and Fish (February 1946), 6-7, 19. Ivan W. Schmedemann, A. B. Wooten and W. D. Franklin, Outdoor Recreation. . . Potential in East Texas, July 1964, Texas Experiment Station, Bulletin 1013, Texas A&M University, 19.}
\end{footnotes}
Montgomery County as a place of unrestricted hunting, fishing, and camping. These blue-collar sportsmen found themselves at the mercy of a double standard enforced by local courts. In one case, three Houston men were fined $700 for poisoning fish in the county in 1953 during a period where locals were notorious for their poisoning of the county’s creeks.\textsuperscript{60} Enforcement in July 1956 led to fines being levied on nine hunters, five of whom were from Houston and none of whom were local.\textsuperscript{61} Leveling fines on Houstonians was always a more popular approach to game enforcement, because these outsiders could be portrayed as stealing game from locals and these fines would pad the county’s coffers. The strongest actions were reserved for those who threatened local property. Three Houston bricklayers, originally from Alabama, drove to the county to go squirrel hunting in 1954. Finding no squirrels, they killed what legal documents later described as a “clearly marked” hog off that they assumed was feral. They faced charges of hog theft.\textsuperscript{62} A few years later, three other Houston men also killed a stray hog while they were trespassing and camping along the San Jacinto River. These men were fined $490 for their trouble.\textsuperscript{63} In 1954 a group of Houston hunters accidently shot a yearling cow while illegally deer hunting on a farm near Magnolia. After a lengthy trial and the real possibility of imprisonment, the accused was declared not guilty.\textsuperscript{64} In each of these cases, the defendants were working class men. The fact that outsiders were trespassing and hunting in the county was looked down upon, but it was the damage they did to local property that led local law enforcement to treat them so harshly. The overall trend was the selective enforcement of game laws against Houstonians and the almost complete lack of game enforcement against locals. Enforcement patterns suggest that

\textsuperscript{60} “Fish Poisoning Charge Changed; Fines total $700,” \textit{CDC}, July 2, 1953, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{61} “2 Hunters Fined for ‘Headlighting’,” \textit{CDC}, August 2, 1956.
\textsuperscript{63} “Three Houston Men Fined $490.50 Here,” \textit{CDC}, March 6, 1958, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Texas v. David W. Mack}, February 11, 1955, #9331, Criminal Docket, 9th District Court, Conroe, Tex.
local residents and elected officials continued to view poaching as a victimless crime and did not yet view wildlife as a resource worth protecting.\textsuperscript{65}

It took the concerted efforts of Texas Game and Fish representatives and the East Texas Chamber of Commerce and the successes of nearby counties to convince county leaders of the possible economic gains to be had. The recreation industry in Texas was booming at the time. Participation in outdoor recreation in Texas increased by fifty percent between 1955 and 1960. The amount of money these Texans spent on recreation doubled over the same period. In light of these statistics, state Fish and Game and Agricultural Extension officials both took it as their goal to further develop the recreational industries in East Texas counties.\textsuperscript{66} By 1960 Texas Game and Fish’s efforts at restocking deer on large protected acreages in Tyler and Angelina Counties were showing promising results.\textsuperscript{67} This restocking coincided with the establishment of private hunting clubs committed to protecting game on their leased timberlands through fencing, range management, and hiring armed guards to prevent poaching.\textsuperscript{68} Montgomery County’s proximity

\textsuperscript{65} For those landowners who wanted to exert more extensive control over their land, the Cattleman’s Security Association offered an alternative to local law enforcement. This organization served the counties surrounding Houston and appealed primarily to absentee landowners. It offered its paying members, fifty of which were in Montgomery county, a radio patrol service that would deter trespassers and poachers. Such patrol services were an effective, if costly stopgap measure, but they often ran into conflict with local law enforcement members who were jealous of their local power. These services could also spark conflict and violence when hired pasture riders clashed with hunters. One such incident occurred in the county in 1961. Just after dawn on Halloween morning, Jeff Beeson, a fence rider near Grangerland, was patrolling private pastures in order to keep deer hunters out. When he saw a teenager on horseback riding out of the woods with his hounds, Beeson confronted him. After a few minutes conversation, the content of which has not survived, Beeson shot the youth twice. These types of conflict were inevitable when private security confronted a law-breaking public. \textit{Ad, CDC, September 25, 1963, s. 3, p. 2 and “Investigator Battles Sheriff with Words,” CDC, February 23, 1964, p. 1, 12; “18-Year-Old Shot off of Horse; Near Death in Hospital,” CDC, October 31, 1961, p. 1.}

\textsuperscript{66} Schmedemann, Wooten and Franklin, “Outdoor Recreation,” 2.


\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Principal Game of Texas}, 96. The East Texas Wildlife Conservation Association, Inc., for instance, started in Hardin County in 1955, and led the way in large-scale game conservation in the region. By 1960 they had stocked deer and turkey, fenced their 56,000 acres of leased forest land, and employed two full-time officers to police it. “Piney Woods Region Restoring Wildlife,” \textit{Texas Game and Fish} (April 1960), 39.
to Houston caused the price of land to soar and therefore put the large acreages hunting clubs required out of reach. In spite of this difficulty, landowners began in 1961 to work toward overcoming what one state official termed the “deeply entrenched” practice “of free hunting on private lands.”\textsuperscript{69} The Chamber of Commerce Game Conservation Committee had been feebly promoting the economic possibilities of game development in the county since the mid-1950s.\textsuperscript{70} The uncertain future of the local lumber industry during a downturn in early 1960s made landowners much more receptive to this message.\textsuperscript{71}

On January 30, 1961, the chamber held a meeting in Conroe with local sportsmen and property owners to discuss the creation of a local wildlife improvement association. Eugene Walker, a representative of the state Game Commission, tried to sell locals on the potential financial benefits of recreational development and regaled them with tales of rural counties in Texas that had turned around their local economies through recreation. Fish and Game experts in Austin had identified Montgomery County as a major potential source of recreation for Houstonians desperate to hunt and fish close to home. Transforming the piney-woods county into a hunters’ paradise would take a lot of work. A Fish and Game survey reported that of the 500,000 acres of land in the county suitable for game, only 100,000 had “sufficient” deer populations. This was a marked improvement over past decades, but if the county was going to secure the $1,000,000 more in game revenue the department promised, they would have to do


\textsuperscript{71} The housing boom of the late 1940s and 1950s brought with it a boom in the national demand for saw timber. As demand slacked in the early 1960s, local production outstripped demand by more than thirty percent. This helped to push local timberland owners to find alternate ways to make money off their land. “Extension Service for Year Cover Wide Range,” \textit{CDC}, December 16, 1964, s. 1, p. 11. “We Produce More Timber than we can Consume,” \textit{CDC}, January 22, 1964, s. 4, p. 3; William B. Alderman, “Enterprise Among the Pines,” \textit{Texas Parade} (June 1962), 10-13.
better. Gaining control of their woods and protecting their deer from both local poachers and illegal hunters from Houston was their first priority.\textsuperscript{72}

Riding a wave of enthusiasm, these local sportsmen, landowners, and businessmen formed the Montgomery County Fish and Wildlife Improvement Association with chamber of commerce representative Earle Gentry as president. The committee called for public education, game law enforcement, habitat development, the creation of game preserves, the destruction of undesirable species, the prevention of pollution, and better communication between sportsmen and landowners.\textsuperscript{73} The County Program Committee, an umbrella group affiliated with the local agricultural extension office, made game and fish development one of its core rural development goals in 1964.\textsuperscript{74} The Committee warned that the greatest barrier to this development was “[t]he tradition of free hunting on private lands” that remained “deeply entrenched in the sociology of hunters and land operators.”\textsuperscript{75} After a few false starts and organizational changes, local landowners moved forward with their program in February 1964. They affiliated with Sportsmen Clubs of Texas (SCOT) and, working with Charles Kincannon, set about recruiting local landowners to patrol and report any suspicious activity along every county road and highway within the county. Surveillance and the control of “outlaw hunting” were vital to the success of recreational development.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{72} Hunting deer in the county had been illegal since 1935. The game laws applicable to the county were those passed \textit{ad hoc} by the state legislature. In 1959 the legislature changed all this by placing the county under the regulatory authority of the Texas Game and Fish Commission. From this point on the commission had direct control over the setting of game seasons, hunting regulations, and enforcement. For the closing of deer seasons, see House Bill 385, Regular Session, 44th Texas State Legislature. For the granting of regulatory power to Game and Fish Commission, see Senate Bill 159, Regular Session, 56th Texas State Legislature.

\textsuperscript{73} “Wildlife Association to Meet this Thursday,” \textit{CDC}, May 21, 1961, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{74} Montgomery County Program Building Committee, \textit{Your County Program: Long-Range Program of the Montgomery County Program Building Committee}, (Montgomery County, Tex.: Self Published, 1964), Dolph Briscoe, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 34-42.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Your County Program}, 36.

\textsuperscript{76} “Sportsmen Set Up to Aid Wildlife,” \textit{CDC}, February 9, 1964, s. 1, p. 5. SCOT was itself a relatively new organization. State conservation leaders founded it in 1956 as an umbrella organization for sportsmen clubs in
Foxhunters and locals who hunted deer with dogs offered the only organized opposition to this new conservation movement. These older style hunters found that their sport—which had been taken for granted only two decades before—was now outside the pale. Conservationists warned locals of the danger dogs posed to deer populations. Although they rarely caught unwounded deer, dogs harassed them to the point of exhaustion and malnourishment. Dogs were especially destructive toward does and fawns. State game officials and sportsmen painted dogs as a primary enemy of deer. For these “depredations,” as one Texas Game and Fish article put it, dogs roused the anger of both deer hunters and conservationists. As so many foxhunters were already coming to realize, dogs and deer could not coexist in the woods. The push to more intensively manage deer populations and establish profit-making leases necessarily brought the two groups into conflict. These tensions came to the surface at one meeting in June 1960 when over a hundred hunters met to discuss the future of game in the county. What began as an informational meeting led by Kincannon and state conservation experts became a heated confrontation when a group of local deer hunters proposed allowing the running of deer with dogs in the county. In response, Ed Damuth and a group of landowners, who sided with Kincannon, roundly condemned the idea. For these landowners and sportsmen, “[f]ree range and uncontrolled dogs” were the main reason for the limited growth of deer populations in the area.

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77 Principal Game of Texas, 96-97; “Hunting Forecast, 1957” Texas Game and Fish (October 1957), 23, 24;
“Unrestrained Pets Can Deplete Game” Texas Game and Fish (June 1957), 28 (quotation); Your County Program, 36. Schmedemann, Wooten and Franklin, “Outdoor Recreation,” 7. It was legal to use dogs for hunting deer in Montgomery County from 1937. House Bill 111, 45th Texas Legislature, Second Session. With the opening of the deer season, however, the question was reopened. Hunters using dogs could always try get around the law by “collar switching” or claiming to be hunting raccoons, coyote, foxes, or other less-regulated game. James Scott Interview. For the ban, see “District Program and Work Plan for Montgomery and Walker County Soil and Water Conservation District No. 425” 1969, Walker SWCD, 23.
78 For their part, fox hunters viewed the return of deer to the southern woods as a travesty for their sport. Fox hounds would often abandon the fox chase in order to follow a deer track. In doing so, the hound would bring disgrace on itself and its owner. For this reason, fox hunting and deer hunting were, in the long run, mutually incompatible uses of the southern woods. See Sitton, Gray Ghosts, 174-176.
The deer they had organized to protect had been “chased, harassed, and often killed by dogs allowed to roam at will.” The Courier’s sympathetic coverage claimed that eighty-five percent of those in attendance sided with Damuth. Dog hunters found themselves shouted down and shut out of the movement.79 T. J. Peel, longtime county commissioner and a foxhunter, led a movement in the summer of 1961 to establish an alternate sportsmen’s club that would develop hunting while respecting the open woods and hunting with dogs traditions. It fizzled. While the Montgomery County Fish and Wildlife Improvement Association had the full support of the chamber of commerce, the local press, and state conservationists, this group had to meet in the local community center and made little headway.80

A group of prominent landowners in Harris, Montgomery, Grimes, Waller, and Walker Counties organized under the aegis of the Cattlemen’s Security Association tried to build on this early momentum. In meetings with representatives of the National Forest Service and Texas Fish and Game in 1964, they pushed the organizations to designate over 20,000 acres of the Sam Houston National Forest as a game preserve in order to restore deer populations in the area and promote hunting leases. Such a move would have closed this public hunting ground to all hunting for a period of five years, If passed, this would have allowed landowners to benefit from improved hunting while shutting down what was quickly becoming the last hunting option for both local residents and working-class Houstonians who could not afford to lease or purchase large pieces of property. This proposal drew heated protests. Foxhunters were especially vexed, as they depended on national forest land to pursue their sport. Large blocks of open forest were increasingly scarce, and the risk of having their dogs killed for trespassing was becoming too

79 “Local Sportsmen Oppose Deer Running with Dogs in County,” *CDC*, June 7, 1960, p. 1, 5; *Your County Program*, 36 (quotation). See Figure B.
great for many foxhunters. In response to this proposal, these irate hunters disrupted what organizers had hoped would be a demonstration for state and regional conservationists of how progressive the county had become in its desire to improve game populations. Instead, as the Courier complained, the meeting “probably set state and federal aid to wildlife projects in this area back about 10 years.”

Local hunter Bill Terrell further explained this popular opposition in a March 1964 letter to the editor. Terrell cast the hunting public of Montgomery County as a victim of greedy special interests. Responding to the broader transformations over the previous decade, he argued that “closing the forest would benefit the deer hunter and the turkey hunter,” but “[w]hat do you good hearted people plan to do for the squirrel hunter, the coon hunter, the fox hunter, the possum hunter, the armadillo hunter, and the many people that just go into the National Forest every year with a gun just to get into the open?” These people, he argued, were the victims of a movement by “the Land Owners” who were “trying to make a few extra dollars off of lease money.” Ultimately, the Texas Fish and Game was unwilling to alienate such a large group of hunters. It rejected the idea of closing down this public hunting land that so many had come to depend on. There was a limit to how far the movement to develop game could go.

For all the conflict that such meetings exposed, enforcement of game laws already on the books proved the most effective means of closing the open woods. Traditionally, game violations had been handled at the precinct level by justices of the peace. Because their reelection depended on maintaining the goodwill of their small sector of the county electorate, these justices usually looked the other way when it came to game law violations by locals. When local justices of the peace did enforce game laws, they did so at their own risk. Justice Raymond Weisinger, for


82 Bill Terrell, Letter to the Editor, CDC, March 4, 1964, s. 3, p. 6. (quotations).
instance, was beaten in 1957 at a local café by a poacher he had dared to fine. Of the justices, only Bobby Yancey took a major stand on the issue. Yancey, who would later get the Courier’s support when he ran for county commissioner, took it upon himself to crackdown on so called fire hunters—hunters who “jacklighted”—hunted deer at night using artificial lights. These hunters were, in Yancey’s words, “a detriment to the county’s rural economy, not to mention the sport of hunting.” As early as 1960, he issued stiff fines to eleven hunters whom Kincannon caught fire hunting in December of that year. Most justices, however, preferred to keep their heads down. Many spent their time handing out speeding tickets to out-of-town drivers they were unlikely to ever see again.

This culture of lax enforcement began to change in 1964 when, as part of this broader movement, Charles Kincannon began filing some of his arrests for game violations with the county judge, W. S. Weisinger. Weisinger, a Conroe businessman, prominent chamber of commerce member, and major area landowner, handed down heavy fines and jail time to game violators as a warning to would-be poachers. Where violators had gotten off in the past with light fines or dismissals, Weisinger made public examples out of them, whether they came from Houston or were from the county. The Courier did its part publicizing these cases and warned hunters of an “all out crackdown” on game law violations. Where between 1960 and 1963, Weisinger had handled only three cases related to game, each of which had to do with fence

84 Deer responded to bright lights by staring back at the lights. The reflections from their eyes made them easy targets. This practice was dangerous, as it was difficult to distinguish deer from other animals or even humans at night. Sportsmen condemned it as cowardly. “Game Violators Fined Heavily in JP Court,” CDC, December 2, 1960, p. 1 (quotation) and CDC, December 14, 1960, p. 1. “Four Youths Fined for Illegal Hunt,” CDC, June 9, 1965, p. 1.
cutting and trespassing, he handled thirty-eight cases over the following two years. The rest resulted in large fines (between $100 and $200) and, occasionally, jail sentences. The majority of these fines were for hunting with artificial light, hunting from a car, or hunting without a license or for poisoning fish. Hunting deer with dogs, in contrast, only accounted for one fine. This dramatic rise in enforcement was a central factor in transforming the culture of hunting in Montgomery County in the 1960s.

The records from justice of the peace precinct one help illustrate this shift in game law enforcement during the period. This precinct was located in the northern part of the county. It was fifty miles from downtown Houston and adjacent to both the Sam Houston National Forest and the future site of Lake Conroe. While not as heavily wooded as the southwestern and eastern parts of the county, this precinct still received a great deal of use by hunters and fishermen during the period. An examination of the game records reveals that in 1960, the precinct recorded twenty-three game citations. Because deer populations in that part of the county were slower to rebound, only one of these violations was for deer. The rest were for hunting squirrel out of season or without a license or trespassing on posted land to hunt squirrel. Fifteen of the violations were by Houstonians and seven were from either Conroe or Willis. All of the citations came from only four separate instances and therefore represents an even more spotty enforcement record than it might seem at first. Enforcement under J. M. Jordy, the justice at the

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86 Of these, only 14 were eventually dismissed—a relatively small percentage in a county whose underfunded justice system dismissed far more cases than it prosecuted over the 1950s and 1960s.

87 The statistics in this section and the section that follows were taken from the County Court Criminal Docket books for 1960-1970, 1975, and 1980 and from the Criminal Docket books from Justice of the Peace, Precinct 1 for 1960, 1964-65, 1970, 1975, and 1980. The Justice of the Peace records for Precinct 1 were complete. Unfortunately, the only other docket books available for this period that have survived are a small collection from Precinct 2. In the County Court records before 1970 game violations were filed by the date disposed rather than the date filed, and as such, it is impossible to know if all of them for 1960, 64, and 1965 turned up in the surviving books. Because of this, the county court records can not support any in-depth statistical analysis. They can, however, give a general sense of trends in game law enforcement in the county. Stream pollution or trespassing were only counted in these statistics if the game warden filed the charge.
time, was better than some but still reflected a general preference for enforcing game laws against Houstonians rather than locals and a general laxity in enforcement. When James Harvey “Bo” Calfee took over the office in 1963, he abruptly stopped enforcing game laws. During all of 1964 and 1965, the years of the game law crackdown in the county, Bo Calfee logged only two hunting-related citations. Both were for killing a hog, an act of theft rather than a game law violation. Given that Kincannon accused Calfee of illegal hunting himself in November 1965, it is little wonder that he decided not to bring such cases to precinct one. When J. P. Bailey took over as justice in 1970, enforcement resumed. Bailey logged forty-six citations during 1970. These ranged from arson, trespass, and dog killing to night hunting, livestock killing, and killing illegal deer. The majority, twenty six, were for night hunting or illegal deer. By 1975 the number of citations had declined a great deal, ostensibly due to the deterrent effect of past enforcement. In 1975 precinct one had only four citations, all of them for night hunting. In 1980 they had twelve, including a few trespassing cases and one arson case. By that point, however, the opening of Lake Conroe had dramatically changed the area. It was now duck hunters from The Woodlands and Lake Conroe fishermen, rather than more blue-collar deer hunters, who showed up on the docket books. The game wardens and justices had a far more lucrative target in Houstonians who persistently fished and boated on the lake without proper licenses. By 1980 lake-related citations dominated other game citations by more than ten to one.

While clearing the woods of outlaw hunters, local landowners took significant steps toward fencing and leasing their land for hunting and fishing. One hundred and fifty local

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88 “Calfee, “Hometown Boy Who Made Good” (quotation); “Game Warden Files on Judge Calfee.”
89 Precinct one was more agriculturally developed and less extensively wooded than precincts three and four, and therefore probably had fewer game violations (reported and unreported) than these other precincts during this period. Precinct two included Conroe, and therefore had fewer huntable acres than the other precincts. The dearth of surviving records makes it impossible to determine conclusively that Bo Calfee’s refusal to enforce game violations proved the rule rather than the exception. The fact that Kincannon took so many cases from different parts of the county to the county court rather than the JP’s offices is the strongest evidence that he believed something was fundamentally wrong with the justices’ enforcement.
landowners were leasing their land by 1966. At least a half-dozen opened their lakes to sportsmen for a fee.\(^90\) For these landowners, leases provided cash income to offset the ever-increasing county taxes owed on their land. The bulk of land available was through three large landowners. Champion Paper had been leasing 10,000 acres to hunters since 1961, Foster Lumber Company leased its timber land as well, and Mitchell & Mitchell leased the bulk of the 36,526 acres it bought from Grogan Cochran Lumber Company in 1964. All three companies saw hunting leases as a way to help balance their books as they held their land for either development or timber harvest. By fencing, leasing, and regulating their land, these companies reinforced the boosters’ efforts to add game to the list of salable products of the county’s woods.\(^91\)

From a wider perspective, this attempt to transform Montgomery County into a hunters’ paradise proved a moderate success. In comparison with other East Texas counties further away from the city, however, Montgomery County’s hunting lease development was limited in scope. The proliferation of recreational developments, ranchettes, rural homesteads, and suburban homes fragmented the landscape and made it far more difficult to manage game populations effectively. The best hunting areas were intensely managed by large-scale farmers, hunting clubs, or timber companies. Even with these limitations, however, the county’s proximity to

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\(^90\) Ken Carr, “The Woods Will Boom on Saturday Morning,” *CDC*, November 9, 1966, p. 1, 3; See also “Extension Service for Year Cover Wide Range,” 11. For an example of one of the more elaborate leases, see “Mud Branch Lease Provides the Easy Life,” *CDC*, June 17, 1964 s. 2, p. 2. A 1964 survey of timber land owners found that 45 percent had purchased fence posts during the past year. *Your County Program*, 30. By 1969, a study by the local Soil and Water Conservation District found that 90 percent of unforested land and 75 percent of forested land was enclosed by fence. District Program, 1969, p. 22. On fishing, see Ken Carr, “Seven Local Lakes Now Open to Public,” *CDC*, April 20, 1966, s. 3, p. 1, 4 and Stan Crawford, “Small Lakes, Big Entertainment,” *CDC*, June 15, 1966, s. 2 p. 1, 7.

\(^91\) Local realtor Larry Jacobs described the Mitchell tract as “a deer hunter’s paradise.” Larry Jacobs, Interview by Author, August 17, 2012, Montgomery, Tex. Any hunter caught breaking game laws on these properties would forfeit their lease. Ken Carr, “These Days are for Deerslayers,” *CDC*, November 7, 1965, p. 11-12.
Houston made hunting leases a popular means for landowners to pay the taxes on their lands while waiting for the right price to sell or develop them.\footnote{James Scott described the local criteria for leasing as “If it can raise a deer on it, somebody has leased it to hunt deer.” Scott Interview; An Appraisal of Potential for Outdoor Recreational Developments in Montgomery County, Texas, A part of the Montgomery – Walker Soil and Water Conservation District, June, (no publisher, 1967), 11.}

Local efforts to develop hunting and game populations had significant success. Where Piney Woods culture had promoted the backwoods poacher as a southern folk hero, the Courier’s news coverage combined with the activities of local sportsmen, law enforcement, and conservationist groups turned public sentiment in favor of game law enforcement. Kincannon explained in November 1965, “[w]hat once was considered as ‘running to the law and ratting’ now is considered an act that will benefit hunters and land owners alike.”\footnote{Ken Carr, “These Days are for Deerslayers,” CDC, November 10, 1965, s. 3, p. 1, 8 (quotation).} Earlier that year he had commented, “[w]hen I first came to Montgomery County. . . it would be a rare day that I would get a call or complaint about game violations. Now I get about 25 a day.”\footnote{Carr, “Men Hunted Here,” 10.} Kincannon cited the increase in the number of hunting leases as a major factor driving this change, as leases put a dollar figure on game. He boasted that “[l]awbreaking was down to a minimum.”\footnote{“Montgomery County Deer Bigger, Fatter in 1964,” CDC, January 10, 1965, p. 10.} Such statements like Kincannon’s had a good deal to do with crafting a larger image of stronger enforcement and success under his watch. The fact that the county court handled only six game-related cases in 1970, however, offers some evidence that Kincannon and the county judge felt secure in trusting game enforcement to the justices of the peace. That justices were willing to support broad enforcement of the law is itself evidence that voters’ opinions had changed. Whether local enforcement ultimately can claim the credit or not, the fact is that the deer populations boomed during the period.\footnote{When asked about the impact of these local efforts to improve game in the county, Morris Straughn, county extension agent during the period, replied that it was only “a minimal success.” For long-time residents in the area,} Only 375 bucks had been legally killed in the county in
1957. In 1964, 580 bucks were killed during the first two days of the season alone. In 1965, deer were spreading from their population center in the timber tracts and bottomlands of the southwest across the whole of the county. Local conservation organizations continued to call for more fencing, game law enforcement, leases, and education in 1969, but by then the county had turned the corner. Poaching continued as a crime of opportunity in the county’s woods, but it no longer constituted a lifestyle for locals.

For local foxhunters, this process of closing the woods and the development that followed severely restricted their ability to hunt in the county. As early as the 1960s, large blocks of land open to unorganized hunters were scarce. Landowners, empowered by the shifts described above, were now quick to complain about dogs trespassing and harassing cattle and deer. In response, local foxhunters organized the Tri-County Fox and Wolf Hunters’ Association in March 1964 to provide a sheltered, organized, and community-sanctioned version of their sport. Although foxhunting in the county had traditionally been practiced by small groups of men at night, organizers of these events followed the precedent set by other foxhunting groups in promoting this new foxhunting as a family affair. The new organization drew members from Montgomery County as well as Walker County, Liberty County, and Houston. Association members encouraged spectators and hunters to bring their families to watch the contests and enjoy a barbecue dinner. Organizers emphasized these events as a safe place for kids and teenagers to socialize. They even hired a band to provide live music and had Ernest Coker, a prominent local judge, to speak about the history and legacy of foxhunting. This new foxhunting,
which met quarterly on a leased 7,300 acre tract of land near the northern border of the county, transformed what had been a semi-clandestine nighttime activity into a geographically contained, predictably scheduled, and well-publicized festival. This was foxhunting turned into a county fair. The meets were dramatically successful. Attendance grew to over five hundred people, and membership in the Association hit 718 by 1966. Foxhunting became the talk of the town for a few years. Yet this public celebration masked the dramatic shifts that had restricted foxhunting’s reach and had driven the foxhunters to organize in the first place. The sport would decline in popularity in the county over the following decades.\(^{102}\)

The damp coolness of a late October morning in 1976 found foxhunters from across the state gathered in southern Montgomery County. This time, however, a spectator hoping to hear the yelp of hounds or to sit around a camp fire late into the night would have been disappointed. Past foxhunts had pitched camp in the pine woods of the southwest part of the county. The hundreds of houses now under construction in The Woodlands made such a meeting place impossible. These so-called foxhunters met in the parking lot of the Rice Food Market. In the past, the fox had taken the hunt wherever he or she so desired, but in this hunt the hunters drove themselves. The sound of dogs careening through the woods had become a nuisance in south Montgomery County. These foxhunters would stick to the paved and gravel roads that now crisscrossed the landscape. This was made easier by the fact that their quarry was now not a live

\(^{102}\) This Association was one of a few dozen in the state. The *Conroe Courier* is the only source of information I have been able to find for this group. I have been unable to find any mention of the organization after 1966. The *Courier*’s increasingly suburban audience had little concern for such things, and so it is possible the group persisted into the 1970s, albeit with a decreased following. Equestrian foxhunts currently occur in Montgomery County, but these moved to the county in the 1990s and claim no connection to the county’s hilltop tradition. “Fox and Wolf Hunters Plan Hunt April 11,” *CDC*, April 5, 1964, s. 2, p. 5; “Fox Hunters Gather for Big Hunt,” *CDC*, April 15, 1964, s. 4, p. 7; “Fox Hunt Scheduled for Sat. Evening,” *CDC*, June 10, 1964, s. 3, p. 8; “Hunter Barbeque Proves Successful,” *CDC*, June 21, 1964, s. 2, p. 10; “Fox & Wolf Hunters to Meet Sat.,” *CDC*, May 30, 1965, p. 15; “Fox Hunters Assn. Has Great Hunt,” *CDC*, March 30, 1966, s. 2, p. 10; “Fox Hunters Assn. Plans Big Hunt,” *CDC*, March 20, 1966, p. 1. The creation of field trials as a response to the increasing difficulty of hilltopping was a national trend. Sitton, *Gray Ghosts*, 139-155.
fox, with its tendency to unpredictably cross fences and its insistence on disregarding changing property lines, but a CB radio transmitter that could be placed within the tightly drawn legal boundaries of the landscape. The organizers of the Copperhead Gap CB Association Fox Hunting Rally were not attempting to recreate the past glory days of foxhunting. In fact, it is doubtful many of the participants in what the group termed a “semi-treasure hunt and sports car rally” knew much about the history of foxhunting in the region. As a bellwether of change, however, CB foxhunting is emblematic of how suburbanizing Montgomery County maintained and recombined pieces of its backwoods land-use practices into a county image—a mystique. The thrill of the chase, the excitement of discovering backcountry roads, and the natural setting remained central to the lifestyle in this increasingly suburban county.

The transformations outlined in this chapter ended the days of the woods as the province of the poacher and the cattle-herding backwoodsman. The woods were now a private amenity for the enjoyment of suburbanites, exurbanites, urban hunters, and recreation-seekers. Those who chose to move to the county instead of the closer-in suburbs of Harris County chose to head out beyond the crabgrass frontier for something more than a larger house or a whiter school district, although both reasons were certainly important. Many moved out in order to experience a more rugged, more wooded, and more exciting brand of suburbanization that offered the romance of discovery as well as the comfort of amenity. The Conroe Courier did its best to feed develop this image, offering its readers stories of backwoods deviance and persistence colored with nostalgia. Now that these practices were rare, they had the tinge of the exotic.

Beginning in the 1960s, the *Courier* offered its readers stories of moonshine, cockfighting, and mad-cap hunting stories from the darker recesses of the county.\(^1\) The *Courier* also began a series of local color columns entitled “Ramblin” where journalist Stan Crawford told yarns about his adventures in the county’s woods. His articles romanticized the broken-down shacks and the old-timers who continued to live off nature’s bounty in the bottomlands of the region. These stories presented woods where a traveler might find a gnarly old sage, untouched by the modern world and willing to offer bits of wisdom to suburban explorers and Houston fishermen. Having repented of their past poaching, these tamed backwoodsmen now served as aged sentinels guarding game from lawbreakers. In their dotage, the aspirations of these men were to, as “Uncle Jim” put it, “hunt and fish and eat and sleep and sit.”\(^2\) Such accounts served a dual purpose during this period of dramatic social change. For newcomers, they reaffirmed the authenticity of the county’s wooded landscape during a period when suburban developments were under increasing scrutiny for their contrived social lives and cookie-cutter built environments. These elderly holdovers from an earlier era were so fascinating partially because they posed no real threat to suburban residents. Had backwoodsmen actually wandered into some exurbanite’s backyard, the picturesque mystique would have vanished and the no-trespassing signs gone up. For locals, these stories offered an opportunity to romanticize, if not necessarily celebrate, a wooded lifestyle that was quickly passing away. Both groups had the imaginative space to appreciate these stories, precisely because these holdovers from an

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\(^1\) Cockfighting, for instance, was practiced in broad daylight in the county. “Answer Please,” *CDC*, February 22, 1970, s. 1, p. 6. Moonshining continued into the 1960s, especially near the county border where practitioners could jump jurisdictions. Stan Crawford, “The Case of White Lightnin’,” *CDC*, October 27, 1965, p. 1. Bodies also had a bad habit of turning up in the forested places of the county throughout this period.

\(^2\) “Uncle Jim,” 1 (quotation). See also Stan Crawford, “Of Time and the Cabin,” *CDC*, June 29, 1968, p. 1. In one 1974 article, Barbara Fredricksen played off this image of a lost cabin in the woods to frame a story about a pair of Houstonians who had restored an old slave cabin as a primitive weekend retreat. The cache of this frontier image offered an extreme example of the promise of wooded life for suburbanites. Barbara Fredricksen, “Touch of the Past Tucked in the Woods,” *CDC*, June 16, 1974, s. 2, p. 1, 3.
earlier era were confined to the more isolated and undeveloped parts of the county, they held no real danger for residents.

Many of those who moved to the county during the 1960s took an active role in supporting the push to protect local wildlife. Many of these new residents proved to be some of Kincannon’s most trusted allies. They kept a watchful eye on every backcounty road and turned in game violators. As chapter eight argues, early developments in the area emphasized the county’s recreational attractions and resident’s proximity to nature. These nature-seeking residents had a vested interest in protecting wildlife and had none of the social stigma attached by locals to whistle blowing. They responded to poaching with anger at the destruction of their backyard wildlife. In a case that received a great deal of press, a local suburbanite called in four Houston men who were poisoning the San Jacinto River with rotenone just upstream from his Magnolia Bend subdivision in 1965. As the game warden took the men away, these subdivision residents mourned the destruction of their fishing holes and shook their heads at the damage done to their suburban nature. It was as if someone had cut down a tree from their front yard.\footnote{Ken Carr, “Man does Best at Killing,” \textit{CDC}, June 30, 1965, s. 2, p. 3, 6 and “Houston Men Face Trial on Fish Poisoning Charges,” \textit{CDC}, June 27, 1965, p. 1.}

By the time the county had entered the 1970s, however, such poaching and natural destruction was rare. The nature that attracted new residents was not the inhabited woods of the backwoodsman, but the pristine woods of nature. It was these new residents and the developers who catered to them that ultimately benefitted the most from the closing of the woods. By this point, newcomers inherited this managed and defended landscape with little, if any, knowledge of its previous history. The greatest single amenity these developments had to offer was the wooded countryside, with its beautiful trees, its wild animals, and its promise of quiet, seclusion, and a better life for the children.
With a level of historical irony lost on these newcomers, these exurbanites and their children claimed access to the woods surrounding their homes as part of their promised suburban lifestyle. This forested version of what Christopher Sellers has termed “suburban country life” offered suburban kids the freedom to roam and to hunt non-game animals on the flood plains, common lands, utility easements, and undeveloped lands that made up the woods surrounding these suburban enclaves.\footnote{Where both Sellers and Adam Rome emphasize the ways the destruction of these informal commons areas mobilized suburbanites as part of a larger environmental movement, this chapter looks backward to connect these open space areas to their rural pasts. Sellers, \textit{Crabgrass Crucible}, 21-23, 32-34, 87-94 and Adam Rome’s \textit{Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119-152.} Residents of Shenandoah, for instance, used the area that would become The Woodlands as their own private wooded playground for years.\footnote{Joseph W. Kutchin, \textit{How Mitchell Energy & Development Corp. Got Its Start and How it Grew: An Oral History and Narrative Overview} (The Woodlands, Tex.: Mitchell Energy & Development Corp., 1998), 53-55.} Whispering Oaks residents used the banks of the nearby San Jacinto River for their recreation. Rising to prominence in the decade after the crackdown on trespassing and poaching in the late 1950s and 60s, this suburban informal commons was never as rigidly defined, as extensively used, or as dramatically defended as the rural commons had been. Still, for suburbanites, the woods surrounding their homes represented a semi-private wooded playground that remained open to them, provided they left game animals unharmed and obeyed posted trespass signs.\footnote{For an example of adolescents hunting non-game animals in the suburban countryside, see Rosanne Doyle, “Willis Boy Remains in Coma,” \textit{CDC}, September 29, 1979, p. 1.} Some of these open spaces became sites of a new form of deviance, as suburban and rural residents faced with inadequate services dumped their trash wherever they could get away with it.\footnote{“Wanted: More Trash dumps in Montgomery County,” \textit{CDC}, April 21, 1965, s. 2, p. 14 and Terri O’Connor, “We Must cover Garbage Before it Covers Us,” \textit{CDC}, February 25, 1970, s. 1, p. 6. This topic will be dressed more fully in chapters seven and eight.} For the most part, however, these areas served as recreational and aesthetic space. What previous accounts of this practice have missed is the extent to which this informal commons depended on the assumption in suburban parents’ minds that the woods were no longer inhabited. Suburban
kids were allowed into the woods precisely because the backwoodsman and the poacher were no longer there. It was only a depopulated wood that could serve as an informal summer camp for suburban youth. In this way, the clearing of the woods of its southern rural past was a direct preparation for the suburban experience of nature that followed it. Only a woods stripped of its rural past could provide the rural lifestyle new suburban residents craved.111

Even as they laid claim to these now emptied woods, many of the suburban and exurban newcomers ironically claimed some of the rights and freedoms of the backwoodsmen for themselves. As part of their move to the countryside, these residents claimed the right to let their dogs run free. The move to the county was not only to bring children into daily contact with nature, but also to free the family pet from the constraints of urban life.112 Roaming dogs were nothing new in Montgomery County. In fact, across rural America, no rural homestead was complete without a few guard dogs or hunting dogs lying around. Nor was the affection shown for these pets was also new to the area. In East Texas, many hounds were just as beloved and spoiled as any suburban dog. What changed with suburbanization was the dramatic increase in the population of these pets let loose in the woods and subdivisions. As with so many of the problems caused by suburbanization, from septic tanks and garbage disposal to water supply and drainage, suburbanites’ attempts to appropriate a country lifestyle resulted in an overloading of the rural infrastructure and environment. Montgomery County, like most southern counties at the time, had no leash law. Even at the height of the movement for game preservation, no local official would think of antagonizing his constituency by trying to pass such an ordinance. The

111 When adult hunters did stray into the suburban woods, residents were quick to complain. See for example Cause numbers 3043A and 3044A, Book 100, Criminal Docket, Justice of the Peace, Precinct 2, Montgomery County, Tex.
112 Because his ultimate goal is to discern the connections between suburban nature and suburban environmentalism, Christopher Sellers examination of suburban dogs focuses on their new arrival to the area and significance as pets—as a constant connection to the natural world and as a pampered companion for suburban children. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*, 82-86.
town of Conroe itself only passed a leash law in 1963, after years of vaccination crackdowns, heated debate, and retaliatory dog poisonings. The county took no such actions. As a result, when suburbanites moved to the “country,” many of them let their dogs run free.

The result was that suburban dogs did far more damage to wildlife populations and caused more problems than fox hunters ever had. The introduction of thousands of roaming dogs into the county’s woods combined with the frequent dumping of unwanted dogs in the area by Houstonians to create a serious problem for county officials. The county was certainly not unique in facing the dog problem. Two factors made the problem especially prominent in the county, though. The area’s mild winters limited the role of the climate in controlling populations. The mixture of poor trash removal facilities, increasing housing densities, and large pockets of woods combined to provide the shelter and food that feral dogs needed to survive. New suburban arrivals did not think about such issues. Like the backwoodsmen who preceded them, these new residents claimed the woods for their privately owned animals to roam. They expected the bonds of ownership to protect their animals while at the same time they defended the need for dogs to enjoy the freedom to act out their animal instincts. Just like the piney woods rooters that roamed the woods before the closing of the range, these dogs were ostensibly owned but lived much of their lives outside of the control of their owners, roaming across property lines, uprooting gardens, harassing and injuring wildlife, and generally making a menace of themselves. The more suburbanites moved in, the greater the problems resulting from this canine open range.

114 This increase in stray and feral pet populations coincided with a dramatic shift in the perception of these animals. Where public health officials had pushed for dog control as a means to control rabies, new advocates pushed animal welfare and concerns over the earth’s ability to sustain large pet populations. Iris Nowell The Dog Crisis (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978) is emblematic of this trend. Alan M. Beck, The Ecology of Stray Dogs: A Study in Free-Ranging Urban Animals (Baltimore: York Press, 1973.
These roaming dogs proved a perennial frustration to local boosters, county officials, and many frightened suburbanites. For the organizers of the first annual Robbie Williams Golf Tournament in 1968, roaming dogs were an embarrassment more than anything. Although ultimately won by Australian Bruce Crompton, the tournament’s most memorable event came while another competitor was setting up a crucial approach shot at the eighteenth hole. After a few practice swings, the man was forced to step back from his ball as a pack of roaming dogs raced across the course, yelping and barking as they ran. Event organizers were eventually able to chase the dogs off, but the damage to both the golfer’s concentration and the event’s prestige was done. Suburban wildlife of this sort clashed with the popular image of deer grazing in backyards.115

Roaming dogs posed a threat to both wildlife and people. They often traveled in packs, harassing deer and hurting wildlife populations, tearing up the landscape, and generally making a nuisance of themselves—just as piney woods rooters had before them.116 More often discussed in the local press was the threat these dogs posed to suburban residents and their property. The problem became especially acute by the mid-1970s. Fred Hajduk, president of the Oak Ridge North Civic Club, representing one of the larger developments in the south part of the county, warned residents of several cases where children and local residents had been attacked by dogs in their development. As he explained to the Courier, “[t]his isn’t just stray dogs somebody’s dumped here. . . It’s neighborhood pets which are allowed to roam or get out of fenced areas.”117

117 “Civic Club to Discuss Dog Control,” CDC, June 6, 1976, s. 2, p. 12. See also “South County Communities Still Seeking Unification,” CDC, March 13, 1975, p. 1, 10.
The problem was not limited to any one development or social class. Wherever suburban developments spread, the issue cropped up. Citizens complained that packs of stray dogs were wandering around neighborhoods throughout the county endangering their health and welfare. One reporter explained that “[e]ven in fashionable developments such as River Plantation, bikers and joggers are known to carry a stick to fend off dogs.” What began as a small group of suburbanites and exurbanites turning their pets loose on the newly emptied open range became, through exponential population growth and a lack of county services, a major threat to the health and welfare of many suburban residents. Concerted action and numerous protests to the county commissioners resulted in a limited response. The commissioners court passed a strong rabies control order in March 1979 but still refused to pass a county-wide leash law or vaccination law. Broad public support, they claimed, was still against such a law, and there was no money available to fund it. As the county entered the 1980s, it did so with no real answer to the problem of free-ranging dogs. As local Humane Society president Harry Goetzman put it, “Our control is how many animals can survive the streets. Our shelter is the subdivision.” For many subdivisions, relief on this issue came only through the passage of town leash laws after incorporation.

Whether in the closing of the open range, the conservation of wildlife, or the management of dogs, Montgomery County, along with much of the South, was far behind both national trends and trends within the South. As a region, East Texas was one of the last areas to embrace strong

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119 Passing a lengthy and powerful dog control ordinance was one of the first acts of Oak Ridge North’s elected officials when residents voted to incorporate in 1979. Ordinance 014-79, Folder Ordinances, Box Ordinances; City Council Minutes, November 19 and December 4, 1979, Folder 1979, Box City Council Minutes, ORN Records. Kaye Thompson, “Cruelty!: It’s a Growing Problem as it Relates to Animals in County,” CDC, December 11, 1979, p. 1 (quotation) and Political Ad, CDC, May 2, 1980, p. 18. For the attempt to pass county dog control ordinances, see Commissioners Court Records, February 1976 and June 1977; County Commissioners’ Minutes, v. 28, p. 484-494, and Thompson, “Cruelty!”
fencing, state-managed wildlife, and limits on roaming dogs. Loudoun County, Virginia, was at the other extreme. Few counties in the South can match its conservation record. When the state of Virginia passed its local-option stock law in 1866, Loudoun landowners immediately moved seven of the county’s districts into the stock law camp. Only two districts kept their open range status. In 1878, a state delegate from Loudoun sponsored legislation that, when it passed, required landowners to fence land that abutted public highways. Both acts inflamed local passions and inspired resistance. Even still, by the 1880s, Loudoun had established the legal frameworks of the open range that Montgomery County would not set up until 1956. The story is similar for wildlife conservation. Loudoun had passed and was enforcing hunting seasons on foxes, game birds, and fur-bearing animals by the end of World War I. Loudoun’s first deer season was in 1959. Loudoun game wardens had plenty of problems enforcing these laws, but Loudoun never developed the culture of poaching endemic to East Texas.¹²⁰

When it came to dogs, non-elite rural Loudouners had every bit as much of a personal attachment to their rural dogs as did East Texans. The importance of sheep to Loudoun’s agricultural economy, however, led county supervisors to set up a dog tax system in 1874. The money from this tax went to compensate livestock owners whose animals were mauled by roaming dogs. A 1914 law declared that any dog in the county whose owner had not paid the tax was liable to destruction by the county constable or deputy sheriff. In Montgomery County, hounds were essential to the agricultural system. In Loudoun they were a danger to it. Yet both counties faced the problems of suburban dogs. The difference was that when the issue of

¹²⁰ Four of the stock law districts allowed milk cows to remain on the range as a concession to the county’s rural poor. The county would close these last areas to roaming cattle with little fanfare in 1958. The closed range was an accomplished fact, even in these areas, long before this point. “Fence Law Adopted for County,” LTM, January 9, 1958, p. 1; Inez Lemmert, “Wildlife Law Enforcement and the game Wardens of Loudoun County,” November 22, 1993, Unpublished Materials, TBL; Charles P. Poland Jr., From Frontier to Suburbia: Loudoun County, Virginia, One of Americas Fastest Growing Counties (Westminster, Md.: Heritage Books, 2005) 289-292
roaming suburban dogs damaging livestock and game and frightening residents, Loudoun had the administrative structures and the staff necessary to tackle the issue, where Montgomery County spent nearly a decade coming to terms with the problem.\textsuperscript{121}

Both counties faced similar problems in managing their rural landscapes. Loudoun, however, had the state structures in place and the local political will to deal with these issues. Montgomery County leaders, in contrast, had a great deal more difficulty managing their rural landscapes. The reasons are both cultural and agricultural. More than three-quarters of the land in Montgomery County remained forested into the 1970s. In Loudoun the same ratio of land was in active cultivation. A denser rural population, more fertile soils, and the higher value of land gave Loudoun residents a far greater interest in controlling their land. Loudoun County’s land owners also tended to be more wealthy, more paternalistic, and more conservation minded than Montgomery County elites, who were only a generation or two removed from the frontier. Finally, Loudoun County elites worked within a state government that was far more amiable to their interests as landed gentry. In contrast, Montgomery County elites had little if any power in the halls of power at Austin. As a result, Loudoun’s local government was one of the most active in the state and in the South in controlling poaching, maintaining fencing, and dealing with dogs. Montgomery County’s experience had far more in common with the rest of the South.

The impact of Loudoun’s rural wealth and political power was most obvious in the difference in the fate of foxhunting in the two counties. Foxhunters in both counties increasingly found themselves hemmed in by land use changes as development encroached. Through the combination of their deep pockets, social connections, and cultural appeals, however, Loudoun’s foxhunters were able to keep the large swaths of property open to their sport. The early

foxhunters worked hard to maintain a reputation for largesse. From their first arrival in 1905, northerners continued the local tradition of paying restitution for any damage caused by their sport. Where East Texas foxhunters’ image tied them to backwoodsmen and deviance the equestrian foxhunters became a prominent symbol of the refinement, of high-minded conservation, and of cultured country life of the Virginia Piedmont. Foxhunters cast their sport as part of the county’s identity and therefore as part of the public good. As wire fencing spread across the countryside throughout the twentieth century, Loudoun’s wealthy foxhunters paid to replace wire fences on area properties with wooden fences to keep land open to the horses. Through such efforts, persuasion, and continued land purchases, Loudoun foxhunters kept their hunting territory open. Montgomery County foxhunters could not maintain the level of institutional support that their sport now required.122

The suburban and recreational development that followed dramatically changed the way county residents interacted with the woods in Montgomery County between World War II and the ascendancy of suburbia beginning in the 1980s. Changes in the ways rural residents interacted with their environment set the stage for the suburban lifestyles that sometimes displaced them. Suburbanites, in turn, adopted many of the same rural customs, albeit in modified forms, that had only recently been restricted through the closing of the open range and the enforcement of game laws. Suburbanites inherited a landscape with a distinct set of limitations and possibilities created by the local conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s. As more densely packed, urban-oriented suburbs spread into the county, the politics and social worlds of

122 On damage claims and fencing, see Secretary to Mr. L. B. Norman, February 19, 1921, Folder 3, and folder 6, passim and Joseph B. Thomas to Walter L. Goodwin, May 14, 1919, Folder 2, both in Box 1, Piedmont Fox Hounds Archives, 1915-1930, National Sporting Museum and Library (NSLM). See also Alexander Mackay-Smith, *The American Foxhound, 1747-1967* (Milwood, Va.: American Foxhound Club, 1968), 191.
rural residents and these earlier suburbanites who came seeking open space and a more rural lifestyle converged to form a distinctive social and political world of the metropolitan fringe.

This type of nature-focused, suburban country life was not the final word on the county’s wooded landscapes. That role would be played by The Woodlands, a 17,000-acre development that opened in the southern part of the county in 1974. The brainchild of Houston oilman George Mitchell, The Woodlands was designed and advertised as a sustainable, environmentally friendly alternative to traditional suburban development. Planners designed this “new town,” as the Mitchell Company termed it, to preserve wooded bottomlands as green space, wildlife corridors, and a natural drainage system. Nationally, The Woodlands garnered a reputation as a town designed with nature. Locally, The Woodlands continued the process of developing wildlife as an amenity for suburban newcomers.

Advertising for The Woodlands leaned heavily on the project’s harmony with nature. The company’s preservation of the trees was paramount. Yet advertisers went beyond this. They promised residents a chance to live in the forest. At their most melodramatic, journalists and The Woodlands’ publicity department hailed the development as a return to the Garden of Eden, where man could truly “live in harmony with nature.” As one reporter described it, The Woodlands did not add natural elements to their development, the development was “hewn out of primeval forests” and placed entirely within the natural world. Forest animals were central to this pitch. The development’s head of marketing and sales, James W. Rush, made this explicit in a 1976 interview. Rush waxed eloquently to a reporter about looking out his office window “into a squirrel-filled sylvan Texas forest. . . . [where] deer meander up, delightfully besmudging the glass with their nose prints.” Rush went on to explain, “I have animals, flora and fauna. The rabbit, the squirrel, the deer. I can look out there at any given time and see a species of bird that I
would rarely see anywhere else. This is their natural habitat, their home.” The Woodlands offered a solution to the destructive sprawl of Houston that alienated suburbanites from nature. Here, man could live in supposed harmony with the animals. Here was a fulfillment of the desire that drove suburbanites to fill their homes with pets. Here was nature “close enough to touch.”

Here the landscape of The Woodlands was as much managed as it was natural. Planners at The Woodlands understood that not all animals were created equal when it came to luring suburban residents to the woods. The vast majority of suburban residents had no understanding of ecology or the complex interconnections that defined the forest ecosystem. For them, and for The Woodlands’ planners, contact with nature meant large populations of four types of animals: white-tailed deer, rabbits, squirrels, and songbirds. These four appeared over and over again in journalistic accounts of the development and in the company’s advertisements—the symbols of what it meant to have “nature living close by.”

In light of the history of game management and conservation in Montgomery County, it is significant that the deer and squirrels that were central to The Woodlands’ pitch were precisely the same game species populations that local elites had, less than a decade before, worked so hard to protect and develop. A project that local elites had pursued as part of a program of recreational development underwrote The Woodlands’ environmental image. An examination of

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124 Raccoons, skunks, foxes, opossums, and armadillos were just as effective at adapting to the new environment as were these four animals, but both because of their nocturnal natures and, in the case of raccoons, their greater capacity for disruptive behavior, their appeal to suburbanites was limited. Larger predators, such as the bobcat, the cougar, the red wolf, and black bear, all of which had been seen, if not frequently, in the southern part of the county into the 1960s, could have no place in this suburban woods. Such large predators would pose a threat to both outdoor pets and the sense of security of suburban residents. Coyotes and raptors of various kinds are the apex predators of The Woodland’s forests. For bear and panther sightings, see Ken Carr, “Hunting was Better in ’65 Even for Bear,” *CDC*, January 9, 1966, p. 9.
the environmental planning documents compiled by Wallace, McHarg, Roberts and Todd (WMRT), the environmental consultants for The Woodlands reveals an even stronger connection between these two conservation projects. WMRT brought on Robert Maestro, a Texas A&M wildlife biologist, to develop the wildlife component of its ecological inventory. Maestro brought to the project a deep knowledge of the East Texas woods and, more importantly, a commitment to developing harvestable populations of game and fish. In his report, Maestro explained, “the amenity of wildlife... is reflected in the price of building lots which afford ‘aesthetic contact’ with such species as squirrel, bobwhite quail, mourning dove, and particularly, deer.”

In order to manage for these animals, he restated the perennial formulas for game management: ensuring year-round grazing through planting non-native crops for forage, managing the forest in a way that maximized the amount of edge environments, and providing for managed hunting.

Not only were these edge species more likely to be seen by suburbanites looking into the woods from their kitchen windows, they also offered the possibility of setting up shooting preserves as one of the recreational amenities.

Conserving the populations of these species provided another justification for WMRT’s drainage plans. Natural drainage maintained edge habitat for deer, squirrels, rabbits, and songbirds. Leaving floodplains undeveloped ensured the presence of wildlife corridors filled

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128 This last suggestion was never a serious possibility. The harmonious image they were trying to craft had little room for the type of conservation that hunters could provide. WMRT, *Ecological Inventory*, 1973, 61; Russell Claus develops this point further in his 1994 reevaluation of The Woodlands’ environmental planning. Claus emphasizes the failings of this game management approach in comparison to current understandings of ecologically based wildlife management. Where Claus places The Woodlands’ management within the context of the historical development of wildlife biology, this study emphasizes the extent to which this management scheme represented the broader management ideals of landowners, soil conservationists, and fish and game representatives within the county. Understood within its historical context, The Woodlands’ approach to wildlife management pursued the same end as other landowners in the county, only with better planning and greater resources to enact its conclusions. Russell Clive Claus, “The Woodlands, Texas: A Retrospective Critique of the Principles and Implementation of an Ecologically Planned Development” (Masters in City Planning: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994), 116-132.
with the hardwood species that these animals preferred. In one case, the firm especially recommended preserving one area that was well-suited to deer populations. This area was well suited not because of its natural state, but because it combined two cleared homesteads, old-age hardwood bottomland, and a recently cutover area. This area, in short, represented in microcosm the landscape history of the county. Wildlife management in The Woodlands was essentially game management for suburbanites. The Woodlands planners picked up where earlier game management strategies left off, cultivating a suburban environment that maintained the wooded aesthetic and managed game populations, this time as suburban amenity. Nature did not disappear with suburbanization. Developers and their suburban customers continued to manage the forests to ensure they produced the environmental experience these newcomers craved. These newcomers were the heirs of the closing of the range and the restoration of game populations. Suburbanites were the heirs of the Montgomery County woods.

\[129\text{ WMRT, } Ecological Inventory, 1973, 45.\]
CHAPETER 3
BETWEEN THE ARMY CORPS AND THE C & O:
POTOMAC DAMS, DULLES AIRPORT, AND WASHINGTON’S METROPOLITAN HINTERLAND

A sleek concrete dam towers over the Loudoun Countryside like a sentinel, guarding Washington, D.C., from the Potomac’s flood waters. The power from the Riverbend Dam sustains a booming industrial area along the riverfront. Tens of thousands of vacationers from the capital city flock each year to enjoy the 36,000 acre reservoir. Motorboats pull water skiers across what had been Eastern Loudoun farmland as fishermen explore the quieter waters up the now flat waters of Broad Run, Goose Creek, and Sugarland Run. Damming the Potomac had provided the nation’s capital city with the electricity and flood protection it sorely needed. It had also brought economic prosperity and dynamism to this agrarian county. This, at least, was Loudoun’s future as envisioned by the Army Corps of Engineers in its 1944 study of the Potomac River. Hydropower developments on the Colorado and Columbia Rivers in the West and the Tennessee River in the South had captured the nation’s imagination. Riding this wave of popular support, the corps proposed the basin-wide development of the capital city’s river. The corps’ efforts to inscribe these visions on the river sparked a series of battles the results of which profoundly shaped the county’s economy, its landscapes, and ultimately its place within the metropolis. Its plan and its later iterations cast a long shadow over three decades of Loudoun’s history. Like the Ghost of Christmas yet to Come, the Army Corps showed Loudoun and people across the metropolis visions of the Potomac’s future—visions that provoked a response.

Loudoun was certainly not alone in facing the possibility of inundation. The Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation, and hundreds of power companies, river authorities,
municipalities, and public utilities collectively constructed 35,000 dams across the nation between 1945 and 1969—a rate of 3.9 per day.¹ Cities have long used dams to exert control over the rivers upon which their prosperity and security depended. These dams prevented flooding, stored water supplies, and provided recreation. These dams also allowed cities to exert a great deal of power and control over the fate of upstream communities and landscapes. This fact has led historians studying urban dam construction to rely on the framework of urban imperialism. To live upstream from a city is to live under threat of water development. This is the lesson historians have drawn from the interactions between expanding cities and their rural hinterlands in the twentieth century.

Los Angeles is the poster child for this framework of urban imperialism. In a move infamous for its larger-than-life characters and alleged graft and corruption, the city bought up water rights in the ranchland of Owens Valley, over two hundred miles away, and then built an aqueduct that drained the life blood of the fertile region and poured it into the orange groves and new suburbs of the Los Angeles basin. Owens Valley ranchers were the oppressed and disenfranchised victims of Los Angeles’ “muscular, competitive, and self-reliant” imperialist expansion.² San Francisco followed a similar path. That city’s attempt to dam the Hetch Hetchy valley, for all of its importance in the development of environmentalism, was a story of a city

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with imperialist designs filling its pipes by tapping its watershed. Urban imperialism was not limited to the arid West. At the same time Los Angeles was invading the Owens Valley, New York City invaded the Catskill Mountains. The city drowned towns, displaced hundreds of residents, and established itself as an arbiter of land use practices in the mountains. As David Stradling describes it, “rural communities [were] sacrificed to the needs of the great city.” In both the East and West, in arid and temperate regions, imperial cities, usually with the blessing of state and federal authorities, took control of distant “water colonies” and subordinated their upstream hinterlands to the needs of the city.

This urban imperialist framework captures the power relations that have defined so many reservoir construction projects. When confronting their rural hinterlands, cities have usually held the advantage in population, finances, cultural influence, and political power. As a result, accounts of rural resistance usually cast these people as tragic victims, agrarian holdouts who were ground to pieces by the wheels of urban progress. This imperial framework does not fully explain the experiences of either Loudoun or Montgomery Counties. Conflicts over urban dam construction in each county involved historical actors and structural relationships that resist

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5 Hundley, *The Great Thirst*, 166.
simplification to a battle between exploiter and exploited—between city and countryside. The central issue remained the competing visions of watershed development. The central question was still who held the social power required to enact their vision. In both cases, however, both city and countryside had to negotiate these power relations among a multiplicity of powerful groups whose interests and visions for these counties also played a role in shaping the development of these metropolitan counties. Nearby cities had a profound influence over the development of these counties, but they never held unilateral power to reshape these counties for the city’s benefit.

In the case of Montgomery County, Texas, water development was the project of the San Jacinto River Authority (SJRA). This state-chartered entity’s interests were distinct both from those of Houston’s business and political elites and from Conroe boosters and the county’s agrarian landowners. The SJRA mitigated the reach and impact of Houston’s power. It also pushed its own vision of the development of the watershed, provoking its own share of resistance. Loudoun’s experience was more complex. Washington, D.C.’s water supply was under the exclusive control of the Army Corps of Engineers, an entity whose expansive vision for the Potomac included more than the water supply reservoirs and flood control that the city required. The city’s national importance and the corps’ involvement both ensured that the battle to shape the Potomac River’s development would take place on a national stage. It would also take place within the halls of congress, where Loudoun’s powerful senators and representative could significantly shape the city’s use of its river. As early as 1965, the battle for the Potomac had become a proxy war in the larger battle between the corps and a growing environmental movement. The shifting winds of regional and national politics constrained Washington’s imperial powers.
The fact that these counties were not completely subject to the imperial designs of neighboring cities does not mean that either was somehow freed from the pull of metropolitan gravity. Each was able, with varying degrees of success, to use the complex interplay of actors to prevent the complete imposition of the urban vision of their hinterland. Yet neither county was able to resist the profound social, economic, and political transformations that came with metropolitan expansion. Whether the city got its dam or not, the pervasive influence of the metropolis eroded the foundations of the agrarian world that rural landowners defended. What was really at stake was not whether these rural areas would be transformed by the city and for the city, but how they would be transformed. Would they serve the metropolis as suburban developments, reservoirs and lakefront resorts, or as wooded parkland for recreation seekers. The battles over dams were part of a larger struggle to define the place these rural areas would have within the metropolis. The imperial framework implies that self-determination was a possibility, or at least an ideal, for these counties. The reality was that they had already become enmeshed within the metropolis, whether they understood that or not. The history of dam construction in each county, then, provides a window into the transformation from rural to metropolitan fringe.

The battle between the SJRA, the city of Houston, and Montgomery County over the development of the San Jacinto Watershed will be the topic of chapter 4. This present chapter follows the thirty-year war over the Potomac River and its impact on Loudoun County. More specifically, it examines the attempts by the Army Corps of Engineers to construct a high dam first at Riverbend and then at Seneca Creek as well as the fate of Loudoun’s bid to host a Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO) coal-fired power plant along its riverfront in Eastern Loudoun. The construction of dams on the Potomac had the potential to fundamentally reshape the county’s economy, its social makeup, its landscapes, and its relationship with the city. The
proposed dams exposed cleavages within Loudoun’s shifting political landscape, as local boosters, farmers, newcomers, and preservationists each had their own stance on what the development of Loudoun County should look like. Each group, in turn, found allies within the state, metropolis, and nation. At stake was the shape of Loudoun’s place and function within the metropolis.

The Potomac River flows 285 miles from the junction of its north and south branches near Cumberland, Maryland, to Harpers Ferry. There it joins the Shenandoah River and then winds its way across the Piedmont before thundering over Great Falls and arriving at Washington, D.C., on the edge of the Virginia tidewater. At that point the Potomac widens as it slowly meanders into the Chesapeake Bay. While the river is not among the largest or the longest in the United States, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Potomac to Washington, D.C. The river and its tributaries have provided the water supply and wastewater disposal for the city and its suburbs throughout their history. Its potential benefits went beyond water supply. The Potomac’s potential for hydropower development had caught the eyes of planners and engineers from the first decades of the twentieth century. Power generation would dominate the corps’ first vision of the river. The city’s postwar population boom changed the conversation. The District and its suburbs in both Virginia and Maryland depended on the Potomac for their water supply. The Potomac’s average flow supplied an amount of water far beyond the metropolitan area’s requirements, even by the Army Corps of Engineers most conservative projections. Without substantial water storage, however, low flows, not average flows, were what mattered. A drought between the months of July and October threatened the nation’s capital with serious water shortages. These periods of low flow also prevented the dilution of the metropolitan region’s sewage effluent and thereby posed a health hazard and, as development spread upstream, a threat
to the purity of the city’s drinking water. The central question that drove the three-decade-long battle over damming the Potomac River, then, was how to provide enough water to mitigate the effects of pollution and provide municipal water to Washington during periods of low flow.  

These issues of water quality and water supply were far from the minds of Corps engineers as it was putting together its early proposals for the development of the Potomac. A record-setting flood had ripped through the city in March 1936. In response, congress passed legislation calling on the corps to propose flood control measures for the river. The resulting report, put forward in 1944, reflected the grandiose visions of the “big dam era.” Corps engineers had calculated that flood control dams did not meet the required cost-benefit ratios. The economic benefits of flood control on the Potomac were not worth the cost. Undeterred, the corps proposed using hydroelectric power development to offset the costs of flood control. The corps used its flood control mandate to propose the wholesale economic development of the Potomac River Valley through the construction of a series of 14 dams costing upward of $234 million. By the corps’ estimates, power generation would make up 91 percent of the project’s benefits. Flooding, pollution control, and recreation made up the remainder. At this time the corps treated water supply as an issue for local governments to handle. Protecting Washington from flood waters was its stated goal. Its plans called for refashioning the Potomac River Valley into the image of the Columbia, Colorado, and Tennessee Rivers.

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7 The corps underestimated the population growth that would transform the area, and therefore assumed that only industrial development could justify dam construction. *Potomac Preliminary Survey 1946*. On the limits of the corps 1946 survey as well as their 1921 and 1934 studies, see Harry E. Schwarz, Speech before the Fall Proceedings of the
The crown jewel of the corps’ plan was a $31.7 million high dam on the Potomac at Riverbend, a few miles north of Great Falls. The dam was slated to generate 90 megawatts, enough electricity to provide for Washington’s growth and to spur industrial development along


the river valley. It would also even out the river’s flow, mitigating flood damage and ensuring the year-round dilution of the pollution that was already becoming a significant issue in the Potomac Estuary below Washington. The project would have created a reservoir stretching 42 miles, all the way to Harpers Ferry. In the process it would have inundated 36,000 acres, 15,000 of which were in Loudoun County. The damage to farming in Loudoun and neighboring Montgomery County, Maryland, would have been substantial. Of the inundated land, 22,350 acres were cleared, with a majority in fertile bottomlands. The displacement of people and homes would have been less extensive. The corps estimated that 111 residences and 20 commercial buildings would have to be purchased, most on the Maryland side. In exchange for this loss of land and tax revenue, the corps promised inexpensive electricity and recreational development that would bring metropolitan tourists to both counties. As proposed, however, seasonal draw-downs from the reservoir ranging from 10 to 25 feet would have frequently left the waterfront a series of ugly mudflats during much of the peak recreational season.

Understandably Loudoun residents viewed the corps’ continued predictions of recreation income with a great deal of skepticism. When Loudoun residents first got wind of the corps’ plan in mid-March of 1944, they responded with unbridled anger. Prominent citizens immediately organized a meeting at the Leesburg courthouse to begin preparations for a hearing the corps had scheduled for April 3 in Washington. David Rust Jr., the group’s spokesman, warned that the county “must act with vigor and promptness” to prevent the county’s “ruin.” Loudoun residents responded. Dairy farmers,

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8 These bottomlands were often the most productive acres on a given farm; therefore, their inundation usually threatened the economic viability of additional farmland that would not be inundated. A. Willis Robertson to Howard Smith, July 31, 1959, Folder Potomac River Dam, Box 141, MSS 8731-c, Howard Smith Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va. (hereinafter Smith Papers).
prominent landowners, state conservationists, and representatives of the Izaak Walton League spoke to the 150 people in attendance about the destruction such a dam would bring. Echoing the county’s deeply engrained image and sense of place, the *Loudoun Times-Mirror* warned of a “tragedy for what, by the cold records, is one of the most prosperous and loveliest counties in all America.” Within a week, the Leesburg Garden Club, the county’s agricultural groups, the board of supervisors, and its local fraternal and service organizations were united in protest. Their opposition combined a commitment to historical preservation and a fierce agrarianism that opposed the destruction of highly productive farmland with a strong southern conservatism that opposed any extension of federal power. If any in the county supported the dam, they thought it best to keep quiet.10

At the Washington hearing a bus load of Loudoun residents added their voices to the cacophony of opposition. More than 1,100 people representing 200 organizations, towns, villages, and counties from across the watershed packed into the Department of the Interior Auditorium. There they listened as forty speakers and eight congressmen took turns commenting on the project. Some echoed Loudoun’s anger over the inundation of valuable farmland and the destruction of historic landmarks and scenery. Others challenged the corps’ claims that the new lake would improve recreation and instead argued that the lake would itself destroy vital recreation areas. Only four speakers braved the jeers of the crowd to support the proposal. Taken as a whole, these people opposed the projects for the same reasons that have motivated every

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community facing inundation—they did not want their homes, their property, their history, and their communities destroyed for the benefit of others.\textsuperscript{11}

Popular opposition, in turn, mobilized politicians against the plan. Of these, none were more significant than Virginia senator Harry F. Byrd and Howard W. Smith, Loudoun’s U.S. representative. The county had the ear of two of the most powerful men in congress. Both men had built their careers by opposing federal intervention into state and local affairs (usually meaning racial integration) and by resisting what they saw as runaway federal spending. When it came to damming the Potomac, Byrd railed against the corps’ proposal as a “willful waste of public money” whose use of eminent domain amounted to “a revocation of human rights.” It would both destroy valuable farmland and “ruthlessly disregard historic shrines made immortal.” Smith and Byrd stood ready to use their senior positions on powerful congressional committees to ensure that the plan never received the appropriations it needed. In the face of such entrenched popular and political opposition, the corps beat a hasty retreat, recommending against the project in their 1946 survey final report. As Corps leaders would later explain it, Smith and Byrd used their political power to hold the nation’s capital hostage for the sake of their constituents.\textsuperscript{12}

Loudoun County’s opposition to the Riverbend Dam in 1944 was a rarity in southern history. Where most of the region’s congressmen worked day and night to secure federally funded water development projects for their constituents, Smith and Byrd used their political power to halt an Army Corps development project in its tracks. Because the corps controlled


Washington’s water developments, Virginian congressmen were able to exert a level of influence over the city’s water plans that is exceptional in comparison with the experiences of other cities. They could do so because of the District’s unique position. The residents of the District of Columbia had no claim on the Virginia congressmen, as they were not part of their constituencies. Nor did they have any congressional representation of their own. The corps was a powerful advocate, but it could do little in the face of concerted resistance from Harry Byrd and Howard Smith. The growth of suburban Northern Virginia would begin to reshape this political balance by the 1960s. In 1944, however, rural Virginia retained the political power to crush metropolitan Washington’s water development program. Because it shared in the South’s long-running grip on congressional political power, rural Loudoun deflected plans for the city’s water development. Washington’s imperial grip over its hinterland was anything but.13

Unfortunately for Loudoun, this victory was only the beginning of the county’s war with Washington and the corps. The next major battle came in the mid-1950s. This time it was Washington’s demand for pure drinking water and the corps’ river development plans that imposed strict limits on Loudoun’s industrial development. At this point Loudoun had yet to face extensive suburban development. At issue was the agrarian county’s industrial development. Loudoun’s political power could protect it from the impositions of the metropolis, but it could not ensure the county would be able to enjoy the economic fruits of membership within the metropolis.

The rapidly growing demand for electricity in metropolitan Washington sent representatives from PEPCO searching for the site of the utility’s next power plant. Cold War security concerns demanded that such an important part of the city’s infrastructure be located outside a potential nuclear blast zone. Economic imperatives required that it be close enough to

minimize transmission costs. It also had to have rail access to coal mines in West Virginia and a high-volume, reliable water supply for cooling. Ironically the Loudoun site benefited from a small dam on the Potomac just downriver at Seneca Creek that had originally been built as part of a nineteenth-century canal system. This dam ensured a sufficient pool of water would be available at the site year-round. This combined with Loudoun’s light tax burden brought PEPCO to the county.  

The company signed an agreement on August 3, 1955, to buy 519 acres from the Triple Seven Stock Farm along the Potomac in Eastern Loudoun. The 600-megawatt, coal-fired power plant would employ 120 people and add between $70 and $100 million to the county’s tax rolls, a fact that caused Loudoun planners to see visions and dream dreams. In practice this meant nearly a doubling of the value of the county’s taxable property and therefore a dramatic increase in the quality of local education and roads without a commensurate increase in taxation. The Loudoun zoning board, the county board of supervisors, the Virginia State Corporation Commission, and the Virginia State Water Control Board had all eagerly signed off on the project by the first week in November. The plant was scheduled to open in 1958. All that remained was approval from the District Public Utilities Commission and the Congressional Committee on the District of Columbia. The former approved the project in late November. The latter scheduled a hearing for November 10, 1955.

The hearing was first and foremost a competition between Loudoun and its upstream neighbor Montgomery County, Maryland, to secure the power plant and its tax revenues.

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Representatives from each county debated the relative costs of railroad freight, the quality and availability of coal, water supplies, and tax burdens. The potential Montgomery County site had a superior rail connection and access to higher quality coal, but its taxes were substantially higher, it was an additional 17 miles upstream, and it had no way to ensure enough water would reach the plant during a drought. Had these been the only issues at stake, the plant would have likely gone to Loudoun. Here the Riverbend Dam came back from the dead to haunt Loudoun and, ironically, lend its aid to its fellow dam opponent across the river. Montgomery County’s proposed Dickerson site was above the Riverbend Dam’s proposed pool level of 225 feet. This was not the case for Loudoun’s site, which was at only 206 feet. As Col. Ray Adams, representing the Army Corps at the PEPCO hearing, explained it, “if the plant is built at this location, the use of the Riverbend site for water supply will be denied to the metropolitan area... because of the obvious impracticality of purchasing a $100 million installation and putting it out of service.” This was only partially accurate. A smaller dam on the Potomac could meet Washington’s water supply needs without interfering with the PEPCO site. The corps high dam at Riverbend, however, could not coexist with the Loudoun PEPCO plant.

Howard Smith, who remained Loudoun County’s strongest advocate, was incensed at Col. Adams’ testimony. He questioned whether the corps believed that Loudoun “property must stay in status quo indefinitely and no development must occur there because it might cost some more to build a dam at some future time?” Smith saw in the PEPCO hearing a desperate attempt to keep the way clear for a dam that he considered to be “just a pipe dream,” a project that his

16 Testimony about the quality of coal available, distance, market prices, and freight rates each varied a great deal. It is therefore difficult to say which county had the comparative advantage when it came to coal shipments. The issue remained hotly contested. PEPCO Hearing, 115-120.
17 For the corps’ stance, see PEPCO Hearing , 13 (quotation), 40, 108-109, “Approval by Loudoun is First Pepco hurdle,” and “Maryland Pepco Site Endorsed,” Post, December 9, 1955, p. 41; On pool levels, see PEPCO Hearing, 73.
18 William J. Cox to Stanley N. Brown, January 2, 1956, Folder Potomac River Dam, Box 141, Smith Papers. As a civil engineer, Cox acted as an informal consultant to the planning commission as well as its vice chairman.
constituents remained unalterably opposed to. The corps, he believed, was holding development in Loudoun hostage. A great deal had changed in the preceding decade, and the Riverbend project was gaining some support among Washington planners. Washington’s rapidly expanding urban population and the looming threat of water scarcity both made a Potomac dam seem more of a necessity.¹⁹

For the moment, the corps had to ensure that the siting of the PEPCO plant would not place an insurmountable obstacle in the way of such a dam. As the organization primarily responsible for the purity and security of Washington’s water supply, it had a ready case to make against Loudoun’s PEPCO plant. It joined with the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River (ICPRB) and a handful of other organizations in calling attention to the plant’s potential to pollute the capital city’s water supply.²⁰ If the Loudoun power plant raised the temperature of the water significantly during periods of low flow, it might lead to algae blooms, bacteria growth, noxious smells, and increased water treatment costs downstream. Col. Adams testified that the plant might raise the water temperature as much as 14 degrees. Under 1955 conditions this posed little threat to Washington. The temperature increase would dissipate to only two degrees by the time it got to the city’s water intakes at Great Falls. This fact led most experts to discount water quality fears. The corps, however, presented a scenario where the plant could significantly damage the Potomac’s water quality. If two medium-sized industries located within 10 miles of the PEPCO site and discharged organic wastes into the river, this would combine with the heat pollution to create significant water quality issues. As Col. Adams explained at a December trade

¹⁹ PEPCO Hearing, 57 (first quotation), “Potomac Dam Plan is Labeled ‘Pipedream,’” Post, November 12, 1955, p. 23 (second quotation).
²⁰ States within the Potomac watershed joined with D.C. to form the ICPRB in 1940 to serve as a watchdog agency over the Potomac’s water quality. On the history of the ICPRB, see Frederick Gutheim, “Planning for the Future in the Potomac River Basin,” Address before the ICPRB, Washington, D.C., January 12, 1950 (ICPRB, 1950) and Paul W. Eastman and Daniel Sheer, Seventy Years of Potomac River History: Interviews with Dr. Abel Wolman, General Publication 82-1 (ICPRB, February, 1982).
luncheon, a PEPCO plant in Loudoun would be a “door opener to further industrial development which would pollute the stream immediately above the point where the District takes its drinking water.” The ICPRB agreed. In a statement it asserted that a PEPCO plant in Loudoun “is a further indication of the impending development of what has heretofore been considered the outlying fringe of the metropolitan area. . . . [It] must be viewed as a possible serious menace to the Potomac River from a pollution standpoint.” The question, then, was whether Loudoun County would industrialize and whether the city could allow it to have the option.\(^{21}\)

For its part, PEPCO had little interest in developing nearby industry. The utility had sufficient demand for its electricity within the city’s expanding suburbs and therefore had no need to promote industrial demand in Loudoun. The county’s political leadership also claimed it had no desire to bring heavy industry to the area. The acreage surrounding the plant was zoned residential, and there were no plans to change that designation. Sybil W. Wanner, Loudoun’s zoning administrator, explained the county’s position in a statement submitted for the hearing.

“As for more heavy industries being located in the PEPCO area or on the Potomac River in Loudoun County, it is extremely unlikely that further industry would be allowed and I am sure that after the evidence brought forth by Colonel Adams as to the effect on the District water supply, the board of zoning appeals would hesitate to grant any further permits.” In effect, the county’s leaders asked Washington and the Army Corps of Engineers to trust their planning department to guard the city’s water quality. Loudoun had some of the strongest growth controls and one of the most active planning commissions of any metropolitan fringe county in the South. Surely they could be trusted to protect the city’s water quality.\(^{22}\)


\(^{22}\) PEPCO Hearing, 56, 73, 113 (quotation).
As the hearing continued, however, evidence mounted that the industrialization of Loudoun’s Potomac waterfront was a very real possibility. The extension of a rail line to the area and the proximity of inexpensive electricity were only the most obvious spurs to industrial growth. The construction and operation of a power plant and the running of coal trains would drastically reduce the value of surrounding land for residential development. This, in turn, would lead to political pressure from landowners who wanted their land rezoned for industry so they could recoup some of its lost value. Wilson Compton, who owned a farm adjacent to the power plant site, explained to the committee, “I hope the middle Potomac Valley will not be industrialized. If it is I will of course ask that my own lands also be included in the zoning permitting industrial and commercial development. Manifestly it would be absurd to encourage commercial development in the area of the power company’s project and try to avoid it in the remainder of the corner of the county immediately adjacent to it.” There was reason to believe such pressure to rezone was imminent. As part of the deal to purchase the land, PEPCO had contractually obligated itself to help the members of the land syndicate that owned the 5,000 acres surrounding the power plant to secure industrial zoning from the county. What this would mean for the rest of Eastern Loudoun remained unclear. Evidence mounted, though, that this rezoning might bring industrial development to Eastern Loudoun.23

From the perspective of Loudoun’s later suburban development, the debate over the PEPCO dam raised a fundamental question about the county’s future. When Loudoun gentleman farmer William J. Cox considered the PEPCO proposal he defined the central question as whether the region upstream from Great Falls would be used “primarily for water storage or for industry?” The region would ultimately be used for neither. It would become Washington’s backyard—a region of recreation, leisure, pastoral beauty, and suburban development. This is

23 PEPCO Hearing, 37-38, 66-70, 97, 103, 118-19.
precisely the future that many within metropolitan Washington envisioned for Loudoun. The same was true for local conservation groups like the Izaak Walton League, which argued that the industrialization of Loudoun threatened “the ultimate destruction of the recreational values of the only easily accessible and relatively unpolluted slack water section of the river nearby” Urban residents had, in their estimation, a right to enjoy this natural resource. The Washington Post added its weight to these arguments. The paper insisted that industrialization in Loudoun County “would be a serious mistake.” For “as Washington grows, most of this land will be needed for parks, recreational facilities, and residential purposes. It is probably the choicest undeveloped land in the area.” Claude W. Owen of the National Planning Commission agreed. The Broad Run area was a “beautiful backdrop for the Nation’s Capital that should be used for open recreational space and low-density residential developments.” The city would use its power to prevent the industrialization of its “back yard” in order to preserve Loudoun’s flowing streams and rivers, its pastoral landscapes, and its agrarian character for the enjoyment of the city and for suburban development.²⁴

Loudoun had fiercely opposed the damming of the Potomac and the inundation of thousands of acres of agricultural bottomland to provide power for Washington and for the industrialization of the entire region. At first glance the county’s support of the PEPCO plant in Eastern Loudoun seems to contradict this stance. Reconciling these two positions requires understanding Loudoun’s economic situation. The county’s planning commission remained committed to keeping “Loudoun as an agricultural county as is its due according to its position as a leading county in the State as to milk, beef cattle, and grains.” Doing so, however, meant rural

landowners made up the bulk of the county’s tax base. Loudoun elites saw in the PEPCO plant and any industrial development that might surround it a way to ease the financial burdens of government. This hope more than justified abandoning a small corner of the county’s eastern section to industry. A group of fifty of Loudoun’s most prominent farmers, businessmen, and politicians made this point clear in a letter submitted for the hearing. In it they put forward their vision of Loudoun’s place within an expanding metropolis. “We do not believe it is the manifest destiny of Loudoun County to become a satellite of Washington, and to be restricted exclusively to agricultural pursuits forever; or to be, as one District of Columbia newspaper regards us, Washington’s backyard. We feel,” they continued, “that we have a right to grow up, to become a community of diversified interests, reflecting every facet of modern American life.” Loudoun, in other words, rejected the city’s attempts to restrict the county’s industrial development. That the federal government was also in on the act only redoubled their anger at this affront to their presumed independence. Loudoun’s bar association, chamber of commerce, and its farm organizations joined in calling for the power plant’s construction.\textsuperscript{25}

Yet a lot had changed between 1944 and 1955. The PEPCO battle demonstrated for the first time that these self-described “representatives citizens of Loudoun County” no longer spoke for the county as a whole. As chapter 1 demonstrated, the decade after V-J day brought a steady stream of Washingtonians to the county seeking nature, recreation, pastoral scenery, and a retreat from modern America. Many of these newcomers settled along Loudoun’s streams and riverfront.\textsuperscript{26}

These newcomers joined many of Loudoun’s old-guard conservationists in opposing the project. Their leader, Leesburg attorney E. B. White, warned that the plant would lead to a bridge

\textsuperscript{25} PEPCO Hearing, 113-117, 113 (first quotation), 115 (second quotation), Raflo, \textit{Iron Gates}, 198-200.
\textsuperscript{26} PEPCO Hearing, 114.
across the Potomac and the industrialization of the whole area. Loudoun’s newer residents were people like Anna Briggs, who had opened an animal shelter at “Peace Plantation” on the Potomac half a decade earlier. Briggs and those like her opposed the PEPCO plant as “not in keeping with the agricultural and residential character of the area.” In other words, industry would spoil the countryside they had moved out of the city to enjoy. These opponents who formed the core of Loudoun’s preservation culture added their weight to those in Washington and its inner suburbs who opposed the power plant for what it might do to the river.  

The Senate Special Committee submitted its report on December 16, 1955. It concluded that “the construction of the plant at the site recommended by the company would serve as a bellwether for further industrial development in the immediate area of the plant” and that such industrialization would “result in serious problems in all phases of water supply for the Washington metropolitan area.” In addition, the committee members agreed with the Army Corps that Washington’s potential need to dam the Potomac made the site a danger to Washington’s future prosperity. It instructed PEPCO to find another site. PEPCO was prepared for this decision. Now that its Loudoun site was not an option, the company moved quickly to secure an alternate. The company took an option on a 340-acre site in Dickerson, Maryland, and made plans to begin construction. Howard Smith used his power as the chairman of the House Rules Committee to stonewall the project for more than two years, but ultimately even he could not get the company to return to its Loudoun site.

27 Raflo, *Iron Gates*, 197, 199 (quotation); PEPCO Hearing, 75, 81; S. L. Fishbein, “Dickerson Land 17 Miles Upstream from Disputed Loudoun Section,” *Post*, January 12, 1956, p. 33; For more on Loudoun’s preservation culture see chapter 7.
29 Fishbein, “Dickerson Land 17 Miles Upstream.”
The battle over the PEPCO power plant pitted two metropolitan fringe counties against each other in an effort to secure industrial tax revenue. Most histories of urban water development emphasize the power of cities to inundate and destroy weak rural areas in their pursuit of their own interests. What happened in Loudoun was more subtle than this. The Army Corps of Engineers, acting as the steward of Washington, D.C., joined with metropolitan planners, representatives of inner suburban areas, and conservation groups to prevent Loudoun from securing industrial development. The city used its limited power and influence to lock Loudoun County into the role of Washington’s backyard—a place of beauty, nature, and recreation rather than development and industry. The Army Corps also contributed its influence toward this end, ironically in order to defend the site of a high dam that would combine recreation with hydropower development and therefore industry. In this the corps continued to face strong resistance from conservationists and preservationists from both within Loudoun and across the metropolis. It also continued to face pressure from Loudoun’s local elites, who fought for industry. These elites, however, were increasingly finding their position of authority eroded by the county’s growing and increasingly vocal preservationists who opposed industry as fervently as they opposed inundation.

Fittingly PEPCO announced in August 1960 that it would open the land it had purchased in Loudoun as a riverfront park. This former site of Loudoun’s industrial dreams would eventually host a golf course, a swimming pool, a boat ramp, and nature trails. Where the PEPCO plant might have anchored an extensive industrial area, the park anchored extensive
suburban development that spread across the area in the late 1970s. The site that would have helped Loudoun pay the costs of suburban growth would instead accelerate that growth.

Even before the dust had settled from the PEPCO battle, the Army Corps was once again beating the drum for its Riverbend Dam. On January 26, 1956, the Senate Committee on Public Works had called for the corps to prepare a new, comprehensive plan for the Potomac River. Unfortunately for the corps, the committee had only provided appropriations to survey the river above Harpers Ferry. In order to complete the survey, the corps had to return for more money. This, in turn, brought the corps back into the sights of Howard Smith and Harry Byrd. Smith had vowed in 1957 that the corps “will never build [the Riverbend Dam] as long as Harry Byrd and I are around to stop it.” Virginia’s congressional opposition, which now also included senator A. Willis Robertson, was convinced that any talk of the proposed dam’s contribution to pollution abatement, recreation, or water supply was a smoke screen for the corps’ real goal of developing hydropower. With the Army Corps requesting $1.1 million over two years to finish its study, these congressmen pushed through an amendment that forbade the corps from using the money to study hydroelectric power. In so doing, Smith hoped to head off any future battle over high dams on the Potomac.

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31 Brigadier General J. L. Person to Sen. A. Willis Robertson, May 6, 1959, Folder Potomac River Dam, Box 141, Smith Papers.
32 Raflo, Iron Gates, 203.
33 During his time in the Senate, Robertson was a leading advocate of conservation and sportsmen groups as well as an ardent opponent of the Army Corps of Engineers. Karl Boyd Brooks, Before Earth Day: The Origins of American Environmental Law, 1945-1970 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 21-37; Robertson to Smith, February 6, 1959 and July 31, 1959 and Smith to George M. Martin, May 4, 1959, each in Folder Potomac River Dam, Box 141, Smith Papers.
These three men did so at their political peril. Each admitted that the Potomac would probably have to be dammed to provide municipal water for Washington. What they opposed were high dams that would flood Loudoun farmland and waste federal money. This distinction was difficult to sell to suburban Northern Virginia. As postwar subdivisions sprawled across Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax, and as many Maryland counties, demand for water mushroomed, with no end to the rise in sight. At the same time septic tanks and small, inefficient, primary

35 Smith to Robertson, May 8, 1959, Folder Potomac River Dam, Box 141, Smith Papers.
36 A Congressional report in 1958 put the region’s average municipal water consumption at 220 mgd, with summer rates reaching as high as 330 mgd. This figure did not include pollution abatement. At this point the metropolitan area’s water supplies could provide up to 600 mgd. Demand estimates at this point predicted demand would reach
sewage treatment plants sprung up across the suburbs. Like open sores, these sewage systems oozed chemical and organic pollutants into creeks, streams, and, eventually, the Potomac. By the early 1960s, the low flows of the summer months turned the Potomac below Great Falls into a stinking cesspool creeping by the nation’s capital. Suburban growth provided new justifications for the dam. The corps’ proposal to dam the Potomac seemed the surest way to provide much-needed water to Virginia’s fastest growing region. Congressmen from metropolitan Washington lined up to offer their support to the appropriation. They were willing to accept almost any dam, provided it would meet their pressing water needs. The Riverbend Dam pitted rural Virginia against suburban Virginia. Smith was most vulnerable on this point, as continued growth was increasingly filling his district with suburban voters.

The corps spent the years between 1957 and 1962 reshaping and revising its plans for the Potomac. It held a new set of hearings from June 25-27, 1957. Col. Ray Adams outlined what was, at least for Loudoun, the same plan with a different set of justifications. County officials and their counterparts on the Maryland side of the river continued to swear their undying opposition to the Riverbend Dam. So too did a growing coalition of recreation advocates, preservationists, and groups advocating for increased pollution controls. The following year, however, brought a surge of support for the development of the Potomac. Concerned with the


37 “Smith is Sole Witness against Potomac Fund,” [May 1959], newspaper clipping, Folder Potomac River Dam, Box 141, Smith Papers.

38 Gov. J. Lindsay Almond Jr. to Robertson, April 16, 1959, Robertson to Smith, May 7, 1959, and Fairfax County Water Authority, Resolution, April 16, 1959, each in Folder Potomac River Dam, Box 141, Smith Papers.

dramatic effects of postwar population growth, congress established the Joint Committee on Washington Metropolitan Problems. Created on August 29, 1957, it was active until August 1960 to consider what infrastructure improvements and government restructuring the area required to keep pace with development. A series of three reports prepared for the committee drew attention to both the increasingly urgent need for water supply and the danger upstream development posed to the quality of the Potomac water that the metropolitan area relied on. The whole region, the report contended, is “confronted with the paramount problem of controlling the flow of the Potomac River to assure an adequate source of water supply.” These reports called on congress to expedite and increase funding for the Potomac study to enable the corps to proceed with its proposed dams. If it did not, the city and its suburbs might face critical water shortages.40

With this increased public support, the corps continued its study of the river in earnest. The engineers chose to unveil the outlines of the new watershed plan at a November 28, 1961, hearing in Washington, once again in the face of strong opposition.41 After finishing its study the following spring, the corps held hearings in Washington and Frederick, Maryland. It continued to face strong opposition from conservationists, preservationists, recreationists, and wildlife organizations.42 At a supplementary hearing in Leesburg on June 5, 1962, Loudoun’s garden clubs, the local Izaak Walton League, county officials, and a throng of residents were on hand to once again state their unalterable opposition to the plan. When, after four hours, Col. Warren Johnson, the district engineer, informed those present that his recommendations were already

being printed, Loudoun residents staged a walkout—disgusted at what one garden club lady described as the corps’ “shocking, stubborn and dictatorial disregard for the economy and the people of Loudoun County.”

Bolstered by growing support from suburban Northern Virginia, the corps plans seemed stronger than ever. Loudoun was in need of a new ally in its fight against the Riverbend Dam. The county found it in the coalition of preservationists, environmentalists, and recreation advocates who had banded together to protect the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal from inundation. Refashioning the 184.5 mile canal into a national park had been the dream of some in Washington since a 1924 flood ended its usefulness as a canal. The federal government had purchased the property from the B&O Railroad in 1938, intensifying a debate between those who wanted to use the 230-feet riverfront right-of-way as a parkway and those who wanted to maintain the canal towpath as a hiking trail. This purchase established the National Park Service as the canal’s advocate and defender against the corps’ proposals, each of which would have inundated large sections. The C&O’s fortunes began to look up when, in 1954, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas set off on his well-publicized hike down the canal to raise public interest in turning the canal into a national park. Congressional hearings followed in June 1957. Coming on the heels of the Echo Park Dam battle, the corps feared that the creation of a national park along the Potomac would permanently restrict its ability to construct any sort of dam along the river. Here, as with the PEPCO plant, the Army Corps and its allies fought successfully to block a project that seriously threatened the potential dam. With the national park bill stalled in

congress and the release of the full Army Corps’ Potomac Basin Study not due out until 1963, the future of the C&O Canal remained in limbo.44

The Army Corps released its Potomac River Basin Final Report in Fall 1963. In it the Corps made a major concession to its opponents. The corps abandoned the Riverbend project for a smaller, 84-foot-high dam four miles upstream at Seneca Creek, just east of the Loudoun border. This dam was primarily designed for water supply, pollution abatement, and flood control. The corps had given up its dream of hydropower. The Seneca Dam would form the keystone of a series of 16 dams across the watershed. The Seneca Dam was far more in line with metropolitan needs. It did little, however, to mitigate the potential damage to Loudoun. The reservoir pool would sit at 226 feet above sea level, therefore it would flood essentially the same land. It was expected to displace 460 families and would remove $214,000 from the tax rolls of counties on both sides of the river. Loudoun would lose the back nine holes of its golf course, the PEPCO recreation area, nine commercial buildings, and 200 homes. The dam would also flood twenty-nine miles of the C&O Canal—which even the corps admitted “would be a very significant breach in the continuity of the canal.” Yet the project’s benefits were substantial. It would secure Washington’s water supply until the year 2010 and would provide a new recreational industry to these agrarian counties. The dam would trap the silt that was burying parts of the Potomac estuary and would cut annual flood damage in the D.C. metro area almost

in half. The majority of the water would be used for pollution abatement. Loudoun would be
dammed to wash suburban sewage into the Chesapeake Bay.\(^45\)

Resistance from Loudoun’s conservation organizations, sportsmen, and garden clubs
continued to gain strength as newcomers took up residence in Loudoun.\(^46\) Opposition to federal
meddling persisted among the county’s elected officials.\(^47\) So too did Harry Byrd and Howard
Smith’s opposition.\(^48\) By 1963 the county had another reason to oppose the Seneca Dam. The
corps was once again holding Loudoun’s fiscal future hostage. This time it was not PEPCO that
was the issue. Loudoun County’s Board of Supervisors was coming to terms with the
tremendous suburban growth coming on the heels of the opening of Washington, D.C.’s new jet
airport in 1962. The industrial sites the county needed to pay for this growth were located along
the Broad Run watershed in Eastern Loudoun—on land that the Seneca Dam would flood. Once
again the shape of Loudoun’s future development was enmeshed within the process of
metropolitan growth.

Chantilly, located near the Loudoun-Fairfax border, had been on the Civil Aeronautics
Administration’s (CAA) short list of possible airport sites since congress passed the Washington
Airport Act in 1950. The agency had, in 1951, originally selected Burke, fifteen miles closer to
the city in Fairfax County. Local residents there had mounted a fierce opposition movement and
had enlisted the aid of senator Harry F. Byrd to their cause. This had convinced the agency to

Approves Seneca as Potomac Dam Site,” Post, December 3, 1963, C1; U.S. Department of the Interior, The
and “Proposed Dam Would Put 200 Homes Under Water,” LTM, May 31, 1962, A1, A4; For a comparison of the
1944 plan and the 1963 plan, see Schwarz, Speech before the ICPRB, 8-10; For the amount of water required for
pollution abatement relative to water supply, see U.S. Army Engineer District, Summary, Potomac River Basin
Report (Baltimore, Md.: U.S. Army Engineer District, February 1963), 34.

\(^{46}\) Potomac River Basin Plan, 1963, I, 102; See also Woman’s Club of Loudoun to Smith, June 30, 1962, Folder
Potomac River Basin, Box 171, Smith Papers; Similar groups from outside Loudoun continued their support.

\(^{47}\) Loudoun County Board of Supervisors, Resolution, November 20, 1961, Folder Potomac River Basin, Box 171,
Smith Papers.

look elsewhere. The CAA turned to Loudoun, holding hearings in the area in December 1957. Reactions were mixed. The board of supervisors passed a unanimous resolution against locating the airport in Loudoun, ostensibly because of jet noise but reflecting their constituents’ general opposition to the federal project. This still remained, after all, a Democratic, southern, conservative county. Some area farmers, however, saw the financial possibilities and responded more favorably. At the hearing, one man, representing more than thirty affected landowners, testified that they were willing to sell their 4,000 acres to the government provided they received $500 an acre—a price well above the appraised agricultural value of $124 an acre. Landowners began receiving condemnation notices before the end of the year.49

Loudoun and its allies in Maryland and D.C. had successfully fought off the Army Corps’ plans to dam the Potomac for decades. Fighting on their own, Loudoun County farmers had no such success with the airport. For the Potomac dam, the costs were many and widely distributed and the benefits remained hotly contested. The airport’s economic benefits to the region, in contrast, were difficult to dispute. Its costs were localized and overshadowed by the potential for growth. Just as importantly, the CAA was under new leadership willing to push the project through. By January 1959, the citizens’ organization formed to fight the airport had collapsed as individual landowners broke ranks and rushed to hire lawyers to secure a higher payout for their land. Of the 200 landowners, 87 had sold out by April 6, 1961. The rest did so over the next year. The average price was $500 an acre, a figure now well below the market rate. Dulles Airport opened in November 1962, having taken over 9,800 acres of farmland, three-quarters of which was in Loudoun County. The iconic terminal building’s foundations rested on the former site of

Willard, a small, largely African American farming community. With the airport on the way, farmland in southeastern Loudoun County was now in line for development, and properties changed hands at a rapid pace. By that point, speculators had driven land values in the area up as high as $750 an acre.\footnote{Historical memory surrounding the construction of Dulles Airport exhibits a deep current of historical inevitability and powerlessness that is rare among Loudoun’s numerous battles over growth. County histories channel the “lost cause” myth in telling a story where the federal government’s overwhelming power decided the outcome before the battle even started. See, for example, William P. Frazer, Interview by Eugene Scheel, December 18, 1991, Waterford, Va. in Folder 24, Box 1, Loudoun County Oral History Project, TBL, (hereinafter LCOHP), 7; and B. Powell Harrison, Protecting Virginia’s Piedmont (Leesburg, Va.: Piedmont Press & Graphics, 1994), 3; On the construction of the airport, see Raflo, Iron Gates, 210-18; Eugene M. Scheel, Loudoun Discovered: Communities, Corners, and Crossroads, vol. 1, Eastern Loudoun: ‘Going Down the Country’ (Leesburg, Va.: The Friends of Thomas Balch Library, 2002), 101-108; Paul E. Ceruzzi, Internet Alley: High Technology in Tysons Corner, 1945-2005 (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), 51-55, Jack Eisen, “New Airport and Suburbia Perk up Loudoun County: Real Estate Men Busy,” Post, March 21, 1960, B1, and “U.S. Condemns 8000 Acres; Airport Work Begins May 1,” LTM, January 30, 1958, A1, A4; Poland, Frontier to Suburbia, 365-66.}

Loudoun County supervisors now braced for a wave of suburban growth generated by a project they had opposed. Washington, D.C., had given the county a ticket to the type of economic growth that rural counties across the South chased after. Local property values were skyrocketing, and developers were lining up to file their subdivision plats. Loudoun’s agricultural elites, however, were not impressed. Suburban population growth meant increased demand for public services, a demand county officials could meet only by attracting an industrial and commercial tax base or by taxing farmers out of existence. Longtime county supervisor Terry Hirst, a stalwart rural conservative, prophesied, “[i]t’ll be the county that pays for the population boom.”\footnote{Scheel, Loudoun Discovered, vol. 1, 107 (first quotation); “Airport Problems: Loudoun’s Plea, Government’ Answer,” LTM, July 10, 1958, A2.} As workers cleared the land for the Dulles terminal, the board of supervisors began planning agrarian Loudoun’s strategic retreat from the eastern section of the county. County officials agreed that farming in the Broad Run District, which made up the bulk of what became Eastern Loudoun, was “doomed to a death by development.” The farming that persisted in the 1960s and 1970s was done on five-year leases, the land having already been sold.
to speculators and developers. The supervisors made significant progress in ensuring the east’s orderly development. They formed the Loudoun Water Supply Corporation, the forerunner of the Loudoun County Sanitation Authority (LCSA) in May 1959 to manage sewage for new homes and businesses. They hired a planning consultant and zoned large tracts of land near the airport industrial, commercial, and one-acre-lot residential to concentrate expected growth in that area.\(^{52}\) They adopted a building code and electrical code in 1961 and 1962 respectively.\(^{53}\)

For all its rhetorical inevitability, Eastern Loudoun suburbia was contingent on the availability of three things: water, sewage facilities, and transportation. Improved transportation was never the driving cause of growth here the way it was in so many other communities across the nation. If anything, limited transportation options were a drag on the area’s growth. The county’s commuter rail service to Alexandria shut down in 1951, never to reopen.\(^{54}\) Route 7 and Route 50, both two-lane state highways at the time, were the only options for Loudoun commuters to get to the city into the 1990s. Both highways ran from Winchester through Loudoun and Fairfax Counties and inside the newly opened capital beltway. Water was provided by Fairfax City’s reservoir on Loudoun’s Goose Creek. That municipality had foisted its reservoir on the county only a few years earlier as part of the town’s plan to pad its budget by


\(^{53}\) Poland, *Frontier to Suburbia*, 372.

selling water to nearby suburbs. The foresight paid off, as Eastern Loudoun and western Fairfax provided eager customers.55

The construction of Dulles Airport provided the third vital component: sewage facilities. Airport plans had originally called for Dulles to have its own sewage treatment plant. Concerns over possible contamination of downstream water intakes on the Potomac River from poorly treated sewage from development surrounding the airport, however, convinced congress to approve a $28 million sewer main known as the Potomac Interceptor. This forty-one-mile pipeline would carry sewage from Dulles and the surrounding developments northward, across the Potomac, and then southeast, eventually arriving at the Blue Plains treatment plant in Washington, D.C. The airport never used more than 10 percent of the line’s capacity. The rest was open to developers in Northern Virginia or suburban Maryland. In effect, Washington, D.C., used the airport to bring regional sewage planning to the area. Where the city’s defense of its water quality had prevented the construction of the PEPCO power plant in Loudoun, it now underwrote the suburban development that would spread across Eastern Loudoun. The thick clay soils of eastern Loudoun County and the board of supervisors’ tight subdivision regulations had prevented widespread septic-tank-dependent development. Now, with the Potomac Interceptor, the door was open for suburbia to come to Loudoun. As the mayor of the Loudoun hamlet of Hillsboro put it, “people are like rats, they follow sewage.” Marvin T. Broyhill’s Sterling Park

55 Fairfax City’s 1956 proposal to build a 3.6 million gallon dam in Loudoun spawned yet another years-long battle between Loudoun and an outside entity over who would control the county’s water. In this case Virginia law allowed the municipality to commandeer the untapped stream, even without Loudoun’s permission, provided no other municipalities were affected. Loudoun exhausted its legal options over the next three years in an effort to prevent the dam’s construction. They ultimately cut a deal. Fairfax agreed to channel all water sales in the county through the LCSA, ensuring the county would control its distribution and Loudoun dropped its opposition. With that, Fairfax City succeeded where the Army Corps of Engineers continued to fail. It dammed Loudoun. The town constructed an additional reservoir on one of Goose Creek’s tributaries in 1972, before state legislation fought for by the Loudoun-based Catoctin Valley Preservation Alliance prevented such unilateral seizures of water. Raflo, Iron Gates, 149-58. Muriel Guinn, “Town Water System Gets Poll Backing,” Post, April 6, 1956, 63. Board of Supervisors of Loudoun County, Virginia v. Town of Fairfax, Virginia, 101 S.E. 2d 519 (1958).
Successful real estate development is all about timing, and Broyhill’s timing was impeccable. The Arlington developer, however, was no visionary. He was the next best thing. He was well connected. His son, representative Joel T. Broyhill, was a co-sponsor of the bill to construct the Potomac Interceptor. Beginning in 1960, Marvin Broyhill’s agents bought up 1,762 acres of land along Route 7, just north of the airport site, for $2.1 million. The developer promoted Sterling Park as the first fully planned community in the Washington area, with a golf

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course, lake, pool, underground utilities, and sewage flowing to Washington. Broyhill’s advertisers promised the standard suburban amenities: green yards, a harmonious community, and leisure. The primary selling point, though, was price. Working with the U.S. Steel Corporation, Broyhill offered working- and lower-middle-class families prefabricated houses on small lots for $3,000 less than a comparable house in Fairfax and with half the property taxes. Generous Veteran’s Affairs (VA) and Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans meant that residents could enjoy Sterling Park’s family-centered suburban life for as little as $95.70 a month.\footnote{For materials on the history of Sterling Park, see Carl MacIntyre, Interview by Chuck White, May 25, 1991, Sterling, Va. in Folder 20, Box 2, LCOHP, 3, Sterling Park, Virginia, Collection, TBL (hereinafter SPVC), Deed Restrictions, Folder Sterling Park, Vertical Files, TBL, and Scheel, \textit{Loudoun Discovered}, vol. 1, 128-38; On land...}
To build his planned community, Broyhill first had to convince the Loudoun Board of Supervisors to rezone his land to allow smaller lots. Thus began the first in the county’s seemingly never-ending series of battles over suburban growth. The supervisors held their first public hearings on the project in February 1962. Broyhill did his best to wine and dine the supervisors and offered to take them on tours of planned developments outside Philadelphia and Louisville. They were uninterested. They had their ears attuned to their constituents, and Loudoun residents had serious reservations about the impact Sterling Park would have on their county. Their fears involved more than the reflexive rural conservatism common to rural communities, although this was certainly pervasive. At issue were taxes and exclusivity. The services Sterling Park residents would require threatened to overwhelm county budgets.

The development’s social implications created just as much friction. The county’s reputation as an enclave for those with good taste, social status, and often wealth was well earned and well protected. Sterling Park threatened this. As the county’s planning commission explained, the development would “dilute the present average income of Loudoun County.” It would add socially undesirable lower-middle class suburbanites to the stable mix of prosperous farmers, landed gentry, rural laborers, and urban professionals that defined Loudoun’s social landscape. Class homogeneity and racial homogeneity were both at stake. The Loudoun Times-Mirror, for its part, jumped to Broyhill’s defense and took up the banner of planned growth. In an August 10, 1961, editorial, the paper praised the developer for “working to build a community which will be a national showplace of its kind—not to be mentioned in the same breath with the

purchases, see Frazer Interview, 2; On Sterling Park’s use of the Potomac Interceptor, see William Chapman, “New Dulles Airport Sewer Draws Potential Customers,” Post, October 16, 1961, B1. 58 Frazer Interview, 6.

59 On this point residents were right. A Farm Bureau study would later demonstrate that, after its completion, Sterling Park showed a yearly tax deficit of $2 million. Kenneth Bredemeier, “Growth Cost Worries Counties,” Post, January 2, 1974, A1, A8. I have been unable to locate a copy of this study.
postwar Levittowns.” Yet, as later advertising for the development would make explicit, Broyhill’s appeal was precisely to the same families who flocked to Levittown: those seeking “luxurious living—on a budget.” Citizens feared what opening the door to so many lower-middle-class people might do to the county. One Middleburg resident, for instance, raised fears that the development’s “low cost housing” would lead to the development becoming a “transient area.” Racial fears lurked beneath such statements. Nelson Craun, a member of the county planning commission, was one of the few to make these fears explicit. He warned that financial difficulties might lead to the developer abandoning the project when it was only half done.

“What would happen to Loudoun County?” he warned, “you men know what I’m talking about because we’ve talked about it before. I mean integration.” Broyhill, himself no racial progressive, responded that they had had “no trouble so far” and that they were willing to work with the county on racial issues. Sterling Park was planned as a segregated community.60

After almost a year of wrangling and a threat by Broyhill that he would develop his land under existing one-acre zoning, the supervisors signed off on Sterling Park.61 Looking back on his decision to vote for approval, county supervisor William Frazer explained, “[i]f you denied Sterling Park, somebody else was going to come; you can’t stop them. . . it was just like a steamroller rolling over a road. . . Washington was coming this way. . . . [we worked to] get everything we could out of the people when they came in. Get them to put up some money for schools, and get them to see that they provided proper roads [that] was about all you could do.”62

62 Frazer Interview, 7.
The first fifteen families moved into Sterling Park on February 23, 1963. First-time homebuyers lined up to take part in what Broyhill’s pamphlets described as “the excitement of community pioneering [with] all the assurances of proper zoning [and] master-planned development.” These new Eastern Loudoun residents were of a different breed than their Loudoun neighbors. They were both culturally and economically tied to Washington, D.C. They bought their homes with VA and FHA loans, they worked in the government offices and for government contractors, they read the Washington Post and swayed to the shifting breezes of national politics, and most cared little for the county’s agrarian and historical character. Sterling Park brought suburbia to Loudoun. By 1970 the development housed 6,809 people, 18 percent of the county’s population. Broyhill’s community became the symbol of suburban growth in the county.  

Loudoun County had certainly changed a great deal since the corps had first proposed its Riverbend Dam in 1944. When the Loudoun supervisors took up their positions on the bulwark of opposition to a high dam on the Potomac in 1961, they brought with them a new rhetorical weapon. In their first volley they declared, “We are unalterably opposed to a dam at Riverbend. . . because we want no interference with the growth that is now taking place in the county.” Why were Loudoun political leaders that had fought so hard to prevent the construction of Dulles Airport and were gearing up to oppose Broyhill’s Sterling Park upset that the proposed dam might interfere with growth? The issue was money. The Loudoun supervisors remained deeply rooted in the agrarian political structures of rural Virginia. Their opposition to the 1944 proposal

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was based on preventing the destruction of farmland. Their stance on the PEPCO plant, mirrored in their stance on the dam fights of the 1960s, was that attracting industry to Eastern Loudoun was the only way to protect agrarian landowners from the crushing tax burden that came with suburban growth. The county master plan, refashioned as the airport’s construction loomed, set aside 5,000 acres in Broad Run for future industrial development. This area had sewer connections, water supplies, improved roads, airport access, and relatively easy access to Washington. Just as importantly, this land was only marginally productive farmland. County officials estimated that this industrial area might eventually might add more than $250 million to the county tax rolls, or the equivalent of more than two PEPCO plants. Such estimates were certainly optimistic; however, the county did see a series of major land purchases by outside firms by the late 1960s.

The dam would not have inundated all of this land outright. The dam would turn the industrial area into a series of isolated peninsulas requiring numerous bridges, expensive sewer connections, and other modifications. In addition, rather than a spot surrounded by beautiful rolling green space like the finest office parks of the day, seasonal drawdowns threatened to leave the gently sloping land covered in thousand-foot-wide mudflats much of the year.

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That the federal government would force an airport and its attendant suburban growth on
the county and then construct a dam that would flood the most valuable industrial land that
Loudoun relied on to pay for this growth was too much to bear. As county supervisor J. Emory
Kirkpatrick explained, “[w]e find it incredible that one agency of our Federal Government can
create our problem of new population, other agencies join us in providing the utilities and
transportation to give us the industrial land which will help us care for that new population and
then a third agency of the Federal Government plans to flood the entire industrial area.” 67 The
editor of the *Loudoun Times-Mirror* warned that the impact of the loss of this industrial land
would reverberate across the county’s agrarian countryside. “It will not then be a question of
whether Loudoun is a pretty place in which to live, a good place in which to foxhunt, or a
profitable place in which to operate a farm. It won’t be. There is simply not enough money to
keep it this way without industry on the land that will be flooded by the Seneca Dam.” 68 A report
by the LCSA agreed: “[T]here has been thrust upon the County the staggering expenses of
proportionate increases in its school facilities and all other services to the public, a burden which
agriculture cannot bear if it is to continue to survive anywhere in the County.” 69 “The plan to
build Seneca Creek Dam,” the *Loudoun Times-Mirror* argued, “is a plan to ruin Loudoun’s
economy and to put an impossible burden on our taxpayers, no matter where in Loudoun we
live.” 70 In summary, one local journalist explained that a high dam on the Potomac would
“knock the County’s planning into a damp and muddy economic tangle, . . . would drown out
highways, railroad and numbers of buildings, and would so flood Loudoun tributaries in Broad
Run District as to cancel out more than $275,000,000 in private industrial development on land

69 Preliminary Analysis: Impact on Loudoun County, 3.
already purchased for that purpose.”71 This was not just an Eastern Loudoun issue; it would
determine the survival of agrarian Loudoun for decades to come. 72

The reality was that the social and cultural landscape of the threatened lands in Eastern
Loudoun had changed a great deal in the nearly two decades since the 1944 plan. Loudoun now
added opposition from the Broad Run Citizens Association and the Sterling Civic Association,
both of which represented the county’s newest Eastern Loudoun subdivisions.73 *Loudoun Times-
Mirror* interviews with affected landowners at the 1962 Loudoun hearing reveal just how much
the county had already become a haven for those seeking the country life. Roy Strickland worked
for the U.S. Patent Office and had lived on his two and a half acres in Loudoun for two years.
His family had just planted fruit trees. Roy Anthony worked for the U.S. Department of the
Interior and had lived on his four acres for three years. Clifford G. Pulvermacher worked for the
USDA and had enjoyed his Loudoun homestead for five years. Howard McFall worked for the
Fairfax County Public Works Department and moved to his three and a half acres two years
before so that his three kids could have a pony and enjoy the country life. Each opposed the dam.
The homes of these newcomers made up the overwhelming majority of those
threatened by the
Seneca Dam. Development was already transforming the riverfront farmland that Loudoun had
fought so hard to defend into prized country lots. As Dr. Donald S. Jewell, who moved to his two
and a half acres two years earlier, explained, “I’ve a vested interest in this area; all my life I’ve
wanted to live along the river and now these people want to build a dam. It seems inconceivable
that they would put the dam in and use valuable areas of land that has such high real estate
value.” The value of Loudoun’s riparian land was no longer tied to its productivity. It was now

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71 Fitzhugh Turner, “Power Lobbyist to Work for Dam,” undated newspaper clipping, Folder Potomac River Basin,
Box 171, Smith Papers; See also “High Dam Threatens Loudoun’s Solvency,” *LTM*, June 27, 1963, A1, A3.
72 The role of taxation in undermining Loudoun’s agrarian economy will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.
entirely wrapped up in residential value. The land the corps hoped to flood to provide water for the city had already been refashioned by metropolitan residents—residents who defended it using the aesthetic and quality of life arguments that would animate a rapidly coalescing national environmental movement. 74

Even as Loudoun’s formerly agrarian riverfront was blooming into a series of exurban communities, public opinion across the nation began to swing against big dams. As one of the nation’s largest undammed rivers and the home of the nation’s capital, the Potomac took on increasing symbolic weight in this national debate. Loudoun increasingly found itself surrounded by allies. Fairfax and Prince William Counties, both of which needed to secure water supplies to continue their rapid suburban growth, came out strongly in favor of the proposal. Other more established counties, however, were more hesitant to support such a large, costly, and destructive project. The corps’ Seneca Dam received a mixed reception among Northern Virginia planning agencies. 75 Both the Washington Post and the Washington Star came out against the corps plans in the fall of 1963, a fact that the Loudoun Times-Mirror editor celebrated as proof that Loudoun resistance did not come from “backwoods hicks, apple-knockers and stump-jumpers who just don’t understand progress.” 76 A growing chorus of environmental, recreation, public health, and regional planning groups increased pressure on the corps to abandon the pollution abatement part of its project and instead work to coordinate and develop more effective regional sewage planning and treatment. 77

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74 “Proposed Dam Would Put 200 Homes Under Water.”
77 Between 1965 and 1969, 2,000 large dams went up across the nation with a total storage capacity of 29 million acre feet. Between 1970 and 1982 these figures dropped to 1,069 and 10 million acre feet. Frederick, “Water Resources,” 48.
And then Lyndon Johnson gave a speech that irrevocably tilted the scales against the corps. In a special message to congress on February 8, 1965, Johnson made it one of his administration’s goals to see that “[t]he river rich in history and memory which flows by our nation’s capital should serve as a model of scenic and recreational values for the entire country.”\(^78\) Johnson put Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall at the head of a Federal Interdepartmental Task Force on the Potomac. Udall, whose had strong environmentalist credentials, put forward an alternate future for the Potomac. The task force’s interim report and the Department of the Interior’s more extensive 1968 study called for extensive federal parkland acquisitions all along the C&O canal as the core of a new national park that would transform the Potomac into a recreational and environmental haven stretching from Cumberland Maryland to Georgetown. The proposal recognized the need for improved water quality and water supplies but advocated addressing both without placing dams along the main stem of the Potomac.\(^79\) Udall’s grand park plans spurred more moderate voices in congress to propose a bill creating a more modest 5,250-acre C&O National Park. Maryland congressman Gilbert Gude, one of the park’s most outspoken advocates, warned his fellow congressmen, “[t]he choice is between a river comprised of wilderness, open space, developed recreation areas and farmland, interspersed with towns and areas of commerce or a mammoth open storm drain running through nightmarish strips of oversized cities, suburbs and Coney Islands.”\(^80\) The C&O park bill rode the rising tide of environmentalist fervor and was signed into law by Richard Nixon on January 8, 1971. The


C&O park now snaked within spitting distance of Montgomery County’s PEPCO power plant. 
The combined influence of the National Park Service and that county’s strong development 
controls, the plant never generated the industrial growth that derailed its construction in 
Loudoun.\textsuperscript{81} The corps quietly shelved the Seneca Dam project in August 1966.\textsuperscript{82} With a new 
national park nestled against the banks of the entire main branch of the Potomac above 
Washington and a congress intent on passing extensive environmental legislation, the project 
would never again see the light of day. Loudoun was safe from any development along the 
river.\textsuperscript{83}

This was not the end of the story for Loudoun. A drought in 1966 gave the corps a new 
mandate to secure emergency water supply for the capital region. It now joined with regional 
water agencies to identify additional sites for water impoundment off of the main stem of the 
Potomac. By March 1968 it was cautiously moving forward with a plan to construct six smaller 
dams on Potomac tributaries in communities where local support was forthcoming. It would 
eventually seek congressional approval for three—Bloomington (West Virginia), Sixes Bridge 
(Maryland) and Verona (Virginia). Only the Bloomington dam would be built.\textsuperscript{84}

Loudoun County was just one player in a larger drama to shape the Potomac River and 
the nation’s capital. The county’s fate was never entirely in its own hands. Washington’s water 
and transportation needs, the Army Corps’ development plans, the divergent interests of 


\textsuperscript{83} Mackintosh, \textit{C & O Canal}, 90-100.

neighboring counties, and the shifting politics of a developing national and regional environmental movement each played a role in defining Loudoun’s future. The county, for its part, added its own shifting mixture of positions to the mix. The resulting shape of the county’s landscapes was as much the result of national and metropolitan forces outside Loudoun’s control as it was the result of local resistance and adaptation. Dulles Airport and the attempts to dam the Potomac River brought Loudoun County into the orbit of the metropolis in a way that redefined the county.

The single most important fact making Loudoun’s experience with Washington, D.C., distinctive is that city’s relationship with the federal government. The city was, for all intents and purposes, the ward of congress during this period. As such, any action on behalf of Washington was a federal action. This only added to the fierceness of Loudoun’s resistance. It certainly added to the national attention given to the river and its development. Ironically the increased federal powers at Washington’s disposal actually doomed the Potomac dams, because it made them subject to congress in a way that empowered the project’s enemies. National involvement obstructed whatever urban imperialism the District of Columbia might have been able to muster. New York and San Francisco did not have the benefit of having the Army Corps on their side, but neither did they have to battle the likes of Harry Byrd and Howard Smith.

Loudoun land escaped inundation. Development in its Eastern Loudoun industrial heartland was slow to fulfill the dreams Loudoun planners had for it. A small handful of industries located in the area over the following two decades but nothing like the amounts required to balance the county’s tax rolls. Suburban growth continued to spread across the Broad Run watershed into the 1990s, when the area became an extension of the IT corridor that stretched along the Fairfax County Toll Road. Industrial development eventually did come to the
Whether the Seneca Dam would have seriously imperiled Loudoun’s fiscal development is a difficult question. Substantial recreational, resort, and lakefront development would have certainly been better for the county’s budget than the suburban development that covered much of the area instead. The question of which would have been better is not a helpful one. At issue was who would determine the future shape of Eastern Loudoun. The corps was unable to push through its vision of Loudoun as a recreational hinterland for the metropolis. Yet even in their victory, the dam opponents, both within Loudoun and within the larger metropolis, reinforced the county’s role as a purveyor of historical, agrarian, and natural landscapes for the enjoyment of the metropolis and the nation. A statement from Secretary of the Interior Udall’s 1968 report is instructive on this point.

We hope to make a model of [the Potomac landscape], commencing here processes of preservation and restoration to show the rest of the country that modern ways of being need not eat up everything whole and green and old and meaningful and right. Another... is that the Basin's landscape... is both physically and spiritually a national landscape, filled with national memories and meanings.  

Loudoun’s value to the metropolis and the nation came from the way it represented, preserved, and purveyed historical, natural, and recreational landscapes for the benefit of the metropolis and nation. In 1944, residents had stood up in Washington to protest the threatened inundation of their agricultural lands for the benefit of the city. By 1970 this agricultural economy was in retreat. These same lands were now the province of country homes and recreational users who fought to preserve them from expanding suburbs. “Don’t dam Loudoun!” began as a slogan of farmers tied economically to the metropolis but resisting its attempts to appropriate their land and water. It ended as a slogan used by those who had fled the city to enjoy life in the country and by those hoping to use industry to protect what farming that remained. Even without a dam,

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85 The Nation’s River, IV.
metropolitan expansion changed Loudoun. Loudoun was never subject to an imperial takeover by Washington. Yet neither was it ever free of Washington’s influence.
CHAPTER 4

RURAL ELITES, THE SAN JACINTO RIVER AUTHORITY, AND HOUSTON’S METROPOLITAN HINTERLAND

The San Jacinto River is an underwhelming body of water. Its West Fork meanders 98 miles from Walker County southward, through central Montgomery County, and to the Harris County line. There it meets the 69-mile-long East Fork, which drains the eastern third of Montgomery County. The combined river then winds for another 28 miles, gradually widening, before entering Galveston Bay. The San Jacinto is a fickle river. During hot, dry summers, it is little more than a creek. A spring downpour or slow-moving tropical storm, however, can quickly transform the river into a raging torrent whose flood waters overrun its steep banks and fan out onto the county’s wide bottomlands. The flow of the West Fork fluctuates between 2,000 and 15,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) in normal years. Flood waters have driven estimated flows as high as 110,000 cfs. Dry spells like the 1956 drought can reduce it to just a small creek. In spite of its frequent damaging floods and its unpredictable droughts, or perhaps because of them, local and regional boosters in Montgomery County had long schemed of ways to tame, harness, and profit from the unruly river. When, in the summer of 1930, J. W. Harris looked out on the sand bars and steep banks of the San Jacinto River from his home in Honea, just a few miles west of Conroe, he had visions of locks and dams, of large barges moving upriver, bringing prosperity to the town’s newly constructed harbor. He was certainly not the first area Texan to have dreams of prosperity coming from the river. Nor was he the last.¹

Across the American South and West during the twentieth-century, small-town boosters, agricultural elites, and industrial leaders promoted, lobbied for, supported, and profited from public and private river development. In the South, industrial elites led the way. These men, often with the support of the federal government, covered the South with dams from the New Deal to the 1960s. These dams powered the region’s factories, electrified the countryside, provided cheap fertilizer, controlled flooding, and ensured stable water supplies. In southeast Texas, the abundance of oil and natural gas and the region’s relatively flat topography limited the attraction of hydro-electric power. Poor soils and abundant water made dams for irrigation unnecessary. Agricultural landowners looked to dams to prevent the flooding of valuable bottomland and to promote soil conservation, but they played little role in promoting major dam projects. It was industrial elites and small town boosters across the region who became the biggest proponents of dams. These men placed their hopes in the industrial expansion that ample water supplies would provide. Pulp and paper mills, oil refineries, chemical companies, and other heavy manufacturing enterprises located where they could find low taxes, cheap, non-union labor, abundant water, and limited pollution controls. They also dreamed of the prosperity that recreational development might bring.

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Like so many East Texas towns, Conroe boosters pinned their future development to dam construction. Getting dams built in Montgomery County would, however, involve far more than hustle from these East Texas businessmen and landowners. After the San Jacinto River flowed past the forests, pastures, and small towns of Montgomery County, it entered what had become, by the 1940s, the nation’s largest concentration of chemical production and oil refining as well as one of the nation’s busiest ports: the Houston Ship Channel. Wartime mobilization had been good to Houston’s economy. Its industries continually demanded more water. So too did the city’s booming population, which relied totally on wells until 1953. When combined with a fading but still water-hungry coastal rice industry, Houston’s water future looked bleak. The city’s complete dependence on well water was becoming increasingly untenable, as subsidence spread across much of the city, aquifer levels continued to decline, and severe salt infiltration threatened. Houston’s business and political leaders turned their eyes upstream for pure water to supply a growing metropolis that was, quite literally, sinking because of its excessive thirst.4

Conroe boosters wanted to harness the San Jacinto to ensure the county’s industrial development. Ranchers hoped for flood control, soil conservation, and small dams within the watershed. Houston struggled to ensure the industrial and municipal water supplies on which the city’s continued growth depended. These divergent visions set the stage for the conflicts that swirled around the damming of the San Jacinto River between 1951 and 1973. As chapter 3 explains, the framework of imperialism does not fully capture the relationship between city and countryside, between Houston and the San Jacinto watershed. Achieving Houston’s dreams for

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the river meant working with the San Jacinto River Authority (SJRA).[^5] During the first half of the twentieth century, the Texas state legislature chartered a series of water authorities who became responsible for the conservation, development, and allocation of their assigned watersheds—at least on paper. Nationally, the number of such special water districts tripled between 1945 and 1980, yet historians have overlooked their importance.[^6]

The SJRA acted as a powerful, state-backed intermediary between Houston and its hinterland. As the authority grew in power, it became the arbiter of competing visions of the San Jacinto and an advocate for its own interests as well. The authority’s central role in water development in Montgomery County made it a buffer between the city and the county’s boosters, ranchers, and, ultimately, suburbanites. The authority blunted Houston’s attempts to exert power over the region’s water. Houston did not always have its way and name its price when it came to developing the reservoir.[^7] At the same time, the SJRA’s significant financial dependence on the city ensured that the authority would look to Houston to provide the resources it needed to transform the watershed to match its own visions. The SJRA’s activities involved little federal money or federal planning. This left the city and the SJRA to hammer out a working relationship. Their courtship was a tumultuous one. Its impact on the landscapes, economy, and social makeup of Montgomery County were profound. The SJRA reshaped Montgomery County’s place within

[^5]: The state legislature renamed the San Jacinto River Conservation and Reclamation District the San Jacinto River Authority in 1951. For simplicity sake, I will refer to this organization by either the acronym SJRA or the Authority throughout this chapter. Where many water authorities are, in practice, extensions of the urban government, the SJRA was a politically independent, state-chartered organization whose geographic reach did not include any land in Harris County or Houston. SJRA, *Master Plan: Report for the Full Scale Development of the San Jacinto River* (Conroe, Tex.: San Jacinto River Authority, 1951), Box 398, SJRA, 5-6, 12.

[^6]: Historian Donald J. Pisani has argued that “the proliferation of special districts and their relationship to county, state, and federal institutions” is “the untold story of the twentieth century.” Pisani, *Water and American Government*, 292.

the metropolis, transforming it from the San Jacinto watershed to Houston’s hinterland. As in
Loudoun, agrarian resistance to the damming of the San Jacinto defended an economy and land-
use pattern that was already being fundamentally transformed by metropolitan growth. When the
SJRA put forward its plan for a large reservoir in the center of the county, the question was not
whether Montgomery County would retain its farm economy or have it replaced by resorts and
recreation. The question was whether this section of the county would offer Houstonians
lakefront recreation and clean drinking water or dude ranches, country homes, and rural suburbs
as in the rest of the county. Defeating the dam would not free Montgomery County from the
metropolitan reach of Houston.

All of these transformations were barely on the horizon when, in 1937, a small group of
rural landowners and businessmen in and around Conroe, Texas, first put forward the idea for
what would become the SJRA. Obie Etheridge, a prominent local lawyer and owner of the
Conroe Courier, led the way. Etheridge had spent much of his childhood in the arid lands of
Southern Wyoming and Northern Colorado, where he had become enamored with the power of
government-funded reclamation projects to pump economic vitality into dry, weary lands. He
now sought to do the same for his adopted hometown. Etheridge and his compatriots convinced
R. A. Powell, their state representative, to guide their project through the legislature. He
succeeded, and the SJRA was born. The authority’s enabling legislation charged it to limit
erosion, combat the dramatic spring floods that plagued the area, promote reforestation, increase
wildlife populations, and, where feasible, construct “a series of small dams along the San Jacinto
tributaries and impound water which could be sold to municipalities, industries, and agriculture.”
Its jurisdiction included the entire watershed, except that portion that lay in Harris County, which
was left for Houston. The authority’s goals reflected its founder’s commitment to conservation,
with its driving passion for the efficient allocation of natural resources to generate long-term profits. Development of both soils and water would, these boosters believed, secure for East Texas a golden agricultural and industrial future full of the cattle, crops, smoke, and soot synonymous with progress.  

The SJRA had the potential to wield substantial power with little local oversight. The state had armed it with broad powers to transform the watershed through eminent domain and reservoir construction. The state also provided the only oversight over the SJRA. The Texas Board of Water Engineers appointed the SJRA’s board, making it accountable to Austin rather than Conroe. The same legislation that created this powerful new conservation entity, however, also starved it into near-irrelevance. Bowing to the fiscal conservatism that pervaded Texas politics, the legislature provided the SJRA with no assets and no income stream. Only after some pleading from the authority did the legislature provide it with a ten-year grant of half of the \emph{ad valorem} taxes within its district. This money, which amounted to $110,000 per year beginning in 1939, was, in the estimation of later SJRA board president Walter G. Hall, “ridiculously inadequate to do anything consequential.” This revenue stream was also inherently unreliable. State law prevented the government from collecting the tax whenever the legislature ran a budget surplus. This occurred in both 1946 and 1948, leaving the SJRA, in spite of Hall’s loud protests, without its state money for those years. The unreliability of this income all but ruined the

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authority’s ability to secure funding for its projects. The authority’s continued existence would depend on the acquisition of a steady stream of income and a financial partner with pockets deep enough to underwrite the bold watershed development plans its engineers were designing. When Austin failed to provide, the SJRA looked elsewhere. Montgomery County had turned its water future over to an entity insulated from local public opinion, whose board did not always represent their interests, whose finances were inadequate to the task they dreamed for it, and whose eyes increasingly turned toward Houston.

The first two boards did little to address the authority’s revenue issues. Things only began to look up when World War II mobilization caused the demand for industrial water to skyrocket. In July 1942 the Texas Board of Water Engineers granted the SJRA the right to 165,000 acre feet per year of water from the San Jacinto River with the hope that they would develop it for use by vital ship channel war industries. The SJRA was slow to act, so the Texas Board of Water Engineers replaced the entire board. This new board redefined the authority’s scope and constituency. Where the earlier board members had represented the interests of Conroe and the surrounding counties, this new board’s members hailed from Huntsville, Baytown, Conroe, and Dickinson, from both the watershed and the areas of possible downstream water consumption. The board retained a similar form up through the 1980s. After 1943,


The Authority’s only source of credit was bonds issued against its future revenues, of which it had none outside of its temporary tax income. Its charter did allow the SJRA to issue bonds on the public credit, provided they receive voter approval. This was something the SJRA never dared to attempt. Fiscal conservatism ran deep in East Texas, making the success of this type of bond vote unlikely. For a copy of the SJRA’s enabling legislation and an overview of its activities during its first decade, see SJRA, Master Plan, 1951.

SJRA, Master Plan, 1951, 6; “Etheridge is Stubborn, and it’s a Good Thing,” CDC, November 9, 1969, Folder Lake Conroe – San Jacinto River Authority, Box 130, SJRA
Montgomery County would never have more than two members on the board of six, and every one of these was from Conroe.\textsuperscript{12}

In 1943 Walter G. Hall of Dickinson—located between Houston and Galveston—took the reins. Hall was a man of restless energy who had extensive political connections and a strong commitment to expanding the role of state-chartered river authorities in watershed development. These qualities convinced the chairman of the state Board of Water Engineers to appoint Hall to the board of what remained, in Hall’s words, “nothing but a paper organization.” Hall rapidly rose to head the SJRA. Once in command, the authority charted a bold program that sought nothing less than the total development of the river. His upbringing on a farm near League City and his experience as a banker for farmers and agribusinessmen gave Hall a deep commitment to agricultural modernization and soil conservation. He firmly believed that proper watershed development would benefit landowners, industries, and cities alike. He focused the SJRA’s resources on soil conservation, flood control, and the development of water supply. “A river,” he explained, “cannot be properly developed without full consideration of each of these three major problems.” Recreation and sanitation faded to the background. Hall envisioned the SJRA as a disinterested regional entity that would promote the economic development of the entire watershed. He resented the way that Houston had attempted to monopolize the region’s water sources. Nature and economics, he believed, each tied the metropolitan region together. Houston’s health depended on the economic health of ship channel industries and the prosperity of the area’s agriculture. Soil conservation, flood control, and reservoir development would each

\textsuperscript{12} The one possible exception to this is in 1949, when three Montgomery county men served for a matter of months before one of them retired. Five of the six members of the first board were from rural and small town areas scattered across the watershed. The only exception was one Houstonian who was brought on board through his brother who lived in the county. A similar breakdown held true for the first permanent board, established in 1941. Between 1941 and 1973, when Lake Conroe opened, Conroe accounted for 59 years of total service on the board, Walker and Liberty Counties accounted for 47, and Houston, Galveston, and Baytown represented 56 total years. Calculated from “Directors of the San Jacinto River Authority,” Folder SJRA, History of, Box 536, SJRA Files. For the 1942 grant of water, see Brown & Root, \textit{Estimates of Potential Water Supply}, 13-14.
contribute to the long-term prosperity of the watershed, not just the metropolis. The SJRA would be the arbiter of this development.\textsuperscript{13}

In summer 1945 Hall publicly unveiled the authority’s master plan for the region. It was beyond ambitious. The SJRA had added to an already expansive flood control and reservoir development plan that the Army Corps of Engineers had completed in the 1920s. The SJRA plan proposed twenty reservoirs of various sizes spread across the compact watershed. The first three projects would be a 5,950 acre reservoir near Cleveland (Liberty County), a 22,000 acre reservoir on the East Fork of the San Jacinto River near Luce Bayou, and a third, a 6,000 acre lake just west of Conroe. Impatient Conroe boosters found it worth the wait. While they certainly understood that much of this water would flow to industries on the Gulf, they took seriously the SJRA’s portrayal of the areas north of Houston as “ripe for further industrialization.” Ranchers brightened at the mention of flood control and continued soil conservation work—both of which meant higher productivity and increased land values. Montgomery County saw in the SJRA’s plan the promise of an economic boom.\textsuperscript{14}

The SJRA’s first financial break came when generous financing from the Federal Works Administration in 1945 allowed the authority to purchase one of the two canals that carried water

\textsuperscript{13} Walter G. Hall, Interview by Chandler Davidson, Walter Buenger, and Louis Marchiafava, July 24, 1979, Folder 3, Box 16, 12-13 (first quotation) and Hall to C. M. Malone, August 25, 1948, 2 (second quotation) both in Walter Gardner Hall-Papers, 1923-1990, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, Tex. (hereinafter Hall Papers). For the most concise summary of Hall’s regional conservation vision for the SJRA, see William W. McClendon, “The San Jacinto River Conservation & Reclamation District’s Proposed Plan of Full Scale development of the San Jacinto River,” undated, Folder San Jacinto River C & R – Public Relations, Box 536, SJRA. For Hall’s background, see Hall Interview, July 1979, 3, Hall Interview, August 17, 1989, and Dan Waters, “Soil and Water Conservation,” \textit{HC Magazine}, October 1, 1949, p. 6-7. For Hall’s agricultural commitments, see Hall, “National Farm City Week Speech at Houston Produce Terminal Cafeteria,” November 21, 1958, Folder 10 and Hall, “Agricultural Economy,” 1954, Folder 6, p. 2 both in Box 3, Hall Papers. For his emphasis on water for industry, see Hall, Interview by Davidson, Buenger, and Marchiafava, November 19, 1979, Folder 4, Box 16, 34.

\textsuperscript{14} “Open Meeting 2:30 P. M. Monday: San Jacinto District To Be Explained to Public,” \textit{CDC}, August 2, 1945; and “San Jacinto River Discussed at Open,” CDC, July 26, 1945, Folder San Jacinto River C & R – Public Relations, Box 536, SJRA. SJRA, \textit{Master Plan}, 1951, 4 (quotation). For a map of the Army Corps plan, see Etheridge, \textit{What was it Like in Conroe}, 404-5. The number of dams planned continually fluctuated over the following twenty-five years. An undated engineering report from Hall’s tenure put the number at fourteen. The 1951 Master Plan would have thirteen.
from the San Jacinto River to the shipbuilding and oil industries east of Houston for $600,000.\footnote{This grant was made in Water Permit No. 1422 on Feb 3, 1947. SJRA, Master Plan, 1951, 13.}

With the Board of Water Engineer’s granting the SJRA another 165,000 acre feet of San Jacinto water in February 1947, the authority had the water, the transmission systems, and the customers it needed to secure a stable source of income and thereby secure the funding it needed to move forward.\footnote{“The San Jacinto River Authority: A History,” 2nd ed., 1st Draft, [c 2006], SJRA; SJRA, Master Plan, 1951, 8; Ike Barrett, “The History of San Jacinto River Authority,” c. May 1972, SJRA Records; Hall Interview, July 24, 1979, 12-13; and Melosi, “Houston’s Public Sinks,” 115-116.} For Hall this meant building the SJRA’s first reservoir where Lake Creek met the West Fork of the San Jacinto, in the heart of Montgomery County. He hoped to work with the

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Figure 4.1: The dam marked San Jacinto Dam No. 1 would later be proposed as the Lake Creek site. The Lake Conroe dam would eventually be located midway between Dams 1 and 2. Its reservoir would cover the proposed reservoirs of dams 2 and 3 and 4 as well as a great deal of additional land not marked on this map. None of the remaining dams were ever built. SJRA, Master Plan, 1951.
Army Corps of Engineers to build a combined flood control and water storage reservoir that would provide water first to Montgomery County customers and then to any paying customers downstream. The SJRA’s engineers finished their report on the Lake Creek project in March of that year. His second priority was to continue the authority’s soil conservation work, which included terracing, retention pond construction, and other erosion control measures. In order to pay for these projects and his larger vision, Hall continued to hope for state and federal money. Houston, he believed, would remain unwilling to take on its responsibilities to ensure the economic health of the entire region. He explained to a friend, “I know of no city which has either the obligation or means with which to finance the development of a watershed.” The kind of watershed development he desired was not the kind of project any fiscally responsible city would have pursued. With the completion of the SJRA’s master plan in 1951, Hall stepped down. For Montgomery County, his tenure had been one of increasing optimism that economic development, agricultural prosperity, and industry would come with the conservation and development of the watershed. Houston’s increasing power over its hinterland, however, would make this watershed vision increasingly untenable. The SJRA would instead become instrumental in turning Montgomery County into Houston’s hinterland. This was not what Conroe boosters had hoped for. Throughout the 1950s, the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce clung to the local industrial potentials of SJRA water development. Suburban development was still over the horizon. These East Texans found it difficult to imagine any type of prosperity that was not connected to water-guzzling, polluting industry. The local oil industry had taught them the economic benefits of industry, and they

17 Hall’s plans outlined in Hall to James V. Allred, April 7, 1949, Folder 28, 2. For the completion of the engineering study, see S. W. Freese to Hall, March 16, 1949, Folder 28. The need to pay for their soil conservation work was another major reason for their purchase of the canal system. Hall to Searcy Bracewell, March 14, 1949, Folder 28. All in Box 15. Hall Papers. 18 Hall to C. M. Malone, August 25, 1948, 2.
wanted more. These men certainly understood that Houston would always have first claim to area water supplies, but they fought to ensure that some of the county’s water would remain upstream to further their economic ambitions. Conroe may have been in Houston’s shadow, but these small-town businessmen saw no reason that this should make the town economically dependent on its big brother to the south. So they got to work. The County Planning Board, a group with ties to both local government and the Chamber of Commerce, took the lead beginning in early 1953 in pushing for a reservoir in the center of the county “sufficient to offer water in attractive quantities to industries desiring to locate in this locality.” They advocated for the county to the chairman of the Texas Water Resources Board and got the County Commissioners to hire a prominent water lawyer to represent them. The Conroe City Council was just as adamant that Houston’s water needs not be allowed to restrict Conroe’s industrial future. Conroe would certainly welcome any recreational development that came with such a reservoir, but their core justification was the need for local industrial water supplies. For these boosters, Conroe was not and would never be merely a bedroom community or a recreational destination for Houstonians. Conroe was upstream. Nature had given the town a claim to water from the San Jacinto. Houston was welcome to what the region could not use, but Conroe resisted the idea that it would ever be subservient to Houston’s water claims. Conroe was and would continue to be its own industrial center, always smaller than, but not subservient to the industrial giant to the South.


The SJRA’s response is telling. At a November 1954 speech, former SJRA president W. G. Hall told local businessmen and state-level politicians “[t]he people of Montgomery County can have an adequate supply of surface water to meet any future needs for residential, commercial and industrial demands, if they want it bad enough and are willing to pay for it.” Houston had the money and the demand. The simple financial realities would make Houston and ship-channel industries the primary consumer of SJRA water for the near future. In order to placate county elites, the SJRA passed a resolution in early 1955 committing themselves to providing “a substantial supply” of water at a fair price to Conroe and the county from any dams they might build. With this assurance in place, the SJRA could present itself as a partner in the industrial development of the county even as it worked to construct reservoirs for Houston in the heart of Montgomery County.

The task of carrying out the SJRA’s 1951 master plan fell to Winifred B. (W. B.) Weisinger. Weisinger joined the board in 1951 as a replacement for his brother, William Samuel (W.S.) Weisinger, who had been elected Montgomery County judge. The Weisinger brothers were the scions of a family whose extensive landholdings and local roots went back into the nineteenth century and whose influence in local politics and society was unparalleled. W. B. Weisinger was therefore one of the most well connected men in Montgomery County. His biography reads like a Sinclair Lewis caricature of a local elite. He owned a local car dealership and wielded substantial influence within the local chamber of commerce. He was a Lion, a Mason, a Shriner, a Methodist, a board member of the local bank, a trustee of the Real Estate Development Fund of the Montgomery County Industrial Foundation, and owner of the local TV and radio stations. Walter G. Hall’s agrarian roots and his economic interests in the Galveston

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22 Unmarked list of resolutions, SJRA History Folder, Box 536.
area led him to emphasize the authority’s role as a regional conservation organization. W. B. Weisinger’s business ties, his personal connections, and his local economic interests each led him to promote SJRA projects that would mold Conroe into a “progressive” town in which economic development, population growth, and prosperity would continue into the next century. During his nearly two decades at the helm, from 1954 to his death in 1973, Weisinger led the SJRA in promoting large-scale reservoirs in Montgomery County. Under his tenure, recreational development would replace industry as the primary benefit promised to county residents, and the authority’s broader watershed development plans would be overshadowed by the construction of a dam to meet Houston’s water needs.24

Even as the SJRA was putting forward its river basin plan, Houston was beginning to develop its own dependable surface water supplies as subsidence and increasing pumping costs punished the city for its total dependence on well water. In June 1943 Houstonians approved a $14 million bond, part of which paid for a reservoir on the San Jacinto River in northern Harris County, outside the SJRA’s jurisdiction. Financial problems delayed construction until November 1951. When it opened in December 1953, 12,240 acre Lake Houston provided 146,700 acre feet of storage and would become a central distribution point for future surface water developments. This new reservoir, however, only bought the city a short reprieve from its water supply problems. A 1943 report predicted the metro area would consume 268 millions of

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24 When local elites used the term progressive, what they sought most was industrial development, increasing land values, and general prosperity of the region. What they wanted was to put Conroe on the map and to gain profits for themselves in the process. Philip B. Spencer, “Winifred Burton Weisinger,” in History Book Committee, Montgomery County Historical Society, Montgomery County History, 1981 (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Hunter Publishing Company, 1980), 537-8;  “Weisinger will Be Missed,” CDC, June 20, 1973; and “SJRA head Weisinger Dies at 66,” HP, June 16, 1973, both in Box 130, SJRA.
gallons of water per day (mgd) by 1970. It reached that benchmark by 1954. A 1955 Houston chamber of commerce report predicted that the total demand for water in the region would rise from 257 mgd in 1953 to 461 mgd by 1960, an 80 percent increase in just seven years. By 1970, that figure was expected to reach 703 mgd. This meant that Houston would outgrow Lake Houston by 1960. “It... is essential,” the report concluded, “that immediate steps be taken to [establish] a new ‘firm’ supply of not less than 200 million gallons daily... within five years. Any unnecessary delay will jeopardize the industrial growth of the entire area.” And then the drought came. From 1950 to 1956, areas across the state experienced their lowest rainfall levels on record. Between March 1956 and February 1957 the San Jacinto River produced only 87,160 acre feet. Its average was 1,238,000 per year. Between July 1950 and March 1957, the average flow into Lake Houston was less than one-third of normal. Houston was in the market for new water supplies.

In this Houston was blessed with something few cities had: the luxury of choice. Houston was within fifty miles of four rivers, the Brazos, the Trinity, the San Jacinto, and the Neches. These rivers combine to drain two-fifths of Texas. Houston’s problem was not where to find water, but which water source to tap first. City officials sought to secure the city’s claim

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25 Water for the Houston Area, 1.
27 Water for the Houston Area, 4 (quotation), 10.
30 Freese and Nichols, Estimates of the Potential Yield of the San Jacinto River Basin, February 16, 1959, Folder Application #002108, Reports, 1959-1972, File 1, Box 2002/ 207-13, Texas Board of Water Engineers Records (BWER), Texas State Library (hereinafter TSL), Austin, Tex., 3.
over as large a water supply as was fiscally and politically possible.\footnote{“Houston Has Access to Plentiful Water Supply,” Say Experts,” \textit{HP}, April 7, 1957, Folder Publicity 1947 thru December 31, 1958, Box 130, SJRA.} This meant securing more distant and uncertain sources first. In its attempts to get Houston to fund a major reservoir project, the SJRA board would continually run head-first into the simple fact that Houston could take the authority’s water for granted. No other municipality in the watershed had anything like the resources needed to fund a large SJRA reservoir. No other major Texas city could put forward a valid counterclaim. Nor would the state allow any reservoir development that did not include provisions for Houston’s claims. Geography and politics conspired to make the SJRA dependent on Houston. Provided the city was willing to accept the slow inflation of land prices in the watershed, Houston’s political leaders could keep the SJRA waiting for as long as they could do without the water. The SJRA, on the other hand, depended on Houston’s money to move even a single one of its fourteen proposed dams from the drafting table to the real world. The SJRA needed Houston more than Houston needed the SJRA. Both sides knew it.\footnote{Freese and Nichols, \textit{Estimates of the Potential Yield}, 4.}

Houston was anything but an imperial power when it came to the damming of Montgomery County. They were, in the eyes of the SJRA, something even worse. They were indifferent. The SJRA’s board spent the following decade coaxing, cajoling, threatening, and leveraging its position to get Houston to sign on the dotted line. For much of that time, its appeals fell on deaf ears. The board began this troubled courtship in August 1952 with the authority’s first proposal to the city. Its board boldly claimed they could have a $20 million reservoir built in thirty-six months without the city having to raise taxes or float any bonds. All Mayor Oscar Holcombe had to do was commit the city to purchase the water that would flow out
of this new reservoir, and the SJRA would handle the rest. Holcombe declined. The San Jacinto, after all, was guaranteed.³⁴ With this rebuff, the authority bided its time.

Events seemed to be working in the SJRA’s favor by the middle of the decade, as the drought deepened and Houston’s water needs grew critical. In its 1955 report, the Houston Chamber of Commerce called on the city to act quickly to develop the San Jacinto. That river, as far as that group was concerned, represented the city’s quickest and most cost effective water supply.³⁵ As the drought peaked in the summer of 1956, the SJRA board members believed their time had come. They picked up their briefcases full of yield studies, contour maps, and engineering reports and drove the forty miles south to city hall.³⁶ They fared little better this time. Nor did they do any better when they made the same presentation twice in 1957.³⁷ By this time, the SJRA had secured additional water rights on the San Jacinto from the Texas Board of Water Engineers. Ironically, this left the authority searching for buyers for 25 mgd of water the year after the worst drought in Texas’ recorded history.³⁸

With the changing of mayoral administrations in January 1958, the SJRA’s board members screwed up their courage to convince new Mayor Louis Cutrer of the wisdom of their plans.³⁹ The Cutrer administration, however, had its own plans. In an unprecedented move, the mayor pursued a water deal with the Trinity River Authority (TRA). The TRA was a massive organization compared to the SJRA. Created in 1955, it covered seventeen counties from Dallas to where the river entered the Gulf east of Baytown. The TRA had more water to sell, a greater financial base, and therefore greater political weight to throw around. It was also adamantly

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³⁴ “City Told 2nd San Jacinto Dam Projected,” HC, August 23, 1952, Folder Publicity 1947 thru December 31, 1958, Box 130, SJRA.
³⁵ Water for the Houston Area, 3 (quotation); “San Jacinto River Program Outlined,” CDC, January 21, 1954, p. 6.
³⁶ Barrett, “The History of San Jacinto River Authority.”
³⁷ Max H. Jacobs Agency to W. B. Weisinger, June 25, 1958, Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA.
³⁹ Walter Mansell, “Water Talks to be Resumed,” HC, December 15, 1957, Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA.
opposed to Houston using any water from its territory. The Trinity River was the primary water supply not only for Dallas, but for much of the rest of East Texas. Towns up and down the Trinity joined Dallas and the TRA in condemning what they viewed as a brazenly selfish water grab by the Bayou City. Pride and boosterism certainly had a great deal to do with the reservoirs of ink spilled over the issue. But so too did the very practical matters of the allocation of a scarce resource. If Houston secured inter-basin rights to Trinity water, they might use this power to limit both water use and upstream pollution, in effect placing future development in a straitjacket. Houston certainly had grand plans for the Trinity. The proposed Lake Livingston would blanket 83,000 acres of East Texas pine woods compared to the much smaller reservoirs proposed for Montgomery County. It would also hold more than twelve times as much water as Lake Houston.\footnote{Charles Hermann Moerbe, “An Analysis of Views on Houston’s Quest for Trinity River Authority Water,” December 14, 1966 in Folder 4, Box 5, Louise Kennedy Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Tex. (hereinafter HMRC), 19, 22.} The reasons why Houston went after Trinity water were clear. Lake Livingston water would be cheaper, per acre foot, that either Lake Conroe or Lake Houston. A TRA contract was simply a better deal for Houston’s water users, that is, of course, if they could get it.\footnote{Brown & Root, Estimates of Potential Water Supply, 24.}

The SJRA was persistent. In April the authority put together a presentation for the Houston City Council that outlined why the city should abandon its Trinity proposal to develop reservoirs on the San Jacinto. This plan placed the SJRA as the primary water provider for Houston. It called for eight reservoirs, developed in increments as needed, totaling 570 mgd. To get these built would require Houston to purchase more expensive SJRA water when Lake Livingston water would be substantially cheaper.\footnote{Lake Livingston would provide 550 mgd for $30 million. The SJRA’s first lake would provide only 150mgd for $25 million. “Water Offer is Repeated by Authority,” HC, February 20, 1958, Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA; SJRA, The San Jacinto River: Logical Source of Houston’s Future Water Supply, April 25, 1958, Houston Public Works, 5.} The SJRA’s selling points were water quality and recreation. Ironically the SJRA used the relative lack of industrial development upstream as
an argument for placing a dam in Montgomery County. Pure water flowed downstream, through the still-rural watershed to Houston. Montgomery County’s reforestation and pasture improvements during the period made the area’s water all the more attractive to Houston’s public works department and to Ship Channel industries. In comparison with this “pure” and “unpolluted” water, Trinity water posed, in the words of W. B. Weisinger, “a serious threat to the health of more than a million people of Metropolitan Houston and [to] one of the finest recreational areas in Texas [Lake Houston].” Weisinger also shamelessly appealed to Houston’s pride. Why, he chided, would Houston invest so much money to bring in water that even Dallas had “emphatically rejected” for drinking water during the last drought? The Trinity River, as Weisinger explained it, was Dallas’ sewer, full of paper mill discharges and industrial wastes, polluted runoff and untreated sewage. Would Houstonians really drink water that Dallas residents flushed down their toilets? Through such exaggerations, Weisinger attempted to turn a real difference of water purity into an issue of urban pride and boosterism.43

Next Weisinger called forth another, more pleasant vision for Cutrer and the city council to ponder. He had them envision “a chain of lakes, stretching like pearls around the San Jacinto watershed.” The counties to the north would, with the their investment, become one large recreational hinterland full of private resorts, profitably developed by Houston businessmen, and public parks, owned and operated by Houston for its residents. These lakes would provide more than an amenity; they would generate a $100 million dollar industry. The SJRA estimated that

43 According to the SJRA’s figures, San Jacinto water had 157 ppm dissolved solids and 60 ppm hardness. The Trinity had 296 ppm and 136 ppm respectively. For this reason San Jacinto water would require less treatment before use. For more on the water quality issue, see Logical Source of Houston’s Future Water Supply, 8-9, 17-18. Recreational statistics from Logical Source of Houston’s Future Water Supply, 6 and “Chain of Lakes Sales Point of Water Group,” HC, May 23, 1958, Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA; “Proposed Statement of W. B. Weisinger, Conroe, Texas, President, San Jacinto River Authority,” November 12, 1957, Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA, 1 (third quotation), 2 (first, second, and fourth quotation).
the lakes might bring as much as 10,000 jobs and a 20 percent increase in tourist expenditures to the metropolitan area.44

The SJRA framed these arguments within a broader vision that stressed the special relationship between the watershed and the metropolis. Its proposal reminded Houstonians that the region was “one integrated agrico-industrial unit,” a “community of interest” that required a “close partnership” between Houston and the SJRA. In doing so, Weisinger echoed Walter G. Hall’s vision of the watershed as a shared natural resource. Unlike Hall, however, this report emphasized the subordination of this hydrologically defined community to Houston’s interests. The SJRA offered Houston the San Jacinto River watershed as a source of the city’s water and as a recreational hinterland—a protected place where Houstonians could find “rest, relaxation and pleasure in the woods.” In building reservoirs on either the San Jacinto or the Trinity Rivers, Houston was not just securing a water source. The city was investing metropolitan money in the countryside. The choice was whether to partner with the SJRA and invest it in a hinterland and a watershed that provided so many other benefits to the city or to invest it in a distant watershed that had far fewer recreational amenities to offer. The SJRA was willing to recognize “the right of the City to insist on owning and operating its own municipal domestic water supply.” Its board would further the city’s influence over the watershed, provided it could both secure a revenue stream from the city and offer Montgomery County the economic benefits of recreational development.45

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44 “Proposed Statement of W. B. Weisinger, Conroe, Texas, President, San Jacinto River Authority,” November 12, 1957, Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA and “Green Light may be Given Conroe Dams within next 10 Days,” CDC, August 10, 1958, p. 1 (fifth quotation).
45 Logical Source of Houston’s Future Water Supply, 4 (first through fourth quotations), 7, 13, 27 (fifth quotation); “Water Offer is Repeated by Authority,” HC, February 20, 1958, Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA.
Three months later, Cutrer brought SJRA officials before the city council to outline the details of their proposal. By this point, the SJRA had moved the Lake Conroe, lower Lake Creek, and Cleveland reservoirs to the front of its dam queue. This more incremental approach was a concession to cost-conscious Houston. It would allow the city to keep its costs in line with the speed of growth of its water demand. The offer of water at 2 ¾ cents per thousand gallons remained the same. Houston newspapers were enthusiastic. The Houston Chamber of Commerce continued to warn that the city would face water shortages by 1961 and that attempts to secure water from the Trinity would take too long. Its leadership called on the city to enter immediate negotiations with the SJRA to ensure it could provide for the city’s continued industrial expansion. Weisinger and the SJRA did their best to amplify these fears and position themselves as the only entity able to construct the needed reservoirs in time. Confident that Houston would see the wisdom of its proposals, the SJRA board submitted an application to the Texas Board of Water Engineers for a 350,000-acre-foot reservoir on the West Fork of the San Jacinto, just west of Conroe. When Houston came around, the SJRA would be ready. If it did not, SJRA officials threatened, the authority would find a way to go ahead without their involvement.

Houston’s negotiations with both the SJRA and the TRA dragged on into the fall of 1958. Houston’s City Council filed a permit for a dam on the Trinity in October of that year. Mayor Cutrer continued his war against towns and cities up and down the Trinity River watershed for access to that river’s water. The SJRA proposal for 110,000 acre feet per year at the Lake Conroe

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46 These three sites were the only ones that the SJRA considered from this point on. “Reservoir Sites for West Fork of River at Conroe Accepted,” CDC, July 2, 1958, p. 1. For the SJRA’s proposal and reactions, see “San Jacinto River Authority Submits Plan to Houston,” [newspaper clipping] May 14, 1958, p. 1; Editorial, “San Jacinto River Plan May Be Solution of City’s Water Riddle,” [newspaper clipping], May 16, 1958; Ben C. Belt, “All Possible Speed” in Houston Magazine, June 1958; “Chain of Lakes Sales Point of Water Group”; Mel Young, “Dam to Be Built Near Conroe, City is Told,” July 25, 1958, HC, A17; and Max H. Jacobs Agency to W. B. Weisinger, June 25, 1958 all in Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA. For the SJRA’s application, see No 29, June 1958, Minute Record Book, Vol. 1991/041-10, BWER.

site came before the Texas Water Board in January 1959, a month before that same body ruled on Houston’s Lake Livingston proposal for 1,254,000 acre feet per year. Houston had chosen to pour its resources into the Trinity project, but it continued to string the SJRA along in the hope that, with only a small investment, it might secure San Jacinto water as well. Houston held the money and therefore called the tune within the San Jacinto watershed. Before finally signing a contract with Houston, the SJRA would first have to survive a confrontation with Montgomery County rural landowners—a confrontation that would reveal just how much its courtship of Houston had changed the SJRA.48

Watershed landowners had not been given a seat at the bargaining table where the SJRA and the city of Houston were hashing out their differences. When the SJRA unveiled the product of these negotiations to the water board, these landowners felt misled and betrayed. In their eyes, the Lake Conroe proposal represented a fundamental shift in the authority’s loyalties. The SJRA’s plans placed the production of raw water for downstream customers ahead of its conservation aims. The conflict aired at that hearing is as significant for what it was not as for what it was. It did not pit an expanding imperial city against its rooted, agrarian hinterland. Nor was it a case of NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) activism by landowners hell-bent on protecting their land from being used for the common good. Nor was it a defense of nature against commodification. The hearing over Lake Conroe was a family dispute. Both sides shared a commitment to the basic tenet of conservation—the moral obligation to efficiently develop natural resources for the economic good of citizens and to protect natural resources for coming generations. At issue was whether the SJRA existed to conserve the soils and water of the San

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48 The Board combined the Lake Conroe application with the application for a 70,000 acre feet per year dam at the lower Lake Creek site. None of the dam opponents protested this dam. Minute Record Book, Vol. 1991/041-11, BWER, 31-32, 39. “Dam Site Near Reality,” CDC, October 15, 1958, p. 1; Mel Young, “City Planning for $40 Million Dam,” HC, October 28, 1958, Folder Publicity 1947 thru December 31, 1958, Box 130, SJRA; “2 Dams Near Conroe Set,” CDC, December 21, 1958, p. 1.
Jacinto River for the benefit of those living in the watershed or whether it existed to conserve and appropriate the river’s water as a commodity for the benefit of Houston and the SJRA’s bottom line. Did the San Jacinto River define a community of shared interests and shared natural resources, or did Houston and its needs define the region within which the San Jacinto River flowed as part of the city’s hinterland? Ranchers within the watershed clung to the former, even when the SJRA board made it increasingly clear that it had accepted the latter.

The landowners were so surprised because the SJRA had, beginning in 1947, partnered with the San Jacinto Soil and Water Conservation District (SCD) to invest its time and money into conserving and improving the county’s pastures and farmland. Now it threatened to inundate that exact same land. The SJRA and the SCD shared the same geographic boundaries and many of the same goals. There were, though, important differences. Unlike the SJRA’s state appointed board, the SCD’s board of was made up of rural landowners who had been elected by their peers to protect and promote their interests. It was, by design, a provincial organization. The SCD had none of the SJRA’s potential to expand the scale and scope of its operations. Nor did it have the SJRA’s significant financial needs. The two labored side-by-side in relative harmony until their 1959 clash in Austin. Under the cooperative agreement, the SJRA purchased and rented soil terracing equipment and supplies to landowners at cost. Landowners, in turn, completed the terracing, pond construction, and other erosion control methods proscribed by the SCD’s soil scientists. This arrangement was a boon for rural landowners and better-capitalized ranchers in the region. They used these programs to increase the productivity and value of their land, to provide water for their livestock, and to continue to free themselves of the downward spiral of cotton agriculture and the hassle of tenants and sharecroppers.49

49 A majority of rural landowners within the watershed voted the SCD into existence in May 1941 to carry on the conservation work begun in the area during the New Deal. The SCD’s board was composed of district supervisors
When interviewed by the Houston *Chronicle* in 1949 about the soil conservation work being done by both entities in the region, SJRA president Walter G. Hall explained: “[t]he development of a river and soil conservation work in its watershed area are so closely related that for all practical purposes the two are inseparable.” He went on to emphasize the dependence of the city of Houston on upstream rural landowners for the quality and quantity of its water supply, By the time Hall left the SJRA in 1951, these soil conservation programs represented a $112,000 investment by the authority in the county’s soils. Managing the program cost the SJRA $58,357 per year. By 1956, the SCD had thirteen contractors and twenty-two bulldozers working full time in the district. The number of landowners signed up went from just under 300 in 1946 to 3,880 by 1956. This represented 1,426,093 acres, or 31 percent of the total farm and ranch land within the SJRA’s boundaries. The number of soil conservation projects the authority reached nearly 200 per year in 1953 and a peak of 321 per year in 1955 before declining to 200 again by 1960. Almost half of this work was done in Montgomery County. Even as the SJRA was defending its dam projects in front of the water board in 1959, authority employees were still averaging 650 hours a month of conservation work.\(^{50}\)

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The SJRA’s little lakes program best exemplifies the watershed vision that the SJRA and rural landowners shared at the beginning of the 1950s. In it, the SJRA promoted the development of stock ponds and small reservoirs (1/2 to 30 acres) across the San Jacinto watershed. These lakes captured flood water and silt and runoff that would otherwise have muddied the waters flowing downstream to Lake Houston and, ultimately, Galveston Bay. The captured water, after watering the landowner’s cattle and providing recreation to landowners, then infiltrated the county’s aquifers. There the water made its way south to Houston, filling the city’s wells, helping to combat the city’s major subsidence problems, and fending off saltwater infiltration. Conservation programs like these promised mutual benefit to both city and countryside. A local landowner praised the program as “one of the most progressive steps ever undertaken” in the watershed. Landowners understood that some of the SJRA’s lakes might eventually have to be larger, but they still believed such lakes should fit within this broader conservation framework of mutual advantage. Soil conservation work made up only part of the SJRA’s activities, but it was central to the way rural landowners understood the authority’s mission. They assumed that the SJRA served their interests. The county landowners’ SJRA was an organization of “little lakes” that developed the watershed, conserving its resources for the benefit of all.51

The SJRA may have bided its time cultivating the soil of the San Jacinto watershed, but its board had their eyes fixed on greater pursuits. Landowners were shocked to discover in

51 By 1969 this program had created around 2,900 such ponds and lakes in Walker and Montgomery County. Montgomery alone accounted for 144 lakes that were five acres or larger. Most of these lakes served as stock ponds and places of recreation for rural landowners and their guests. Some had little to do with agriculture, but were instead an amenity for rural subdivisions. *District Program and Work Plan for Montgomery and Walker County Soil and Water Conservation District No. 425* (1969), Walker SWCD, 26; SJRA, “Stock Tanks and River Development: A Report,” Box 206, SJRA; “‘Little Lakes’ Program Integral Part of San Jacinto River Plans,” *CDC*, June 18, 1953, p. 1, 3. On recreational use, see Elmer Summers, “Land of Lakes,” *HC Magazine*, September 7, 1958, Folder From W. B. Weisinger, Box 130, SJRA. For the landowners’ understanding of this watershed conservation approach, see Statement of Wilbourn S. Gibbs, Huntsville Tex., in front of Texas State Legislature Interim Agricultural Committee, October 11, 1966, Folder Misc, Walker SWCD. Gibbs was the president of the local SCD and a state conservation leader.
January 1959 that the SJRA had submitted an application to place a 350,000-acre-foot dam right in the middle of some of the most productive pastureland in Montgomery County—the very pastureland that the SJRA and SCD had spent over a decade improving. Ranchers organized the Association of Submerged Landowners and Operators of Montgomery and Walker Counties and got 206 signatures protesting the reservoir—a figure that represented a substantial majority of area landowners. The SCD and the local Farm Bureau chapter sent in letters of protest. These groups sent a half-dozen representatives to Austin to protest at the Texas Board of Water Engineers hearing on February 16 and 17, 1959. Arthur P. Terrell and W. Bryan Shaver represented the submerged landowners and Luther Hall and W. S. Gibbs represented the SCD. They raised no grassroots protest or public smear campaign. They made no claims about the sacredness of the land or its right to remain “natural.” These opponents accepted as a given that the San Jacinto ought to be dammed and its water put to productive work. What they opposed was the size of the reservoir and its placement. The landowners’ opposed the way the SJRA was turning its back on its earlier soil conservation work in order to single-mindedly pursue a reservoir that would benefit Houston and Conroe at the expense of the watershed’s rural economy and society. Their testimony before the board appealed to a shared set of understandings of what it meant to properly conserve and develop the San Jacinto watershed.

Their defense began with the land. These ranchers opposed the destruction of agriculturally productive and therefore valuable land. Where the Texas Water Board saw open space, these landowners saw land that was “deep, fertile, . . . and practically all of it is open.

52 Dick Calfee to Board of Water Engineers, February 9, 1959, Folder – Application# 002108, Correspondence, 1958-1966, 2002/207-13, BWER.
54 For the attendance at the hearing, see Hearing Minutes.
improved, and in a high state of production.” In a county full of sandy timbered uplands and poorly drained swamps, the SJRA had chosen to flood “a highly fertile, well developed, and thickly populated area.” Not only was this land agriculturally valuable, but it was also the land most improved by the SCD and SJRA’s soil conservation work. These investments had helped make these bottomland pastures up to three times more productive than land in other parts of the county.55

Jack Ayer, the SJRA’s lawyer, responded to these claims by questioning whether these lands really were “improved.” His cross-examination placed San Jacinto bottomlands within a hierarchy of land use that denigrated their claims to improvement. Whenever each landowner mentioned the quality of their land, Ayer would respond by asking him how much of the land was cultivated in row crops. The answer was always little to none. He then asked them how often their land flooded. The landowners had to admit then that much of the land lay within the flood plain. This was all that the Board needed to hear. No matter the pastureland’s productivity, it still lay lower on the totem pole of land uses than even unproductive row crops. You might conserve the fertility of such land in spite of floods, but such floods were evidence that the land had not really been tamed or controlled. Such land remained subject to an unruly river that needed to have its water dammed and conserved.56

The landowners’ second argument was that the SJRA had abandoned its state-assigned purposes in its pursuit of large reservoirs. The SJRA, these witnesses argued, had, quite literally,

55 J. H. (Dick) Calfee, Association of Submerged Land Owners and Operators of Montgomery and Walker Counties, September 10, 1959 to Durwood Manford, Neville H. Colsen, Jamie H. Clements, W. B. Weisinger, Price Daniel, Harold H. Coley, and Lewis Cutrer in Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA (hereinafter Landowners to Board of Directors) (first, second, third, and fourth quotations). See also James Price to Texas Board of Water Engineers, October 27, 1959. On the productivity of the land, see also Hearing Minutes, 51, 61-62, 259-260. W. S. Gibbs would later quote $2 million as the yearly productivity of the land. This figure paled in comparison with the amount of money ultimately brought to the area by the recreational and tourist industry once the lake was built. James O. Holley, “Money Settles Muddy Water of River Fuss,” HP, March 28, 1960, s. 1, p. 1, 11, Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA.
56 Hearing Minutes, 53-56, 59, 65.
forgotten itself. Hall attacked the SJRA for misappropriating funds. Rather than investing fully in soil conservation, the authority had squandered the local tax money that was supposed to have gone for “erosion, flood control, forestry and recreational purposes” on engineering data for its large-scale reservoir projects. The authority preempted any attacks on its conservation record by having W. B. Weisinger take the stand to discuss all that it had done in cooperation with the SCD, work the authority was “very proud of.” Weisinger quickly rattled off conservation statistics, including the authority’s $160,000 invested in the conservation work. When one of the opponent’s lawyers asked him, however, to compare this figure with the authority’s yearly income from water sales to Humble Oil, its largest downstream customer, Weisinger somehow could not come up with a number. Industry, not soil conservation, covered the SJRA’s bottom line. For the ranchers, Lake Conroe represented a betrayal of the rural landowner’s trust as well as of the SCD’s decade-long partnership with the SJRA. The SCD believed, as Luther Hall explained, that “we can keep our pie and eat it, too, we can conserve water and the soil at the same time.” The Lake Conroe proposal, in Gibbs’ words, “defeats our concept of conservation.” Gibbs and the other landowners had embraced the county’s role as an agricultural hinterland, but they could not understand why the SJRA would attempt to turn their productive lands into a reservoir for the city. Luther Hall, revealing a flair for the dramatic, ended his testimony by quoting a conservation textbook whose pages cautioned that “nothing is more priceless than soil”—a statement that, in his mind, summarized the SCD’s claim that the dictates of conservation demanded the preservation of the productive bottomlands and the moving of the dam further downstream.57

57 Hearing Minutes, 32-38, 35 (second quotation), 46 (first and fourth quotation), 49, 71 (third quotation), 76 (fifth quotation).
The landowners never questioned that the land’s value should be commodified, but they remained deeply committed to a conservationist ethic that placed progressive agricultural production above other uses. Rather than respecting this, the SJRA was pursuing a “clear unvarnished attempt to provide a cheap future supply of water for Houston at the expense of the land owners and operators of this area.” Even worse, some landowners believed that the SJRA’s project was “a purely recreational and land promotional reservoir” designed to fill the pockets of businessmen and speculators from both Conroe and Houston. Either way, it was clear to the landowners that the SJRA no longer had their best interests in mind.58

Each of these arguments focused on one central question: why this dam on this site? The 1951 authority master plan had included two small reservoirs with a combined storage capacity of 158,000 acre feet beneath the proposed reservoir. As the SJRA funded more engineering studies and continued its intense negotiations with Houston, the plans changed. The SJRA proposal submitted to the Board on December 19, 1958, called for a single reservoir west of Conroe with a greatly increased storage capacity of 380,430 acre feet.59 Landowners blasted this large reservoir as having “no relationship to the various so-called Master Plan[s] of the” SJRA.60 The simple fact was that the Honea site, the site just west of Conroe under consideration, was where the engineers said the dam should be. The site had steep hills and good base soils and a watershed large enough to fill a large reservoir. When the authority realized that Houston was unlikely to pay for more than one reservoir its proposals increasingly promoted the single most cost-effective site for water storage. The Honea dam would cost 1.68 cents per

58 Hearing Minutes, 46, 70 (first quotation), James Price to Texas Board of Water Engineers, October 27, 1959 (second quotation).
59 As late as May, 1958, the public still believed the main dams would be located just above Lake Houston. SJRA, Master Plan, 1951. The SJRA would enlarge the reservoir again in April 6, 1965, this time to 430,260 acre feet. Permit to Appropriate Public Waters of the State of Texas, No. 1962, and An Order Amending Permit N. 1962 of San Jacinto River Authority both in Folder Application #002108, Permit and Amendments, Box 2002/ 207-13, BWER.
60 Hearing Minutes, 46.
thousand gallons. Comparatively the Lake Creek would cost 3.67 cents, the Cleveland site would cost 2.1 cents, and the Humble site would cost 3.15 cents. A large reservoir at the Honea site best fit the SJRA and Houston’s economic criteria. These reasons were sufficient to justify the choice.\footnote{The lower Lake Creek site was too flat, and had both active oil wells and railroad lines, both of which were expensive to remove. The Humble site was too flat and land there was too expensive. Hearing Minutes, 237. Ike Barrett, Interview by Author, July 11, 2012, Dobbin, Tex.} In the face of the SJRA’s cost estimates, Luther Hall replied “[t]he cost of the construction of these dams, gentlemen, are not the only costs involved here.”\footnote{Hearing Minutes, 72.}
Neither Houston, nor the SJRA, nor the Water Board agree with Hall on this point. If the authority wanted Lake Conroe, it would only come through Houston’s financial support. Houston’s support, in turn, depended on the SJRA offering water at a good price. The Honea site offered this. All three parties agreed on this. It was the landowners who found themselves locked out in the cold. And this, perhaps, was the deepest issue of all. Landowners attacked the SJRA for its clandestine approach to reservoir construction. In a county where personal connections and face-to-face conversations were the core of both political power and masculinity, the SJRA insulted these men by cutting them out of the loop. Weisinger didn’t even make the time to lay out the SJRA’s plans to Luther Hall, who was a SCD board member, a major landowner, and his brother in law. Hall learned that his place would be under the lake from Weisinger’s mechanic. SJRA board members did ultimately meet with some of the landowners on January 2, 1959, but less to explain the need for the large reservoir than to offer them the false hope that the SJRA would use its influence to move the project if landowners protested. The Water Board’s refusal to move the hearing to Conroe prevented the possibility of such protests. Even so, the truth was that no amount of landowner protest would sway the SJRA to change its plans once Houston had signaled its interest. Even after the January 2 meeting, the to-be-submerged landowners complained, “[w]e have the distinct impression that steam-roller tactics are being employed to construct a lake which will injure us.” Albert Myers summed up the landowner’s views when, at the hearing, he explained “Having talked with friends in that area, I find that most of them . . . are really upset and they don’t feel that they have been treated fairly in the matter and before you take their land away, they just like to be asked.” Such rural social norms played little role in metropolitan decision making.63

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63 These landowners were ranchers and farmers. They were smart businessmen as well as conservative agrarians. When pressed during the hearing, each admitted that he would be willing to sell his land for what he termed a fair
After sitting quietly during most of their complaints, the Water Board sent the landowners packing and got down to the real business of examining the engineering specifications for the lake. Wise development for the board meant maximizing the productivity of the water available. For the landowners, the hearing dispelled any remaining hope that they might retain a voice in conservation and reservoir development within their watershed. The doors of the SJRA’s halls of power were increasingly closed to them. The authority was becoming a metropolitan entity serving the metropolis and its own interests.

In comparison with Loudoun’s storming of the halls of Washington in 1944, these landowners look hopelessly ineffective. They staged no large-scale rallies. They chanted no slogans. Loudoun County farmers had powerful allies in Senator Harry Byrd and Representative Howard Smith. These two men went on tirades against the Army Corps of Engineers and used their legislative power to obstruct their plans at every pass. The ranchers’ state representatives lined up alongside Conroe elites in supporting the SJRA. There were also major differences in tone and strategy. Where Loudoun protestors articulated a bold preservationist stance in defense of the county’s historical landscapes, agrarian beauty, and agricultural productivity, the ranchers held fast to conservationist assumptions that resources should be developed for production for the common good. The ranchers’ utter failure to live up to common conceptions of grass-roots fights against reservoir construction reflects the fact that these men viewed the hearing and their opposition as a family squabble within a well-established local elite. They viewed conservation as an issue best handled by white, landed elites and trained experts. These men all knew each other well. They shared the same social world and were tied to the same landscape. In their

price provided they were made to see how it benefited the common good. This in no way invalidates the larger concerns they raised. Rather, it demonstrates more fully the inherent limitations of conservationist thought that accepts the commodification of nature as its starting point. For testimony on this point, see Hearing Minutes, 69. Hearing Minutes, 57-58 (second quotation), 75; Landowners to Board of Directors, 1959 (first quotation).
testimonies, both Gibbs and Hall emphasized that they appreciated the “friendly relations” they had with the SJRA, that “[w]e as a District [SCD] Board are not fighting you,” and that they were not “trying to kill their project with their objections.”64 The opponents based their opposition on their understanding of the dictates of conservation. They would have never considered themselves a grassroots movement; nor did they oppose the idea of reservoir development in principle. Both would have gone against their view of the proper stewardship of the natural world. They submitted their case to the State Board of Water Engineers and grudgingly accepted its decision.

The SJRA, confident that the water board would approve its application, purchased the first parcel of land in April of that year. It had yet to negotiate a contract with Houston.65 The city, however, signed a $74,500,000 contract with the TRA on September 14, 1959. The deal entitled them to 70 percent of the water impounded within the future Lake Livingston. Hearings before the Texas Water Board on this project began in earnest in the winter of 1959. As expected, the city’s plans once again drew fierce opposition. The SJRA gained a major bargaining chip when Houston decided to transport Trinity water through Lake Houston. Trinity water was dirty—a fact that the SJRA never tired of reminding anyone who would listen. The SJRA owned 50 mgd out of the 200 mgd flowing into Lake Houston. The addition of poorer quality Trinity water into the system would degrade the quality and therefore the value of the SJRA’s water. The authority seized the opportunity to block the construction of Lake Livingston before the water board. As the hearings dragged on into the New Year, the SJRA remained optimistic that its obstruction would bear fruit. Their actions drew shrill protests from city leaders and Houston newspapers. The Houston Chronicle attacked the SJRA for “hijacking” the

64 Hearing Minutes, 44-45 (first quotation), 71 (second quotation), 74 (third quotation).
65 “San Jacinto River Authority Buys First Reservoir Land,” HC, April 26, 1959, s. 1, p. 22 Folder From W. B. Weisinger Files, Box 130, SJRA.
hearings and holding the Trinity project hostage. The *Chronicle* was not far off the mark. The SJRA, of course, denied these accusations.66

Even as the SJRA was stonewalling in Austin, board members continued their negotiations with Mayor Cutrer. Relations between the two sides were understandably strained. The SJRA continued to push Cutrer to take on a financial commitment in the development of the San Jacinto. Finally, on March 12, 1960, the city and the SJRA signed a five-year contract. Houston agreed to purchase 25 mgd of SJRA water that the city did not yet need for $228,000 per year. This money was to be used solely for the construction of a dam on the San Jacinto, the plans of which were subject to the city’s approval. The city also agreed to not put any Trinity water into its municipal water system, except in the case of emergencies, for twenty-five years. In exchange, the SJRA dropped its objections to the TRA permit.67 The *Houston Post* smelled a rat. Under the headline “Money Settles Muddy Water of River Fuss” the paper snidely remarked that “[t]he waters of the Trinity River cleared as if by magic” once Houston signed its $1.14 million, five-year contract. By the paper’s calculations, Houston would have to “sell 92 million gallons of Trinity River water a day to industry to pay for the 25 million gallons of San Jacinto water.”68 Houston bought off the SJRA with a small stream of funding, while still allowing the city room to negotiate in the future. Whether viewed as blackmail or simply shrewd negotiation, the SJRA got what it wanted out of the city. The city had the money, but it did not always have


67 For comparison, 25 mgd is 27,500 acre feet per year, or about a quarter of the SJRA’s reservoir’s expected annual yield. Under the contract, the city would own water stored by the dam proportionate to the amount of funding their water purchases provided. Houston Contract, Box 490, SJRA; Barrett, “The History of San Jacinto River Authority”; Unmarked list of resolutions, SJRA History Folder, Box 536; “Lake Conroe Dam Permit is Granted,” *CDC*, May 5, 1960, p. 1.

68 Holley, “Money Settles Muddy Water.”
the power. With the signing of the contract, the SJRA now returned to Montgomery County with cash in hand. The Texas Board of Water Engineers approved the SJRA’s contract on May 5, 1960. The authority was now ready to finally begin Lake Conroe—or so it thought.69

Nine years later SJRA contractors broke ground on the Lake Conroe dam. When the money from Houston ran out in the spring of 1965, the authority had somewhere close to 70 percent of the land accounted for. A $2 million loan from the state kept the purchases crawling along for another year.70 The SJRA began bulldozing San Jacinto bottomland in the hope that it would soon be able to begin dam construction. Houston, meanwhile, remained preoccupied with a series of lawsuits related to the Lake Livingston project. It took another two years of waiting and tense negotiations before the SJRA and Houston signed a contract on April 14, 1968.

Disagreements over the city’s responsibilities for parkland purchases and engineering issues related to the dam type were the main sticking points.71 The final deal gave Houston a two-thirds interest in Lake Conroe in exchange for its accepting two-thirds of the cost and recommitting to keeping Trinity water from Lake Livingston out of the city’s municipal water systems for twenty years.72 By this point, the SJRA had already invested $3.9 million, most of it Houston’s money,

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70 The Authority had acquired 10,502 acres of the 21,000 acre lake by March 31, 1966. This figure did not include the 5,100 acres of forest service land, which the SJRA leased for $2.50 per acre per year. Land Acquisition and Cost Distribution Lake Conroe, Folder Miscellaneous Information Lake “C,” Box 406, SJRA. Memorandum of Understanding Between The San Jacinto River Authority and the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, March 16, 1970, Folder U.S. Forest Service, Box 503, SJRA. The SJRA had requested $6.25 million from the state. For the loan, see Ellen Middlebrook, “SJRA Will Request State Help,” HP, November 8, 1964, s. 2, p. 2; “$2 Million in Bonds Goes to Lake Conroe,” CDC, March 28, 1965; Folder – Application# 002108, Correspondence, 1958-1966, 2002/207-13, BWER; Unmarked List of Resolutions, Folder SJRA History, Box 536, SJRA.

71 For the dam type issue, see Dick Merkel, “Houston Mayor Airs Position for Local Group on Monday,” CDC, October 25, 1967 and “Lake Conroe Delay over Dam Design,” HP, November 23, 1967, both in Folder Lake Conroe- San Jacinto River Authority, Box 130, SJRA. For the parkland issue, see “Let’s Get Going on Lake Conroe,” HC, December 4, 1967, Folder 4, Box 5, Louise Kennedy Collection, HMRC.

72 “Lake Conroe Contract Approved by Officials,” CDC, April 14, 1968; Barrett, “The History of San Jacinto River Authority”; Unmarked list of resolutions, SJRA History Folder, Box 536.
Lake Conroe was finally underway by 1969. The delays had inflated the projected costs from $13 million to $18 million. Most of this increase came from mushrooming land prices. After two and a half decades of conflict and strife, the SJRA and Houston had finally agreed to a contract that would bind the two entities together for the decades to come.

The contract signing opened the fiscal tap once more, and the city’s money once again poured into Montgomery County. Land acquisition brought the usual battery of lengthy negotiations, heated condemnation proceedings, and accusations of price gouging and dispossession. The SJRA had purchased its first parcel in April 1959 and was still pushing land into condemnation in 1971. The pace was anything but quick, as many overzealous land speculators in the area discovered to their dismay. Until Houston signed the 1969 contract, time was on the authority’s side. For the decade before this, a pall of uncertainty had hovered over the San Jacinto bottomlands. A reservoir that might remain merely another shaded area on an engineering map kept property values low. This left the SJRA to pick up parcels on its own terms, at prices that reflected only a fraction of the lake’s potential impact on property values. As long as the money trickled in, the SJRA continued to buy land without resorting to intense negotiation or condemnation. During this period the SJRA paid between $200 and $300 an acre.

When money from Houston and the state dried up in June 1966, the authority put its purchases on hold. Even before the ink dried on its new contract with Houston in 1969, the SJRA had returned to its property purchases in earnest. The signed contract made the reservoir a certainty and gave the SJRA the funds to complete the land purchases. This sent property values skyrocketing. The land was now part of a future lakefront resort area—it’s value defined by development potential rather than agricultural productivity. From the signing of the contract until

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73 C. W. Curry to Howard B. Boswell, August 28, 1968, Folder Lake Conroe Texas Water Dev Board Grant App, Box 503, SJRA.
the final purchase, landowners secured between $600 and $1,200 an acre for their land, making their take between 250 and 450 percent higher than those who had sold out earlier.⁷⁴

Figure 4.3: Data from the 82 property purchases for which I was able to secure complete data. Price per acre increased with the passage of time. Folder Land Acquisition, Lake Conroe, Box 405, SJRA.

The most important part of the land acquisition story is not how much they got, but who these recipients of metropolitan largesse were. Whatever conflict the SJRA may have had with local landowners, it is impossible to deny that the authority brought large sums of Houston money to the area to the benefit of landowners, local speculators, and the county as a whole. Landowners who held out and thereby received the largest sums for their land represented a

⁷⁴ These conclusions are drawn from an analysis of 82 property purchases for which I was able to secure complete data. Folder Land Acquisition, Lake Conroe, Box 405, SJRA. Condemnation values were not supposed to take into account the value the lake would add to the property when constructed. In practice, it was impossible to set a market price for these properties that did not include the inflation of land values due to the city’s influence through the increasing popularity of ranchettes and suburban country life, the development of rural subdivisions, and the expected construction of Lake Conroe. At least part of the explanation for the increased prices paid to these landowners is that their lands tended to be part of profitable ranches and therefore of a higher value even without the city’s influence. Even taking this into account, the fact remains that these landowners received metropolitan rather than rural prices for their land. For an explanation of the Authority’s purchasing strategies, see SJRA, “Suggested Procedure for Land Procurement Program,” Folder Land Acquisition – Lake Conroe, Box 405, SJRA; Confidential Memo re. meeting with Jack Culp, C. W. Curry, R. A. Scarborough and H. E. Barrett, Feb 12, 1971, Folder Culp, Jack (supt. Reservoir Proj.), Box 405, SJRA.
cross-section of county elites—including both the dam’s strongest opponents and its greatest allies. Landowners on both sides of the issue used their knowledge of the local power structures and the legal system to ensure that they would be well compensated for their property. Three of the dam’s most fervent opponents forced condemnation hearings in 1969. Luther Hall, Dick Calfee, and Allen Monroe received $925, $1,000, and $1050 per acre respectively. These figures were lower than the prices paid by speculators for prime lakefront land, but they were still far higher than prices paid to those who sold out earlier. The cattlemen held out for their price. The SJRA paid it as Houstonians grumbled.

When it came to the financial windfalls that graced the fortunes of the Weisinger family and certain other SJRA officials, however, the Houston journalists and politicians would not keep quiet. W. C. McClain, a Conroe businessman who had been on the SJRA board until 1956, purchased an interest in two tracts that would become lakefront land. C. W. Curry, the SJRA’s general manager, got in on the act in 1962, buying 37 acres near the lake for $190 an acre. “I was fortunate that I was able to buy that land,” he told a Houston reporter in 1969, “one of these days that land will be worth a lot of money.” Most of the public attention focused on the Weisinger family. The clan had deep roots along the San Jacinto River east of Conroe. Patriarch John Michael Weisinger had managed a 4,000-acre cotton plantation in the area around the turn of the century, complete with a general store and two dozen mostly black cotton tenants. When the elder Weisinger died, he left this land to his eleven children, who included county judge W.S., SJRA president W. B., Ruth Mae, who married local rancher Dan Madley, and Nancy Beth, who married Luther Hall. Each of these families owned land that would go under the lake.76

75 “Suits Filed for Lake Conroe Tracts,” CDC, September 21, 1969, p. 1.
76 James O. Holley, “Relatives of SJRA Head Own Tracts,” HP, March 18, 1960, 1, 6; Zarko Franks, “SJRA President Buys Up Conroe Reservoir Acreage,” HC, October 19, 1969, s. 4, p. 6 (first and second quotations); For the Weisinger family history, see Margaret A. Simpson, Montgomery County, Texas: Picture of a Dream Coming
As early as 1959, the *Houston Post* was all but leveling charges of graft at the Weisingers. The paper accused the SJRA head of increasing the size of the lake to ensure that some of his family’s 6,000 acres in the area would end up as profitable lakefront land. Such charges would appear regularly in the paper. When questioned, other SJRA board members joined in the condemnation. Russell Jolley, a board member from Houston, declared, “I think it wrong and completely indefensible for any board member to deal in land on the lake. I could have become a rich man by buying land for $100 an acre in the area where we knew the lake would be built.” In his own defense, W. B. Weisinger explained, “you can’t throw a rock anywhe[re] up here in the Conroe area without hitting a Weisinger. . . there are more than 30 of us. . . .this land has been in the family for 75 years – that’s not speculation.” To those who criticized his management of the SJRA, he responded: “[my] conscience is clear. . . What I do is in the best interest of the San Jacinto River Authority.”

However pure their consciences, W. B., W. S., and Melvin K. Weisinger, a first cousin, all continued to consolidate their land holdings around the lake throughout the period. Ownership of lakefront land was a family affair. W.S. Weisinger had 2,034 acres; Dan Madley owned 3,147 acres; and the Weisinger estate, W. B. and W.S. Weisinger trustees, owned 1,200 acres. For Houstonians all of this meant paying these landowners the ballooning “fair” prices for inundated lands. W.S. Weisinger, for instance, got $513,221 or an average of $765 an acre for land that he had either inherited or purchased over the previous decades. The real money, however, was in the new lakefront property. Here landowners were blessed indeed. Dan Madley was left with

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77 Holley, “Money Settles Muddy Water.” Whitson Etheridge, a longtime Conroe lawyer, echoed this accusation in his memoir. Etheridge, *What was it Like in Conroe*, 404-5.


79 Holley, “Money Settles Muddy Water.”
over 1,500 acres of lakefront property. W.S. Weisinger retained 1,334 acres. These two men and former county commissioner T. J. Peel combined to sell 1,470 acres of lakefront property to the Berton Land Developing Company of Houston for a staggering $9 million dollars, an average of over $6,000 an acre. Lake Conroe was the center of a real estate boom. All around the lake, developers were paying between $4,500 and $6,000 an acre for land that had, only ten years before, rarely been worth more than $300. For Houston developers, the land was worth the investment. Many lots on the lake sold for between $15,000 and $25,000 even before the lake filled. For both landowners and developers, the city’s investment in Lake Conroe proved immensely profitable.  

It would be easy to join Houston newspapers in crying foul at the money made by those close to the SJRA. Sniffing along a cold trail of alleged graft and corruption, however, would be a fruitless exercise at this point. Salacious corruption accusations distract from the larger issues at stake. The dictates of engineering within the criteria of maximizing the efficiency of raw water production for Houston were sufficient to place a large dam at the Honea site. As SJRA board member J. B. Stratton put it, “[o]f course I know a dam can’t be built near Conroe without one or more of the Weisingers being affected, but engineers will make that decision, not I or Mr. Weisinger.” Once the dam was slated for the Conroe area, landowners made the most of the city’s investment. Both cattlemen and Conroe businessmen were shrewd opportunists. They held their valuable acreage, added to it when the price was right, fought for the highest price they could get, and enjoyed the profits that came with their dealings. Weisinger family fortunes had

80 Holley, “Relatives of SJRA Head Own Tracts;” “Five Lake Tract Owners Granted $960,940,” newspaper clipping, October 5, 1969, “Go-Ahead Given on Lake Conroe Bids,” CDC, November 2, 1969, and “Land Boom At Lake Conroe,” HP, January 10, 1971, all in Folder Lake Conroe – San Jacinto River Authority, Box 130, SJRA; “Lakefront Tract Brings $9 Million,” CDC, January 7, 1973, p. 1; “Chronicle Late on Land Deal,” CDC, October 22, 1969, s. 1, p. 4; For landownership maps, see Folder Land Acquisition Lake Conroe, Box 405, SJRA.

81 Richardson and Berry, “Kin of SJRA Head Owns Lake Site Land.”
been made this way long before the dam and they would continue to do so after the reservoir filled. The same was true for Dan Madley and Luther Hall, both of whom opposed the dam but sold their land for high prices when the opportunity came. By holding out, these white elites received a far higher “fair price” than those who sold out earlier for their inundated land. The city and the SJRA gave rural landowners a good hand to play, and they knew how to play it for all it was worth.82

Opposition to the lake was the prerogative of those with the financial resources and local connections required to fight the SJRA. Uncovering what smaller landowners and tenants did is far more difficult. Many of these were African American, adding a racial layer to the unequal power relations that accompanied reservoir land purchases. It is hard to imagine that black tenants received any benefit from the lake’s construction. The issue was more complicated for black landowners. As the cotton and timber economy declined, the children of most non-elite rural families sought employment in Houston or outside the state. A few decades of this type of migration meant homesteads divided among multiple heirs, many of whom were no longer living in the area. Such families were in a poor bargaining position relative to the SJRA and developers.83 Evidence is scarce as to how the area’s African American population viewed the

82 It should be noted that W. B. Weisinger was not among this group. As an act of good faith, he had the SJRA condemn his land early on in the process for $250 an acre, before land prices shot up. “Five Lake Tract Owners Granted $960,940.” Dick Calfee and Ed Barnes were among the few who refused to sell out or develop. Dick Calfee’s son, Gary, would eventually develop some of this land in the 1990s, but he continues to run a ranch on the lake to this day. Ed Barnes and his family also continue to hold their property. Gary Calfee, Interview by Author, October 10, 2010, and July 19, 2012, Willis, Tex. Blake Kellum, Interview by Author, October 2010, Conroe, Texas. For the land acquisitions, see “Lake Conroe Land Parcels: Remaining Tracts to be Purchased, January, 1969,” Folder Land Acquisition, Lake Conroe, Box 405; At this point there were 97 tracts left, nearly three-quarters of which were 50 acres or less.

83 If a land speculator could get one family member to sell, he could then sue to force the others to sell the property at auction, usually allowing him to purchase the rest of the land at a bargain price. On the difficulties rural black families had in holding on to their land, see Leo McGee and Robert Boone, “A Study of Rural Landownership, Control Problems, and Attitudes of Blacks Toward Rural Land,” in Leo McGee and Robert Boone, ed., Black Rural Landowner—Endangered Species: Social, Political, and Economic Implications (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 64 and The Black Economic Research Center, Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South (New York: The Black Economic Research Center, 1973), 51-57.
coming of Lake Conroe. One scrap of evidence that remains comes from Dorothy Weaver Reece, who remembered that most of New Home, her small black community, “disappeared beneath the waters of Lake Conroe—the school, the churches, the homes and the old landmarks. Only the cemeteries and the memories remain untouched.”

The vast majority of Houston’s money went to white landowners. When it came to their land, all Houston could do was watch as the cost of land purchases continued to spiral upward. The mayor had committed the city to the SJRA. Under both the 1960 and 1969 contracts the city had no direct control over how its money was spent. Mayor Welch goaded the SJRA to speed up the process and negotiate for lower prices. For the most part, however, he and the city council had to watch and wait as the SJRA spent the city’s money. Houston got its reservoir, but local landowners extracted their pound of flesh from the city and made small fortunes selling their new lakefront property to Houston developers. As county extension agent Morris Straughn remembered, by “the time it got to the money part, [ranchers] were happy, even though they fought it tooth and nail.” The construction of Lake Conroe destroyed one of Montgomery County’s more productive agricultural areas, just as Luther Hall and W. S. Gibbs had feared. As the hearing demonstrated, these landowners never had the power to prevent Houston and the SJRA from damming the San Jacinto River. Agricultural land uses simply could not hold their own against metropolitan demands for water.

To call the construction of Houston’s reservoir dispossession, however, would be going too far. These landowners were not powerless in the face of urban imperialism. Though the

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84 I have been unable to find this community mentioned in the SJRA records. Mrs. Curry, “Willie Williams,” 549-50, Dorothy Weaver Reece, “Dinah Young,” 561-62 (quotation), and W. Lawson, II, “History of the Monroe Wyatt Lawson Family,” 373-4, in Montgomery County History.
SJRA may have abandoned its earlier position as the rancher’s ally, its actions continued to work for the benefit of Montgomery County landowners. With the SJRA in charge, land acquisition was slower and more profitable for locals than it otherwise would have been. The SJRA’s intermediary role blunted Houston’s imperial ambitions and ensured that displacement would fill the pockets of these Montgomery County landowners.

As 1971 came and went, the SJRA scrambled to prepare for the closing of the Lake Conroe dam. The authority completed its land purchases, bulldozed the future lakeshore, flooded the local timber market with trees harvested from the lake site, and stocked a temporary lake with game fish. The dam closed in January 1973. For all the engineering studies and planning that went into the construction of Lake Conroe, many had remained skeptical that the lake would ever fill. Move the dam farther south, below Lake Creek, dam opponents had warned, or the reservoir would spend much of the year as a series of stinking mudflats unfit for recreation or agriculture. Even as their workers were putting the finishing touches on the dam site, SJRA spokesmen warned that the lake would probably take between three to ten years to fill. The drenching rains that blanketed the watershed in the months after the dam closed filled the lake in less than a year.86

By comparison, the scorecard from Loudoun County’s battles with the Army Corps of Engineers was a mixed bag. As part of the larger metropolitan opposition to the Riverbend and Seneca Creek dams, the county had prevented the inundation of its industrial area and the potential development of a lakefront resort and recreational industry in its stead. At the same time, the Corps, in league with Montgomery County, Maryland, and the District had successfully prevented the construction of a PEPCO power plant in Eastern Loudoun. As a result, Loudoun

86 The average rainfall in the area was 48 inches. In 1973 the area received 75 inches. Ike Barrett, Interview by Author, July 11, 2012, Dobbin, Texas.
County faced an uphill battle in securing the type of industrial or recreational development that would ease the tax burden on agriculture and provide a more balanced economy for a county whose undammed land was awash with deficit-inducing suburban development. The preservation of the county’s agrarian and recreational landscapes from inundation added to the fiscal burdens borne by Loudoun’s agrarian landowners.

Montgomery County got its dam, and the consequences of this fact were many. The first came in the form of industry. Throughout its long history, Conroe’s business elites had looked to the future Lake Conroe to provide them with the kind of industrial development that would balance out the fiscal drain from suburban development. Lake Conroe never spurred the wholesale industrial development of the area. It did, however, provide the county something that Loudoun sorely missed: a power plant. Gulf States selected the town of Willis, just east of Lake Conroe, as the site for a $50 million gas-fired power plant. Opening in 1970, it used Lake Conroe water, padded local tax rolls, and became one of the largest employers in the county. The most important industry to come out of Lake Conroe had nothing to do with manufacturing or power generation. The lake’s recreational potential provided Montgomery County with the type of economic windfall that most piney woods counties dreamed of.

In Texas, reservoirs were tourist destinations of the first order. By the mid-1970s, lake houses were the most popular source of recreation for the state’s expanding middle and upper-middle class. Austin’s Lake Travis and Dallas’ Lake Ray Hubbard had already demonstrated the

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amount of development that would surround a reservoir so close to a major city.\textsuperscript{89} Lake Conroe was just as successful as these two lakes. The \textit{Houston Post} rightly warned that “[q]uiet, slow-paced Montgomery County. . . is about to be discovered by Houston suburbia, middle-class families looking for resort areas to play and party on weekends.” Lake Conroe was destined to become a “a fun-in-the-sun spot for invading masses.”\textsuperscript{90} It boasted excellent fishing, beautiful vistas, clear water, a piney woods environment, and gently sloping shorelines that, because the lake had no flood storage capacity, would remain usable year-round. It was also less than an hour’s drive from downtown. The dam’s opponents had warned of this. In their letter to the SJRA, ranchers prophesied that “This lake will destroy an existing agricultural economy and will attempt to substitute therefore. . . a lake dwelling citizenry which will lower the moral, political, economic, and educational standards of our established society.” These rural conservatives had condemned any attempt to replace what they viewed as a morally superior agricultural productivity with recreational land uses that encouraged what they saw as frivolity, moral laxity, and consumerism.\textsuperscript{91}

Such rural Jeremiads were powerless to prevent the recreational development of the Lake Conroe shoreline. Wealthy Houstonians and the developers who served their interests claimed Houston’s reservoir for themselves. Twenty-six separate developments had broken ground by May 1973, ranging from modest weekend homes to full-service resort communities. Many targeted higher status Houstonians. The development names speak to these aspirations: Point Aquarius, Roman Hills, Corinthian Point, April Sound, Seven Coves, Cape Conroe, and Walden


\textsuperscript{91} Judged by modern standards, such claims were patently false. The highly educated, prosperous upper-middle class families that moved into Montgomery County raised the economic and educational standards and moderated the racial politics of this southern rural area. The landowners, however, did not see it this way. Landowners to Board of Directors, 1959.
on Lake Conroe. The price of lakefront land combined with stringent septic tank regulations to push up the prices of these developments. On the lake, deed restrictions, underground utilities, security systems, concrete drainage systems, streetlights, and gated entrances were all standard. Nature was usually part of the appeal, but luxury was the most important amenity these developers offered.

These lakefront communities combined the suburban promise of “city close-country quiet” with a focus on leisure sports and exclusivity. Its newcomers had little interest in sharing their social world with locals or East Texas fishermen. Privacy was of paramount importance. Developers did all they could to create an illusion that the lake areas existed in a social vacuum, separate from the rural landscapes upon which the SJRA had built the lake. They maintained guarded entry gates, built private boat ramps, and enforced trespassing laws in order to protect their customers. This group came to include Montgomery County elites. Lake Conroe developments were exclusively maintained for those with the money to enjoy it. Such was the county’s “devil’s bargain” with the tourism industry.

92 “Lake Front Bustling with Developers,” East Texas Outdoors 2, no. 11 (May 1973), Folder Houston Post News clippings, Box 130, SJRA, 4.
93 See, for example, “Seven Coves: The Ultimate in Living,” Lake Conroe Vertical File, HMRC.
94 See, for instance, “Come to Walden on Lake Conroe: Discover Life with Nature,” Lake Conroe Vertical File, HMRC.
96 One advertisement printed a list of more than 75 Conroe elites who had become members or property owners at their development. April Sound Advertisement, CDC, May 26, 1974, p. 3.
97 The development of lakefront land conforms to the broad outlines laid out by Hal Rothman in his definitive study of tourism in the west. Development benefited a growth coalition of developers, bankers, and businessmen while redefining the social and cultural world of the new resort areas and dramatically diminishing the power of past residents to shape their surrounding world. Because tourism here never depended on the participation of essentialized locals as natives, however, it never developed the cultural imperialist edge that many of Rothman’s case studies demonstrate. Rothman, Devil’s Bargains: Tourism and the Twentieth-Century American West (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1998).
With the closing of the dam, the SJRA began a new chapter in its history. Its involvement in soil conservation work, which had been declining over the previous decade, was now slated to shut down entirely.\textsuperscript{98} The authority freed itself to take on the various management responsibilities that came with the lake and its developments. In consultation with the Texas Water Quality Board, the SJRA licensed sewer and septic installations and monitored water quality.\textsuperscript{99} It regulated marinas and charged license fees for businesses.\textsuperscript{100} It regulated changes in the shoreline and oversaw the impact of construction. It took the lead in regional planning and oversight for lakefront development.\textsuperscript{101} In consultation with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, it stocked and managed game fish and other wildlife.\textsuperscript{102} It even attempted to get into the wastewater business along Spring Creek, in the southern part of the county.\textsuperscript{103} One thing the authority did not do was ensure public access to the lake. How Montgomery County, Houston, and the SJRA solved this issue provides a glimpse into the shifting relationship between the city and its watershed and the water authority that had placed itself between the two.\textsuperscript{104}

A simple fact drove this conflict. There was not a single publicly owned park or boat ramp on the lake from its opening in January 1973 until October 21, 1976. Part of the blame for this oversight lay with the county residents themselves. Suburban and rural voters, both

\textsuperscript{98} Courtney W. Curry, “SJR Authority, Its Purposes and Works,” \textit{Baytown Sun}, Feb 21, 1971, Folder Lake Conroe – San Jacinto River Authority, Box 130, SJRA.
\textsuperscript{99} “SB 147,” Folder Sanitation, Box 398, SJRA; and “Flowage Easement Area, Lake Conroe Reservoir,” Internal Memo, May 14, 1969, Folder Cape, E. B. (Director Public Wks.), Box 405, SJRA.
\textsuperscript{100} Joyce Everhart, “SJRA Approves Lake Fee,” \textit{CDC}, August 29, 1975, Folder Paid By Petty Cash Check, Box 130, SJRA.
\textsuperscript{101} SJRA Board Meeting Minutes, July 7, 1970, Folder Directors Meetings (Agendas of), 1964-1972, Box 39, SJRA.
\textsuperscript{102} “Lake Conroe Filled with Action,” \textit{CDC}, [undated] in Folder Newspaper Clippings Baytown Sun, Box 130, SJRA.
\textsuperscript{103} See Folder Newspaper Items – Re: Lake Houston Watershed, Box 130, SJRA, passim.
\textsuperscript{104} In contrast with the extensive, even excessive attention they have given to the construction of reservoirs, historians have almost completely ignored what happens after the dam gates closed. The ways cities and water authorities have managed their reservoirs can reveal just as much about the nature of the relationship between these entities and the rural areas which they have inundated. David Soll has taken this approach in his history of the New York water system, to great effect. Soll, \textit{Empire of Water: An Environmental and Political History of the New York City Water Supply} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).
persistently opposed to rising taxes, had soundly defeated county park bonds in both 1954 and 1968. These residents had assumed that the SJRA and Houston would provide free parkland on the lake. Montgomery County was being tapped for the economic good of the metropolis. Membership in the metropolitan community should, they believed, carry with it provision for the county’s recreation needs.105

Legally speaking, this was accurate. The SJRA’s enabling legislation charged it with providing recreation opportunities. The authority, for its part, had frequently reaffirmed this commitment.106 Recreation and resort development had long been central to the authority’s mission and proposals. During contract negotiations in 1968, SJRA officials had insisted, in spite of Houston’s protests, on a clause that committed both parties to providing at least four parks on the lake totaling at least eighty acres.107 Such provisions were standard procedure in Texas and across the nation, and the SJRA board was unwilling to completely abandon what they saw as their public responsibility. The question was how to secure the land. During the first years of land acquisition, landowners had been uninterested in selling additional land to the authority for parks.108 When the SJRA resumed its land purchases in 1969, it was unwilling to endure the hassle and expense of using condemnation to acquire parkland when Houston was already grumbling about the money being paid out for inundated land and flood easements. As Jack Ayer explained it, “[w]e got so preoccupied with getting the land for the lake... we just kept putting

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105 The 1968 bond was defeated by a five to one margin. “Citizens Group O.K.’s new County Park Issue,” CDC, April 22, 1954, p. 1, 8; Editorial, CDC, April 29, 1954, p. 2. “County Parks Bond Election is Called: County Dads are Divided,” CDC, October 20, 1968, p. 1; “Opposition Appears to Parks,” CDC, October 27, 1968, p. 1, 2; “Parks Plan Defeated Soundly,” CDC, November 6, 1968, p. 1.
106 Folder Recreation, Box 406, SJRA; McClendon, “Proposed Plan of Full Scale Development,” 5; SJRA, Master Plan, 1951, 15.
107 Lynn Coker to Fred Hofheinz and J. Bryan Stratton, February 22, 1974, Folder Recreation – FM 830 and J. Bryan Stratton to Lynn Coker, March 28, 1974, Folder Recreation, both in Box 406, SJRA. See also Section 1.05, Houston and SJRA Contract, 1969, Box 260, SJRA.
108 Carter Pettit, “Lack of Financing Labeled as Reason for No Park Move,” CDC, February 27, 1974, Folder Newspaper Clippings – Conroe Courier, Box 130, SJRA. The SJRA’s condemnation power did not extend to parkland until 1967. Act 1967, 60th Legislature, Regular Session, Chapter 547, Page 1212-1213, Box 536, SJRA.
off buying land for parks. When we got to the end we had no money. . .”\textsuperscript{109} The costs of land acquisition and construction had placed the SJRA into what its general manager termed a “financial plight.” Park development was beyond their financial capabilities.\textsuperscript{110} At the 1969 dam groundbreaking ceremony, W. B. Weisinger had told the crowd that the lake would “be unsurpassed as a recreational playground for our citizens.”\textsuperscript{111} By 1973 this promise rang hollow for those who found themselves locked out of Lake Conroe.

The speed with which the lake filled placed this issue in a pressure cooker. County Judge Lynn Coker received a flood of phone calls from irate residents demanding to know how they would get access to the lake they had waited so long for. Coker sent off a formal complaint to both the SJRA and Houston’s city hall reminding them of their contractual agreement. He was told, quite simply, that there was no money.\textsuperscript{112} Whatever sympathy Coker may have had from the board had disappeared when W. B. Weisinger had died in June 1973. The board elected J. B. Stratton, a banker from Baytown, as the SJRA’s new president. Stratton refocused the board’s attention squarely on the authority’s economic health and security.\textsuperscript{113} Where Weisinger had made the county’s economic development a central part of the SJRA’s mission, Stratton viewed requests for parks as proof of the county’s ingratitude. \textquotedblleft[W]e’ve spent a lot of money up here and increased valuations,” he claimed, “and Montgomery County hasn’t spent anything.”\textsuperscript{114} With more than a hint of anger at the county’s narrow-mindedness, he informed Coker that “[t]he
people we sell water to would not stand for higher rates to furnish park sites up here.” When county officials requested that the SJRA make the Newton tract, a prime twenty-acre piece of real estate that the SJRA had acquired as part of its land purchases, available for a public park, Stratton rejected the idea outright. “This property is an asset,” he replied, “and now [that] we have no money. . . I don’t know that we need to be giving [it] up.” Stratton’s SJRA was a public utility with water contracts to fulfill. Montgomery County may have been the site of its reservoir, but it had no claim to special favors from the authority.

For its part, Houston Mayor Fred Hofheinz’s administration had even less interest in funding park development on Lake Conroe. The city already had a steep deficit of parks within its boundaries. Park construction outside the city limits was a financial and political impossibility. Hank Norman of Houston’s Public Works Department told the Courier plainly that the city “is not in the parks business.” All that the city wanted from Lake Conroe was drinking water. As two-thirds owners of any property that the SJRA purchased, the budget-conscious administration encouraged the authority to sell off its remaining holdings to further development of the lake and help balance the city’s books. What, then, of the contract? Leonel Castillo, Houston’s comptroller, declared the provision “politically unsound. . . vague [and] open

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116 Pettit, “SJRA Considers Latest Plea” (quotation). In response to continued public pressure and negative publicity, the SJRA board agreed on May 28, 1974 to lease three acres of the Newton tract to the county for a token fee. The county chose to save its limited resources in the hope of securing a larger piece of land elsewhere. SJRA Board Meeting Minutes, May 28, 1974 and Jay Bertrand to J. Bryan Stratton, April 25, 1974, Folder Directors Meetings-Minutes September 1973 – August 1974, Box 39, SJRA; Pettit, “SJRA Considers Latest Plea,” and Pettit, “SJRA Pressed to Relinquish Land for Park,” CDC, April 22, 1974, Folder Newspaper Clippings – Baytown Sun, Box 130, SJRA.


118 Cummings, “Public Lake Park Plans.”
ended.” It set no timeframe for park construction. More importantly, it provided no recourse for the county. Here was the rub. The contract for its construction and the money that went into it came from Houston and the SJRA. The county was not party to the contract and therefore could not sue if its provisions were not followed. Ultimately county leaders were left to do what they could to provide access to a lake that bore their name and padded their county’s tax rolls, but which remained entirely outside their control.

In the meantime, local fishermen and boaters appropriated county roads that deadended into the lake as access points. In the process many trespassed, littered, and generally made a nuisance of themselves. In frustration, several of the property owners along the lakefront forcefully privatized county roads, barricading, fencing, and setting up earthen embankments to defend their property. When the court refused to officially close these roads and instead moved to turn them into permanent boat ramps, these landowners—both recently arrived suburbanites and longtime rural residents—protested the erosion of their property rights. In the process, each articulated a distinct vision of the lake’s role within a changing county.

For the real estate interests, public access undermined the image they had crafted of Lake Conroe as an exclusive retreat from the urban decay, crime, pollution, and heat of Houston. Their developments were surrounded by pristine beauty—a natural landscape of peace and leisure. Deer and squirrels were to be the only visitors appearing out of the woods to greet the

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119 Carter Pettit “River Authority Requested to Honor Contract for Parks,” CDC, February 24, 1974, Folder Recreation – FM 830, Box 406, SJRA.
120 When confronted with the contract provision, Stratton responded that it was “hardly enforceable.” Pettit, “River Authority Requested to Honor.”
121 V. 21 p. 898 and p. 966, CCM and “Lake Barriers Must Be Down By Monday,” CDC, April 14, 1974, Folder Zoning – Lake Conroe, Box 406, SJRA. This was only a problem on county roads. The national forest had closed their access roads, in order to prevent the kind of dumping and access issues would come to plague the county roads. Charles Sigler, “Recreational Facilities to be limited on Lake at First,” East Texas Outdoors 2, no. 11 (May 1973), Folder Houston Post News clippings, Box 130, SJRA.
122 “Boat Ramp OK’d by County Commissioners With 3-1 Vote,” CDC, April 15, 1974, in Folder Zoning – Lake Conroe, Box 406, SJRA; “Montgomery Commissioners told Lake Conroe Park Plans,” HP, November 13, 1973, in Folder Newspaper Clippings – Houston Post, Box 130, SJRA.
newcomers. The trash, noise, and the decidedly un-picturesque character of these fishermen threatened this advertising image and therefore threatened profits. Lawyers representing one rural development, Seven Coves, characteristically argued that his clients had no “gripes” against the public, but that “[t]here’s no question that land values would drop if a boat ramp were placed [near the development].” The Far Hills Property Owners association was more direct, setting up a fence and earthworks across the road. Homer L. Bruce Sr., a retired Houston lawyer and one of the many so-called “elbow roomers” who retired to the country for its fresh air and peace and quiet, erected his own fence to reclaim his dream home. These suburbanites were unwilling to share their lakeside arcadia.

These metropolitan residents found an ally in Allen Monroe, a rancher and former dairy farmer. When Allen Monroe complained to county officials and reporters about trespassing on his land, however, he did so from a decidedly rural frame of reference. The close social, religious, and familial ties that pervaded rural Montgomery County had softened property lines and allowed local residents greater access to private property for hunting and fishing, provided they always do so within the locally defined bounds of propriety and custom. Monroe was angry less because fishermen were using his land to access the lake than because these fishermen had shown contempt for the personal connections that had made the traditional system work. As he put it, “I didn’t want to fence it off, I’d rather try and get along with people, but people won’t listen or let you explain that they are on your property.” They failed to respect his property and

123 Carter Pettit, “Coker Says County Prepared To Condemn Land If Necessary,” CDC, April 16, 1974, p. 1, 10, Folder Zoning – Lake Conroe, Box 406, SJRA and April 1974, CCR.
124 “Ramp Opponents Group,” CDC, April 10, 1974, Folder Recreation – FM 830, Box 406, SJRA.
125 “County Gears up to Start Proceedings to Open Roads,” CDC, April 30, 1974, 1, 3, Folder “Zoning” – Lake Conroe, Box 406, SJRA
126 Ed Watson, “Court Orders Roads Closed,” CDC, November 12, 1973, Folder Newspaper Clippings Conroe Courier, Box 130, SJRA.
127 “Issue on Lake Access Closings Sparked Again,” CDC, March 29, 1974, Folder Newspaper Clippings – Conroe Courier, Box 130, SJRA.
his wife, who, he reported, once had to shoot at a group of people who were verbally harassing
her. In doing so, these fishermen led Monroe to give them the damning label of “out of
towners.”

Had they been locals, he implied, he might have looked more favorably on their
attempts to access the lake access.

While the out-of-towner label raises images of urban-rural conflict and resistance to
metropolitan expansion, the reality of what was taking place next to Monroe’s ranch was more
complicated. The fishermen and weekend recreationists whom Monroe faced were as likely to
have been from the county seat of Conroe or from rural areas in the county as from Houston and
its suburbs. Monroe blamed their failure to respect his notions of property and propriety,
ironically, on their urbanity. The reality was that the building of Lake Conroe brought large
numbers of urban, rural, and small town strangers to his doorstep. The metropolitan public was
claiming access to the lake. They did not do so through rural kin networks and social
conventions. Yet there is more to Monroe’s story than this. For even as his actions demonstrated
that he was adopting a siege mentality around his private property, he was also laying claim to
Lake Conroe for his own benefit. Monroe had a trench dug across the road and onto his property.
In effect, he extended Lake Conroe onto his own land so that he could use the lake to water his
cattle, to provide his own lakefront fishing spot, and as a moat to keep trespassers out.

In doing so, Monroe joined suburban developers in claiming the lake as a private recreational
retreat.

The issues these four groups raised—decreased land values, trespassing, and the
“unsupervised public[’s]” inability to maintain the tranquility and beauty of the lakefront—mark
a convergence of recreational and rural property-owner rhetoric around a shared defense of

128 “County Lake Roads,” Lake Conroe Progress, November 27, 1974, Folder Newspaper Clippings - Baytown
Sun, Box 130, SJRA.
129 “Issue on Lake Access Closings Sparked Again.”
strong property rights and private over public interest.\textsuperscript{130} When faced with the possibility of boat ramps near their property, these owners discovered a shared commitment to NIMBY. None of those involved opposed public boat ramps on principle, but each fought to push these ramps into the National Forest to the north, a type of recreational ghetto for those unable to afford access in the more exclusive southern end of the lake. Rural joined suburban and resort in sectioning off Montgomery County’s recreational landscapes for those who could afford access.

The commissioners ultimately ordered such obstructions removed. The county hammered out a deal with the National Forest Service in the fall of 1974 to construct a seventy-three-acre park site on the northern end of the lake.\textsuperscript{131} The county also secured the right to build a boat ramp at the end of FM 830, a state road that now dead-ended into the lake. It did so over the loud and well-funded opposition of a recreational subdivision and nearby landowners.\textsuperscript{132} Both projects took years to complete. The FM 830 site, the county’s first publicly owned access point, did not open until October 1976.\textsuperscript{133} In the meanwhile, the SJRA came under pressure from the state legislature to provide parkland. At a special hearing before the Interim Committee on Water Supply and Waste Disposal in Metropolitan Areas, legislators charged the SJRA with abusing the public trust and working purely for “particular private interests.” Public funds paid for the construction of Lake Conroe, one legislator reminded the committee, yet the SJRA had not provided public access. Representative Bill Blythe exclaimed, “[i]t’s ridiculous for a county the

\textsuperscript{130}“Boat Ramp OK’d by County Commissioners.”
\textsuperscript{131}The Forest Service, which owned the northern third of the lakefront property, had originally had plans to develop ten recreational areas on the lake totaling over a thousand acres. The 73 acre Scott’s Run site was all they would develop for the first decade. They currently maintain three: “Construction Begins This Fall on Lake Recreation Complex,” \textit{CDC}, August 13, 1974, Folder Newspaper Clippings – Baytown Sun, Box 130, SJRA; September 1974, CCR; Sigler, “Recreational Facilities to be Limited.”
\textsuperscript{132}The development of both of these sites was dependent on a grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife department. “Boat Ramp OK’d by County Commissioners;” “Public Ramp Project Moves to Design Stage this Week,” \textit{CDC}, May 7, 1974, Folder Recreation – FM 830, Box 406, SJRA.
\textsuperscript{133}“Public Boat Ramp Opened,” \textit{CDC}, October 21, 1976, Folder Newspaper Clippings – Conroe Courier, Box 130, SJRA.
size of Montgomery County to be in the backyard of a metropolitan area such as it is and have as few parks as it does.” The SJRA’s response was telling. While the lake may have been open to the public, the Montgomery County public did not pay for it. No local tax money went directly into the lake. No voter in the county ever approved it. Private landowners had been compensated for their land. The lake belonged to the city and the SJRA. It was not Montgomery County’s lake.134

From a practical standpoint, all of this conflict was unnecessary. There were a handful of privately owned boat ramps open to the public for a small fee by this time.135 The conflict was not so much about the absolute lack of access as it was the perception that private landowners and developers were limiting public access. Would Lake Conroe be a suburban lake surrounded by gated communities or would it be a public amenity, open to county residents who had long been promised its benefits? The lack of boat ramps and parks became a public reminder that Lake Conroe existed for the benefit of the metropolis, the authority, and those who could afford to live in the lake’s exclusive developments. In its early years, at least, Lake Conroe earned its reputation as, in the words of a Houston reporter, a “spa of [the] wealthy.”136

It is impossible to construct a reservoir without sparking resistance. Bulldozers transcribe the blue shading from an engineering map onto the land with violence. Lawyers, appraisal hearings, and eminent domain statues distill each acre and each homestead into a dollar figure. Contour lines, mysterious yet exacting and inexorable, divide the landscape between water and

134 “SJRA Denies Charge of Abuse of Trust,” (first quotation); “Blythe Critical of SJRA,” CDC, March 13, 1975, p. 1, 10 (second quotation). There was no public park on the lake until the SJRA, with the aid from Texas Parks and Wildlife, opened one on the Newton tract in 1993. Houston, because of liability issues, played no role in the construction of this park. Folder Newton Property Park: Purchase of 8.581 acres, Box 396, SJRA; James R. Adams to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, December 18, 1989, Box 252, SJRA; Maury Hammond, “Idle Land turned into Public Park,” CDC, newspaper clipping, Box 252, SJRA.
135 There were five publicly accessible boat ramps open by April 1976. At least two of these opened even as the lake was filling. Ken Carr, “Lake Conroe Attracts Boaters, Campers,” CDC, April 25, 1976, B6-7.
136 Reeves, “Confusion Allows Lake Conroe to be a Spa of Wealthy,” Houston Post, July 11, 1974, Folder Newspaper Clippings, Houston Post, Box 130, SJRA.
land, between public lake and private shoreline, between displacement by condemnation and windfall gains. Here man manages the usually unruly floods, preparing a home for them and evacuating those in the way. It is little wonder that historians have found such narratives so attractive. Dam construction and the great engineering feats that go with it exemplify, better than any other engineering work, the power cities have over their hinterlands.

One historian has described the ranchers in Los Angeles’ Owens Valley as “victims of brute power in a broader reorganization of the state and urban society.” The construction of Lake Conroe certainly involved Montgomery County ranchers in the reorganization of Houston’s infrastructure, but they were not its victims. The SJRA built Lake Conroe in spite of the resistance of the county’s agricultural elites, but certainly not at their expense. The authority turned its back on its earlier partnership with these ranchers and instead used city money to purchase and inundate nearly 17,000 acres. These ranchers had never questioned that the river should be developed, but they fervently protested the dam’s placement and the way their interests and the SJRA’s past conservation work were being sacrificed to meet urban needs.

The SJRA brought prosperity to Conroe and its surrounding countryside. In so doing, it fulfilled the dreams of local boosters, albeit in the form of recreational development rather than industry. The construction of Lake Conroe by Houston and the SJRA played a primary role in the economic development of Montgomery County. The lake created an entirely new center of gravity for suburban homebuyers and weekend retreats. In many ways the SJRA fulfilled the original purpose for which locals had created it: it brought prosperity to the county through water development. That it did so by inundating prime pastureland and without bringing in heavy industry would have certainly surprised these local landowners. That Houston would foot much

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of the bill would have also come as a shock. Such were the benefits of being Houston’s
recreational hinterland. Here more than in any other aspect of their relationship, Montgomery
County’s growth was directly dependent on Houston’s involvement, no matter how large the
SJRA’s intermediary role ended up being. Lake Conroe was Houston’s often grudgingly given
gift to the county. This gift bound the county all the more to the metropolis.
CHAPTER 5

THE DOUBLE EDGE OF PROXIMITY:

AGRICULTURE AND OPEN SPACE IN LOUDOUN COUNTY

Two historical narratives dominate the memory of agriculture in Loudoun County, Virginia. The first, told by local extension agents and the progressive farmers who they served, is a whiggish tale of modern technology, nationally recognized breeding stock, and ever-rising production figures. It is a story of how progressive, educated, and well capitalized farmers organized, adopted the latest research, and built the finest dairy operations in the state and perhaps the South. These farmers were intelligent, hardworking businessmen who knew how to command respect.

The second tale is a tragedy told by farmers and preservationists and picked up by journalists. Here farmers cultivated their lush pastures and lovingly managed their dairy herds to produce wholesome milk for consumers. These farmers were deeply rooted agrarians, brimming with common-sense wisdom and practical knowledge resting on a bedrock of country morality and rural character. As fortune would have it, these modern, republican yeomen and the rich, dark soils from which they drew their competence lay within the shadow of the metropolis. As the city expanded, it brought urban people into the county. Some moved to the countryside, where they complained about the stench of manure, the noise of tractors, and the flies that buzzed against their screen doors, blocking their views of lounging Holsteins. Others moved to the sprawling subdivisions that had grown up like red cedars in what were once called Eastern Loudoun’s old field. These newcomers knew little of farming and the rural world that it supported. They both grumbled and complained. They demanded the services they had enjoyed in the city. They raised taxes to pay for schools and roads, for traffic lights and sewer lines, for
landfills and police protection. They taxed the farmer to provide solutions to problems they had created for themselves. Facing the onslaught of suburban growth, Loudoun farmers abandoned their milking parlors and tractor cabs, selling out to developers and thereby ushering in, some gently others less so, the twilight of Loudoun agriculture.

Each of these narratives of twentieth-century agriculture has deep roots in the county’s historical memory. Even more significantly, each has played a significant role in the local policy debates over farmland preservation, open space preservation, and the future of agriculture in the county. The former is the central message of the Loudoun Heritage Farm Museum, which protects, promotes, and interprets this legacy of progressive agriculture to the county’s suburban children. The latter narrative dominates popular memory of suburbanization and fuels efforts in Western Loudoun to protect the remaining farmsteads and pastures from development. These narratives are in no way mutually exclusive. The narrative of a blooming progressive agriculture adds to the tragedy of its destruction at the hands of suburban expansion. Both cultivate a sense of loss, whether that ultimately provokes mourning and resignation or activism.

In their broad outlines these narratives make sense of a great deal of twentieth-century Loudoun agriculture. Yet they also obscure a great deal about agricultural decline: its causes, its meaning, and the experiences of farmers facing it. This chapter examines the agricultural history of Loudoun County, particularly its dairy industry, within a metropolitan framework. It explores the long-standing and pervasive connections that bound the county’s farmers to the city long before suburbia came to Eastern Loudoun in the 1960s. It also reexamines the narrative of decline within the context of the postwar, nation-wide transformation of agricultural production. Agricultural historians have long been negligent in ceding metropolitan expansion to urban and suburban historians. The result has been a historiography that relies on two-dimensional, static
cardboard cutouts of rural people, culture, and society. Only in the past decade have rural and agricultural historians begun to interrogate the urban idealizations of country life that are so prevalent in histories of suburbanization and open space preservation. This chapter builds on these works in treating agricultural decline as a part of both agricultural history and metropolitan history. In so doing it offers a more complete picture of the forces that ended Loudoun’s large-scale agriculture in general and dairy farming in particular.

This approach has the most significant implications for how historians understand and evaluate the movement to preserve farmland and open space. On its face this movement, both in Loudoun County and in counties across the nation, sought to defend rural areas and their ways of life from suburban expansion. The journalists, policy analysts, and historians writing about these movements have generally done so from the standpoint of environmentalism and sustainability. They have celebrated these movements, at times uncritically, for their efforts to preserve the countryside. Yet in so doing they obscure the economic and social transformations that refashioned these rural areas into countryside. The preservation of the countryside reaffirmed class hierarchies and validated white privileges. It also substituted an idealized conception of cultivated, pastoral landscape for a functioning rural economy and society. Preserving the countryside certainly had environmental, economic, and aesthetic benefits. It was a far cry, however, from preserving agriculture and rural life. Farmland preservation, like the organic food

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1 In her history of the dairy industry, Kendra Smith-Howard emphasizes the dissonance between urban idealizations of dairy production and the modern, technologically sophisticated agribusiness it had become by the postwar period. David Walbert pursues a similar strain of argument in his examination of countryside tourism in Amish Country. Laura Barraclough, a historical geographer, takes this dissonance in a different direction. She examines the cultural, racial, and political implications of rural lifestyles that continued to rely on cultural and policy supports for agriculture even as they abandoned any economic connections to modern agriculture. Kendra Smith-Howard, *Pure and Modern Milk: An Environmental History since 1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), David Walbert, *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Laura R. Barraclough, *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscapes, Urban Development, and White Privilege* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).
movement, united environmental protection with elitism and class exclusivity and a limited and limiting conception of agricultural production and rural people.\(^2\)

This critical stance toward farmland preservation is not a defense of Loudoun farmers as if they were somehow the victims of suburbanization or open-space preservation. As much as they might mourn the changes that they saw in the county, Loudoun farmers remained elite white males who often sold out with hundreds of thousands of dollars to their names. As much as they might cast themselves as victims, like plains Indians driven from the land by railroads, settlers, and U.S. soldiers, these farmers were some of the metropolis’ greatest beneficiaries. Their agricultural businesses had grown on a steady diet of urban milk money. They now sold their land at prices inflated by suburban expansion.

This chapter begins by tracing Loudoun’s agricultural history from the end of the nineteenth century until the 1960s, especially focusing on the history of the dairy industry. Against this backdrop, it examines the competing explanations for the decline of Loudoun’s dairy industry. It then proceeds to trace the way these explanations combined with the

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preconceptions and values of preservationists to propel the county’s efforts at farmland preservation. These efforts did not preserve agriculture as Loudoun’s farmers remembered it. Yet, as the final section argues, agriculture persisted nonetheless.

The twentieth-century agricultural history of Loudoun County, Virginia, can be summed up in two words: privilege and prosperity. The region had a temperate climate, fertile and highly productive soils, and nearby urban markets. These environmental and geographic factors in turn attracted farmers with the financial resources, the expertise, and the institutional networks that made Loudoun County a model of progressive farming in the state and across the Upper South. This agricultural prosperity went as far back as the Quakers, who came from eastern Pennsylvania to settle the rich soils of Western Loudoun beginning in the 1730s. In a state where slave-worked plantations relied on shifting cultivation and extensive farming methods, Loudoun Quakers developed a system of crop rotations and soil-building practices that enhanced the productivity, value, and look of the land.3 During the Civil War, Loudoun was the northernmost county in the breadbasket of the Confederacy. Its agricultural economy rebounded from the war and emancipation. Diversified commercial farming dominated local agriculture throughout the nineteenth century. Farmers supplied Washington and the Potomac Valley with wheat, corn, cattle, horses, and sheep. A visitor at a crossroads general store in Loudoun would have heard complaints about low prices, unfair railroad management, and unruly weather. Such a visitor would never have heard the radical agrarian rhetoric or the tales of agricultural woe that defined so much of the South’s rural politics in the period. Loudoun farmers did not fear for the general success of their businesses or the provision for their families.

This prosperity continued into the twentieth century. In 1920, during the “golden age” of American agriculture, Loudoun County had one of the most prosperous farm economies in Virginia. The county was first in the state in total corn production and in corn yields per acre. It was sixth in the number of hogs and fourth in the total value of its dairy products. Loudoun was first in the state in the percentage of improved land within its farms. Of the 332,160 acres of land in Loudoun, 247,673, roughly three-quarters, were in improved farmland. Its farmland was both intensively managed and highly productive, making the county fourth in total farm wealth. Even though the county had no other industries to speak of, it was still thirteenth in the value of its taxable property. One area farmer remembered, “Everything was farming. . . . If you didn't live and work on a farm, or you worked for somebody on a farm, why then you either had to work at a bank or a grocery store.” Loudoun’s agricultural prosperity was one of relatively small-scale producers. Family farms of less than two hundred acres dominated the county well into the twentieth century. Only one quarter of these were run by tenants. Some of this prosperity reached African American farmers, who owned 5 percent of the county’s farms. Most of the county’s small African American population worked as tenants and farm laborers for the county’s larger landowners. The Great Depression took its toll in Loudoun, forcing a little over a fifth of the county’s farms out of business. Yet the county’s proximity to Washington ensured that wartime mobilization would bring a flood of prosperity to Loudoun.

Much of this twentieth-century prosperity was the result of the continued influx of gentlemen farmers, agricultural experts, and more progressive farmers who brought to the county

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4 Patrick A. Deck and Henry Heaton, An Economic and Social Survey of Loudoun County (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1926), 42, 50-51, 57-58, 92, 120-21.
7 The number of farms in Loudoun dropped from 2,107 in 1930 to 1,645 in 1935. Agricultural Census, County Table 1, 1935.
the institutional connections, scientific expertise, and financial resources that made it a regional exemplar of modern farm practices. The foxhunters described in chapter 1, for instance, poured their wealth into establishing their hunt-country farms into showcases of the latest agricultural implements and practices. Rokeby, Welbourne, Huntland, and Foxlease became synonymous with the latest in pasture, beef, and dairy production.\(^8\) No foxhunter was more important in this than Westmoreland Davis, a blue-blooded Virginian who had his eyes set on the Virginia governorship. As part of positioning himself as the champion of the state’s farmers, Davis poured his Wall Street earnings into his 1,200-acre Morven Park estate on the outskirts of Leesburg, turning it into a showcase for the latest breeds, implements, and practices. He also used his influence to establish agricultural extension work in the county.\(^9\) The leadership and example of these men combined with the generally prosperous and progressive character of Loudoun farmers to keep the county at the forefront of agricultural change. Loudoun farmers were some of the first in the state to purchase tractors, automobiles, and binders; to adopt and even develop new pasture and feed crops and animal breeds; and to adapt to changing agricultural markets. It would be hard to find a southern county that more fully embraced progressive agriculture. Certainly the county retained a less-prominent minority of farmers who was more resistant to agricultural modernization, but, in comparison with other regions, these voices were few and far between. Where so many farmers across the South were being crushed by the wheels of agricultural progress, most Loudoun farmers reaped substantial profits as they confidently kept pace with technological and biological improvements.


\(^9\) Davis purchased the Southern Planter, the state’s agricultural newspaper, in 1912 and rode support from farmers into the governorship in 1918. Jack Temple Kirby, Westmoreland Davis: Virginia Planter-Politician, 1859-1942 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1968).
Yet Loudoun County lay less than sixty miles from the nation’s capital. The metropolis would exact a high price from the county’s agricultural economy even as it paid high prices to the county’s farmers. Proximity indirectly shaped all of Loudoun’s agricultural economy. It most directly shaped the county’s most profitable agriculture sector: the dairy industry. This industry began its slow and steady rise a few decades before northern foxhunters discovered the county, peaked just as federal planners were laying down their first sketches of Dulles Airport, and entered its well-publicized death-throes by the 1980s. The dairy industry never accounted for a majority of local farms. It always accounted for a majority of the public attention and attracted the most progressive and capital-intensive farmers. When local politicians and preservationists articulated their defense of farming, they cast the hardworking and prosperous dairy farmer as the victim of suburban sprawl. The history of dairy farming in Loudoun County offers a case study of the interplay between changes within the agricultural industry and the transformations wrought by metropolitan expansion.

Businessman J. R. Beuchler was the grandfather of dairy farming in Loudoun County. He bought an ice cream shop and bakery in Leesburg in 1872. To ensure a steady supply of cream, he also purchased a local farm and set about modernizing its dairy production. The construction of the Washington and Ohio Railroad through the county during that decade gave Beuchler the opportunity to sell milk to Washington. Over the following decade, he expanded his production and purchased and bred what was only the second registered Holstein herd in the state. He maintained production records for his cattle and invested in cream separators, silos, and brick

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10 In 1945, for instance, the county had 235 dairy farms, 180 poultry farms, 496 livestock farms, 218 general farms, and 669 subsistence farms along with a few dozen forest product farms and orchards. Poland, Frontier to Suburbia, 337.

cooling vats. Unfortunately for Beuchler, these production improvements could not make up for marketing difficulties. The Washington and Ohio Railroad was unreliable and could not provide the consistent transportation dairy farmers required. Washington wholesalers, for their part, were hesitant to trust a milk producer so far from the city. These issues retarded the growth of the industry into the twentieth century. Loudoun dairy farmers continued to focus on the less demanding and less lucrative production of butter and cheese for Washington.¹² Beuchler was ahead of his time, but he convinced other Loudoun farmers of the county’s possibility as a dairy producer.¹³

The county’s milk production did not take off until the first decade of the twentieth century. Here Westmoreland Davis played a central role. The former Wall Street lawyer took it upon himself to make Virginia the Wisconsin of the South. To this end, Davis led the effort to organize the Virginia Dairyman’s Association in 1907 to disseminate the latest agricultural research and practice to the state’s dairy farmers and to promote the industry’s interests in Richmond. Most important among its achievements, this organization secured passage of the Dairy and Food Division in Virginia. This government agency regulated the sale of milk, thus ensuring that Loudoun farmers who invested in new technologies and more productive herds would be protected from the devastating impact other farmer’s contaminated milk could have on their sales.¹⁴ Beginning in 1910, the lord of Morven Park initiated the county’s first farm

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¹³ In 1872, the Catoctin Farmers Club agreed that the agricultural future of the area lay in providing milk and produce to DC. Waterford Foundation, “Waterford’s Agricultural Heritage, 1733-1993,” (Waterford, Va.: Waterford Foundation, n.d.).

extension programs, funded by the General Education Board of New York City.\textsuperscript{15} The county’s more prosperous farmers converted to this gospel of progressive dairy farming. They formed the Loudoun County Breeders Association in 1916 to develop more productive herds.\textsuperscript{16} They imported purebred bulls from overseas, first Guernsey and, beginning in the 1930s, Holstein. In 1911, they formed the Loudoun Valley Cow Testing Association to maintain production records on each cow and thereby ensure that their feed was going to only the most productive cattle. This was the first testing association in the South.\textsuperscript{17} Taken as a whole, these developments in the local industry increased the production and quality of Loudoun milk. By the end of World War I, milk going into Washington had the lowest rate of bovine tuberculosis in the nation. Between 1900 and 1920 milk sales from Virginia went from $1.8 million to $19 million even as the number of dairy cows declined from 281,876 to 140,368.\textsuperscript{18} On September 21, 1920, dairy farmers from across D.C.’s hinterland met and formed the Maryland and Virginia Milk Producer’s Association, a marketing cooperative whose central purpose was to ensure stable milk prices in the region. It became the largest milk producer in the state within a decade. Between 1926 and the outbreak of World War II, annual production by association farmers went from 10 million gallons to 33 million gallons.\textsuperscript{19} Northern Virginia was home to an efficient, highly capitalized, technologically progressive dairy industry.

Many of the leading producers in this industry were, like Davis, newcomers. There were certainly farmers whose roots went back generations and who transitioned into the dairy industry as it took root and grew beginning in the 1920s. Yet there is also abundant anecdotal evidence

\textsuperscript{15} Poland, \textit{Frontier to Suburbia}, 322 n53.
\textsuperscript{16} Harrison, McComb, and Miller, \textit{Loudoun’s Dairy Industry}, 11.
\textsuperscript{17} In 1929 the testing association changed its name to the Dairy Herd Improvement Association. Harrison, McComb, and Miller, \textit{Loudoun’s Dairy Industry}, 18-19.
\textsuperscript{18} Sharrer, \textit{A Kind of Fate}, 134, 147, 163.
\textsuperscript{19} Robert and Ruth Boley, Interview by Janney Wilson, August 26, 1998, Loudoun County, Va., Folder 2, Box 1, Oral History Project, TBL (hereinafter OHP) and Harrison, McComb, and Miller, \textit{Loudoun’s Dairy Industry}, 25.
that the dairy industry attracted entrepreneurial, progressive farmers from outside the county who were searching for economic opportunity. The Brown family, for instance, moved to the area from Blacksburg in 1918 because of its good soils and economic promise. They took up dairy farming soon after. Jesse Hughes did likewise in 1921. His dairy farm, which would eventually become part of Sterling Park, was the first dairy in the county to be electrified. J. S. Smith, later head of the county’s Dairy Herd Improvement Association and Farm Bureau president, moved to the county from Philadelphia during the Great Depression after graduating from Cornell University. These educated, progressive farmers settled in a county awash with gentlemen farmers. Some of these, like Nevada Senator William Morris Stewart, came as early as the 1890s to take part in the county’s expanding dairy industry. Kentucky coal businessman James Jenkins was attracted by the image of dairy farming as a modern business pursuit that rewarded expert management. Deflated land prices during the Great Depression also brought a new wave of Yankee gentlemen farmers to Western Loudoun and Fauquier to buy up old farms and turn them into progressive dairy and cattle operations whose greatest contribution was the green pastures they maintained for the use of foxhunters. The bulk of the gentlemen farmers to settle outside of Hunt Country came in the two decades following the election of FDR. Many, like Dr. John Monroe, pursued dairy farming as a hobby even as they pursued their careers in Washington. Some looked to farming in the county as a way to stay busy in retirement.

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20 Mary Brown, Interview, 2003, Folder 3, Box 1, OHP.
21 Hughes used the money from selling his farm to purchase a 500-acre farm near Middleburg. “Jesse Hughes, Dairy Farmer,” Post, September 2, 1964, B16.
26 Monroe was originally from Loudoun. “Arlington Druggist Buys Dairy Farm,” Post, July 23, 1944, M5.
some, commuting and gentlemen farming became a lifestyle passed on to the next generation. As such examples reveal, many of the leaders of Loudoun’s dairy industry were newcomers—prosperous, educated whites who took up farming as a modern business and, in some cases, as a leisured pursuit. This rural elite had the resources and technical knowledge to pursue the latest technological improvements in the industry. Certainly not all who took up dairy farming were outsiders. The industry’s success lured owners of the county’s struggling orchards and poultry farms to switch to dairy production. The vanguard of dairy production, however, was primarily made up of outsiders. The dairy industry that they created was the product of wealthy outsiders who, along with many local farmers, used improved transportation and the latest methods of agricultural production to turn the proximity of urban markets into profits. Agriculture had deep roots in the county. Dairy farming for the Washington market was quite new.

Loudoun County attracted the best university-trained farmers and production specialists and established a reputation for its progressive farming practices. As the treadmill of technological improvement kept turning, Loudoun’s more prosperous farmers kept pace. Area farmers adopted electric milking machines and refrigeration when they first became available in the mid-1930s. The same was true for artificial insemination by 1946. Their pastures were

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27 Scheel, *Loudoun Discovered*, vol. 5, *Waterford, The German Settlement, and Between the Hills*, 81. James Symington bought a farm in the county after his doctor had prescribed it as a treatment for a nervous breakdown. He and his wife continued their high society lifestyle as their laborers managed the day to day operation of the farm. Mrs. James Symington, Interview by Allison Weiss, June 5, 2002, Leesburg, Va., LHFM.
28 Thomas E. Taylor, Interview by Vivian Chouha, February 20, 1991, Lincoln, Va., Folder 26, Box 3, LOHP.
32 This date marked the formation of the Loudoun Artificial Breeding Organization. The first cooperative artificial insemination organization in the nation formed in May 1938 in New Jersey. Harrison, McComb, and Miller, *Loudoun’s Dairy Industry*, 34. On the adoption of artificial insemination within the industry, see Smith-Howard,
filled with alfalfa, orchard grass, and other high-yield hays from early in the twentieth-century.\textsuperscript{33} A grant from wealthy philanthropist Paul Mellon established the Middleburg Forage Research Station in 1949 to ensure that Loudoun farmers and horse breeders could produce hay with enough protein to support their pureblooded horses and cattle.\textsuperscript{34} Loudoun dairy farmers adopted tractors, combines, hay balers, and corn pickers.\textsuperscript{35} The average herd size in the county had shot up to 43.3 cows by 1950, a figure that signaled the continued adoption of modern agribusiness models of farming.\textsuperscript{36} Loudoun’s dairy industry was, as historian G. Terry Sharrer put it, a “progressive exemplar” of the type of agriculture that farm journal editors and extension agents across the South promoted.\textsuperscript{37} This prosperity was both earned and inherited. Loudoun dairy farmers had deep pockets, often substantial education, extensive support networks, and easily accessible urban markets. They used these advantages to their fullest.

Proximity to Washington had made the dairy industry possible. Across the nation government policy, transportation technology, and market forces had combined to divide dairy production into two distinct rings. Their proximity to the city allowed inner-ring farmers to deliver fresh fluid milk for urban consumers. These farmers secured higher prices for their milk. They also had to meet stricter standards for the cleanliness and quality of their milk. Outer-ring

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\textsuperscript{33} Orchard grass seed became a local specialty crop and major source of cash income for farmers. It was used to pack ammunition crates during World War II. The county remained a national leader in its production into the 1960s. One farmer remembered “The orchard grass certainly was a godsend in this country, especially to the farmer. It really brought him out of debt. Set him straight, set him going. And he's never really gone backward since.” In many cases orchard grass quite literally provided the seed money for the continued expansion of the dairy industry. Curtis Poland Interview (quotation). See also Bob Grubb, Interview by Allison Weiss, September 5, 2002, Hillsboro, Va., LHFM. Dr. George Washington, Interview by Allison Weiss, October 18, 2001, Loudoun County, Va., LHFM, Curtis and Betty Laycock, Interview by Allison Weiss, May 14, 2002, Loudoun County, Va., LHFM, and “Let’s Look at Loudoun,” 1949, Folder 80, Ephemera, TBL.


\textsuperscript{35} Poland, \textit{Frontier to Suburbia}, 354-356.

\textsuperscript{36} Harrison, McComb, and Miller, \textit{Loudoun’s Dairy Industry}, 20.

\textsuperscript{37} Sharrer, \textit{A Kind of Fate}, 163.
farmers delivered their milk to local creameries and cheese factories, which, in turn, shipped these products to the city. These farmers received lower prices for their milk but also did not have the high costs of meeting increasingly stringent production standards. Because of their higher costs of production and higher potential payouts, more progressive farmers and gentlemen farmers invested in fluid milk production. These farms had larger herds, more machinery, and required more non-family labor.38

Such farms dominated in neighboring Fairfax County during the interwar period, making it the state’s leading dairy county. Loudoun County had established a strong core of fluid milk producers by the Great Depression. The number of these producers continued to expand over the following decade even as the number of cream producers declined. The very structural transformations that are often credited with undermining rural communities were a boon for the county’s dairy industry. The cars and paved roads that introduced rural folk to the pleasures of town life in the 1920s also, with the adoption of milk trucks, untethered dairy farms from the railroad network. The adoption of bulk tanks and bulk trucks in the 1950s drastically decreased the time and labor it took to bring milk to market and thereby extended the city’s fluid milkshed farther into Loudoun County. At the same time suburban growth in Fairfax was pressuring dairy farmers to sell out and move westward. As early as 1951, Loudoun had claimed the distinction of having the most grade A dairies in Virginia, 282, and the greatest value of dairy products sold, with over two-thirds again as much income as its closest rival.39 Loudoun’s dairy industry was

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the heir to a Fairfax industry squeezed out by suburban development. Thus an ominous cloud hung over Loudoun’s dairy industry even as it boomed in the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{40}

This agricultural modernization and prosperity came at a price. The postwar expansion of fluid milk markets forced producers to upgrade their facilities and increase their herd sizes or get out of the milk business altogether. Those unable or unwilling to make this investment switched to cattle and/or hay crops, both of which were less labor and capital intensive.\textsuperscript{41} The Loudoun industry followed national agricultural trends toward fewer farms with more capital, more intensive oversight, larger herds, and higher productivity. The number of dairy farms in the county declined to 180 by the early 1960s, even as production increased.\textsuperscript{42} The number of farms in the county peaked in 1945, the number of dairy cows peaked in 1954, the county’s average farm size peaked in 1974, and the value of dairy products sold peaked in 1978.\textsuperscript{43} These figures are consistent with an industry that expanded in the postwar decade and then consolidated in the following two decades, as the most efficient producers expanded their pure-bred herds and less-productive farms and cattle left the industry.

In the fall of 1961, even as the Loudoun County board of supervisors wrangled with the Broyhill Corporation over the details of its $175 million planned community and the structure of what would be the Dulles Airport terminal was taking shape, Loudoun remained one of the state’s most prosperous agricultural counties. The average gross receipts-per-farm in Loudoun was 38 percent above the mid-Atlantic average and 74 percent above the average in Virginia.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Nan Netherton, Donald Sweig, Janice Artemel, Patricia Hickin, and Patrick Reed, \textit{Fairfax County, Virginia: A History} (Fairfax, Va.: Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, 1978), 545-67.
\item \textsuperscript{41} See, for example, James and Maxine Hamilton, Interview by Allison Weiss, April 22, 2002, Hillsboro, Va., LHFM and Lehon Hamilton, Interview by Allison Weiss, October 18, 2001, Hillsboro, Va., LHFM.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Loudoun County Industrial Development Committee, \textit{Loudoun County, Gateway to the World: A Good Place to Live... to Play... to Work...} [c. 1963], Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va. (hereinafter Small UVA)
\item \textsuperscript{43} Agricultural Census, Virginia, County Data.
\item \textsuperscript{44} “Loudoun’s Farm Income Up; Nearly Double State Average,” \textit{LTM}, September 28, 1961, A1
\end{itemize}
The county ranked fourth in the state in the number of cattle, second in the number of dairy cows, third in corn production, fifth in hay, and sixth in wheat.\footnote{Virginia Electric and Power Company, Loudoun County Chamber of Commerce, and the Loudoun County Economic Study Committee, Loudoun County, Virginia: An Economic Study (Richmond: March 1967), 33.} The county’s dairy industry accounted for $54 million in sales each year. The dairy industry that squared off against suburban expansion was dynamic and prosperous. It had grown and expanded as the industry became more capital intensive and technologically sophisticated. It had also grown not in spite of, but because of metropolitan expansion. Loudoun’s dairy industry was inexorably tied to Washington, D.C., and its suburbs. The county’s agricultural prosperity was, in no small way, dependent on its status as one of the most productive regions of Washington’s milkshed. Urban milk money underwrote the pastoral fields and prosperous dairy farms of Loudoun County.

A brief comparison with Montgomery County’s dairy industry reveals, however, that there were limits to what proximity could do. As with Loudoun, the Texas county’s dairy history began with the expansion of rail lines to the area and urban growth. Unlike Loudoun, however, Montgomery County’s poor soils, open range system, atrocious roads, and the prosperous dairy industry of neighboring Harris County all worked to limit the industry’s expansion. Most dairies in the county were small-scale outer-ring producers. The modernization of the industry in the 1940s and 50s that so benefitted Loudoun’s dairy industry drove many of these Texas small dairies out of business.\footnote{“Today’s Dairymen an Industrialist,” East Texas, August 1959, 18. For an example of a dairy farmer who converted to beef cattle, see “Meet Dick Calfee,” CDC, February 12, 1964, s. 2, p. 6.} There had been 276 dairies operating in the county in 1940. That number declined to 136 by the end of World War II.\footnote{Agricultural Census, Texas, County Data. This number included dairy farmers like Gene and Christine Molk that moved from Harris County to escape the rising land prices. The Mols moved out in 1952 and later sold their dairy in 1966, but kept the old farmhouse. Gene commuted to work in Houston. As they explained, they could not give up the “hilly meadows and big tree woods” of Montgomery County. Christine Molk, “Molk” and Gene Molk, “Gene Molk” both in History Book Committee, Montgomery County Historical Society, Montgomery County History, 1981 (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Hunter Publishing Company, 1980), 405-406.} By 1965, when Loudoun still boasted over 150 dairy farms, the costs of upgrading cattle and facilities had decreased the number in
Montgomery County to 44. These were struggling to keep pace with changes in the industry. Their annual production averages were under 10,000 pounds per cow, below the state average. More than half of the operators reported disease and parasite problems. Few had adopted artificial breeding practices that had become standard in the industry. They struggled to keep pace with modernization within the industry, increasing production costs, declining profits, and the rise of industrial operations much farther out. Increasing transportation efficiency within the industry eroded the economic benefits of proximity to the point where county dairies simply could not compete. Never a major center of dairy production in the state, only thirteen county dairies remained in the county in 1978. Six survived into the 1980s and only one remained by the early 1990s.

Yet, for all its agricultural superiority, Loudoun’s dairy industry followed a similar trajectory of decline. By the mid-1990s the number of dairies remaining in Loudoun County could be counted on one hand. As of 2008, only one remained. What caused the destruction of dairy farming in Loudoun County in the thirty years between 1960 and 1990? Within the popular memory of preservationists and farmers alike, the dairy industry was a martyr, the victim of the expansion of the federal government and the sprawling subdivisions of Eastern Loudoun. This interpretation has the ring of truth, for suburban development and the rising land values it

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48 Thirty-three of these dairies were grade A. Compare this number to the 236 grade A dairies left in Loudoun in 1964. This, in spite of the fact that Montgomery County covers more than twice the land area of Loudoun. Montgomery County Program Building Committee, Your County Program: Long-Range Program of the Montgomery County Program Building Committee, (Montgomery County, Tx.: Self Published, 1964) in Briscoe, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 31; “Agent Quizzes Three Kinds of County Farmers,” CDC, February 19, 1964, s. 3, p. 1. Loudoun statistic from Harrison, McComb, and Miller, Loudoun’s Dairy Industry, 89. Morris Straughn, Interview by Author, July 31, 2012, Conroe, Tx.


50 Agricultural Census, Texas, County Data.

brought with it placed increased pressures on the county’s dairy farmers. Yet, as with all such morality tales, the complexity and contingency are quickly lost in such an interpretation. It is easy and politically expedient to blame suburbanization, but factors intrinsic to agriculture and rural life were at least as significant as the influence of the city and its suburbs in destroying Loudoun’s dairy industry. Dairy farming, after all, was anything but the bucolic, traditional family farmstead that urban and suburban newcomers often believed it to be. It had begun as the scion of modern agriculture, and it persisted as a highly competitive agribusiness. By the 1970s, Loudoun’s dairy farmers were caught between the pressures of suburbanization and agricultural industrialization. The suburbs may have pushed dairies out of the county, but they were able to do so because of deep structural weaknesses within the local industry.\(^52\)

An examination of oral histories of farmers recorded by the Loudoun Heritage Farm Museum in the late 1990s and early 2000s sheds light on the way farmers, looking back from the perspective of forty years of suburban development, tax increases, and agricultural decline, understood these pressures and made sense of the forces that led them to abandon agriculture. Loudoun’s location on the metropolitan fringe shaped historical memory of agriculture in general and dairy farming in particular. The city certainly cast a large shadow over Loudoun’s farm economy. Images of suburban sprawl gobbling up acreage, developers turning quick profits, and tax bills requiring pockets far deeper than any dairy farmer could muster haunt their memories, overshadowing the more mundane cost-price squeeze that undermined the farm economy across the nation. These farmers addressed both, but, when it came to assigning blame, they pinned it on the city. The Pandora’s Box of this historical narrative was Dulles Airport.

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\(^52\) For a summary of the pressures facing dairy farmers on the metropolitan fringe, see John Fraser Hart, The Rural Landscape (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 328-331.
Dulles Airport opened in 1962, followed closely by Sterling Park in 1963. The airport’s construction immediately put 9,000 acres, two-thirds of which was in Loudoun, out of production. Eastern Loudoun’s proximity to Washington and the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad (W&OD) had made it the center of the county’s dairy production from the 1920s to the early 1950s. Most of these farms were still in operation when the federal government condemned a large proportion of them for the airport. Many of the remaining Eastern Loudoun dairy farmers accepted the fantastic offers they received for land from speculators eager to profit from new development in the area.  

Looking back, the Western Loudoun farmers interviewed spoke of the construction of Dulles Airport as if it had the power of a nuclear blast. Curtis Laycock explained, “[t]hings started changing when they put the airport in. . . . The dairy farms started going out in Eastern Loudoun. . . and they just went out like flies. Land values increased so. . . .The land values escalated so rapidly after they put that airport in down there they just got swallowed up, you know. And it just came right on up.” Looking back from 2002, Laycock summed up fifty years of Loudoun history in that one sentence. “And it just came right on up.” When asked how farming had changed in the county, Bob Grubb responded by laying out a line of causation that tied the opening of the airport to the sprawling rural developments of twenty-first century Western Loudoun. The airport brought with it high-tech businesses and their overpaid employees. These people could “home on a chunk of nice farmland and they build an enormous mansion. And their neighbors do likewise. And farmers can be like anybody else. They might be

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54 Curtis and Betty Laycock Interview. Of the thirteen interviews done by the Loudoun Heritage Farm Museum that discuss suburban development, five explicitly name Dulles Airport as the primary catalyst of agricultural change.
inclined to want that money for their land, so they can sell it off.” 55 Another farmer simply explained “Dulles Airport came in,” and that exposed “one of the problems with farming in Loudoun County. . . that we’re so close to the metropolitan area.” 56 The proximity that had made dairy farming possible was now agrarian Loudoun’s Achilles’ heel. Edwin Potts remembered, “I was [at Dulles] for the dedication and I stood right in front of John F. Kennedy when he was up there on stage dedicating the airport . . . That was the end, basically the beginning of the end of agriculture in Loudoun County.” 57 County extension agent William Harrison explained that “the die was cast when the airport came in here.” 58

Dulles Airport accelerated the decline of dairy farming in Eastern Loudoun, it is true. But the region’s dairy farms were hardly robust and healthy. The postwar decades had been hard on these farms. Eastern Loudoun soils had always been poorly drained and relatively infertile. Proximity, not productivity, had made these dairy farms profitable. Bulk tanks and trucks were rapidly eroding their competitive advantage, as Western Loudoun farms could produce milk for the same markets more efficiently and cheaply. Changes in the industry were eroding their competitive advantage, a fact that led many of these Eastern Loudoun farmers to support the construction of Sterling Park and even Dulles Airport, provided they were assured a “fair” price for their land. It is not surprising that they cashed in their land and walked away from farming or moved their farms farther out from the city. 59

55 Bob Grubb Interview.
56 Mac and Jim Brownell, Interview by Allison Weiss, May 15, 2002, Purcellville, Va., LHFM.
57 Edwin Potts Interview.
58 William Harrison Interview.
59 One area citizens’ group claimed that local landowners were two-to-one in favor of selling out to the airport, provided they could be assured a “fair” price for their farms. “Airport Landowners Say Appraisals Unjust, Seek Help of Congressmen,” LTM, June 26, 1958, A1, A2, “Airport Landowners will Hire their Own Appraisers,” LTM, July 10, 1958, p. 1, Raflo, Within the Iron Gates, 211-213, and William P. Frazer, Interview by Eugene Scheel, December 18, 1991, Waterford, Va., Folder 24, Box 1, LCOHP.
For many Western Loudoun dairy farmers, the airport’s initial impacts were indirect. The first effect was the increased difficulty of attracting farm laborers. Edwin Potts remembered, “[P]eople started going down there and going to work, and when that happens the farm help is gone and a lot of the farmers are getting fed up with it and they go in there and work, instead of farming.”^60^ The cows had to be milked twice a day, every day, making Loudoun farmers dependent on day laborers and tenants.^61^ Difficulty keeping farm children and laborers “down on the farm” was nothing new in rural America. Loudoun’s population had remained stagnant from 1860 to the 1950s in spite of the outsiders moving to the area because rural children had left the farm to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Henry Stowers explained, “[t]he development industry took away a lot of the labor. There is no farm labor anymore. If you could find somebody, you couldn't afford to pay them a decent wage. . . . It takes labor to run a farm.”^62^ When these laborers understandably chased job opportunities into the city and suburbs, it left farmers in a lurch. Labor shortages during World War II had accelerated farm consolidation and mechanization in Loudoun.^^63^ Now the metropolitan job market placed additional pressure on farmers to invest in expensive machinery to maintain their production.^^64^

Dulles Airport’s second indirect effect was on land values and therefore property taxes. The airport and the Potomac Interceptor sewer that came with it accelerated suburban growth in the county. These newcomers demanded urban services, a fact that riled agrarian, conservative Western Loudoun. The first waves of suburbanites who had moved to the countryside in the

^60^ Edwin Potts Interview. Henry Stowers voiced a similar complaint. Stowers, Interview by Allison Weiss, December 14, 2001, Loudoun County, Va., LHFM.

^61^ Jim Brownell remembered that most of his tenants were blacks and “West Virginia hillbillies,” Mac and Jim Brownell Interview.

^62^ Henry Stowers Interview.


^64^ For more on labor difficulties, see Taylor Interview. The scarcity of labor was a state-wide issue. Ronald Edwin Buffington, “Labor Study on Virginia Dairy Farms Employing Full Time Workers (MS Thesis: Virginia Polytechnic Institute, June 1967).
1940s and 1950s had little impact on property taxes or the costs of government. They generally expected little from the county government. The wave of suburbanites who came to Eastern Loudoun in the wake of Dulles was another matter. These newcomers demanded new schools, improved roads, and fire and police protection. Property taxes remained the primary source of income to pay for these services. As the county’s largest landowners, farmers foot the bill for suburban growth. They were none too happy about this. Jim Brownell, a Western Loudoun dairy farmer who eventually ran for county supervisor, explained his frustration

> Everybody was farmers in those days [1960s]. Farmers and landowners, that was the power, and attorneys, and we resented Sterling Park. We resented the fact that they wanted more schools and better schools and services. . . . As an individual member of the board I was always voting against higher taxes, more schools, higher salaries for employees, just against everything. I was! I liked things the way they were, like all farmers did. We did [not] want all these newcomers telling us what to do!65

Even so, the county budget increased from $4.5 million in 1965 to $11.85 million in 1970—a 62 percent increase in five years.66 Tax assessments kept pace with this growth in expenditures.67

Farmers felt forced off the land. They saw themselves as highly successful agrarians who knew their business and yet seemed unable to keep up with the economic pressures from development. “How can you afford to farm land as valuable as land is in Loudoun County?” one farmer asked, “You just can’t do it.”68 Under such pressures, developers proved an easy target for their anger. When asked what caused the decline of agriculture in the county, one farmer answered in one word: “greed.”69 James Hamilton explained the process as one where, beginning in the 1960s, “[d]evelopers come in and run the farmers out.”70 Such sentiments would lead some farmers to join a slow-growth, Western Loudoun political coalition that united

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65 Mac and Jim Brownell Interview.
67 “County value up $7 Million; Tax Increase: 17.8 Percent.” LTM, February 2, 1961, a1.
68 Curtis and Betty Laycock Interview. See also Joan Moore, Interview by Allison Weiss, May 23, 2002, Upperville, Va., LHFM.
69 Hugh Grubb, Interview by Allison Weiss, September 5, 2002, Hillsboro, Va., LHFM.
70 James and Maxine Hamilton Interview.
environmentalists, exurbanites, gentlemen farmers, and a handful of agrarians in opposition to development. For most farmers, however, the slow growth movement proved too little, too late. Bob Grubb summed up the frustrations of many when he explained “I’m not a retired farmer. There’s no retirement to it. I’m a quit farmer. That’s the title that I have accepted.”

The construction of Dulles Airport and the suburbanization it brought with it raised the costs of dairy farming in Loudoun. Increased property values raised taxes, and the metropolitan labor market raised wages. As the number of dairy farms declined, it became more difficult to maintain the service infrastructure required to keep dairy farms running. Agricultural suppliers, veterinary services, herd testing services, milk haulers, and repairmen also faced declining business. As these supporting companies went out of business, dairy farmers had to travel longer and longer distances for basic services. Suburban newcomers could also cause a more direct type of conflict. As former extension agent William Harrison explained, suburban newcomers “say they want the bucolic look of Loudoun County and they want to keep the agriculture, but they won’t give you the time of day to take a piece of machinery up the road or spray something.”

Yet for all this, there were also substantial pressures from within the dairy industry that pushed farmers out of business. An entirely new milk distribution system emerged in the postwar years in which supermarkets replaced milk deliverymen and paper cartons replaced milk bottles. When combined with refrigerated bulk-tank trucks, these changes nationalized milk markets and thereby severed the economic ties of proximity that had bound dairy farms to the city. Even as the costs of dairy production on the metropolitan fringe increased, the economic benefits of doing so decreased. At the same time the production side continued to move toward

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71 Bob Grubb Interview.
industrialized, confined feeding operations in which large dairy herds, usually over 200 animals, were given feed grown elsewhere. In exchange for economies of scale, these operations dealt with concentrated wastes. The landscapes they created were worlds apart from the bucolic images on dairy cartons. For this reason and for economic reasons, these producers located their operations far from the metropolitan fringe.\textsuperscript{73}

![Dairy Production in Loudoun](attachment:image.png)

Figure 5.1: Dairy Production in Loudoun. Agricultural Census. County Data. Loudoun County.

These changes continued to drive dairy farms out of business and to force those who remained to increase the scale of their operations. The same trends held true across Virginia.\textsuperscript{74}


\textsuperscript{74} Gerald B. White and R. G. Kline, \textit{Grade-A Dairy Farm Growth in Virginia}, Research Division Bulletin 102 (Blacksburg, Va.: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, June 1975).
Loudoun’s most progressive dairy farms focused on their competitive advantage in breeding, producing some of the finest Holsteins in the country. Breeding allowed dairy and cattle farmers to leverage their expertise and industry connections to continue to turn a profit. Nor was Loudoun immune to the generational difficulties common to farming across the nation. Few farm children were willing to take on the long hours, hard work, crushing debt, and uncertainty of farming, and few Loudoun farmers were willing to wish the farming life on their children. The farm became a retirement plan for farmers rather than a legacy to pass on to the next generation.

Rising corn prices in the late 1970s were a temptation too strong for many local dairy farmers.

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75 William Harrison Interview. Most famous was the bull Round Oak Rag Apple Elevation. Less than a decade after his sale in 1966 an industry publication labeled him the “world’s most sought after bull.” He would ultimately have 104,434 children. Harrison, McComb, and Miller, Loudoun’s Dairy Industry, 44, 64; and Richard Denier, “The Impact of Elevation in Europe,” Holstein Friesian World, April 10, 1978, p. 1044.
who sold their dairy equipment, put their land in corn, and may have even slept in till 6 a.m. for
the first time in decades. Industry consolidation and industrial production culminated in a sharp
decline in milk prices from 1975 to 1980 and a federally funded dairy buyout program in 1985,
both of which convinced the handful of remaining dairy farmers to abandon the industry.
Farming in Loudoun was for those who already had money. It was no longer a way to make
money.

Jim Brownell’s story provides a sense of the way these forces combined to transform
Loudoun’s agricultural economy. Brownell and his wife, Mac, chose life on a dairy farm. The
grandson of northern Pennsylvania farmers, Jim was born in Washington, D.C. His visits to the
family farm during the Great Depression allowed him to enjoy the freedoms and contact with
nature of farm life without its drudgery. As he put it, “I was a city boy, no question about that,
but every summer I went up to . . . the old family farm, and then I decided I wanted to be
outside.” After attending the University of Maryland and serving in World War II, he married
and spent several years learning the dairy trade at various farms in the counties surrounding
Washington while Mac commuted to her job at the FBI headquarters. After searching all across
the metropolitan area, they found a seven-hundred-acre estate in Western Loudoun whose owner,
Frank McComb, was willing to cut the price for a young family starting out. Jim and Mac
Brownell began farming in Loudoun County in 1959, just as the condemnation letters went out
for Dulles Airport.

76 William Harrison Interview.
77 Harrison, McComb, and Miller, Loudoun’s Dairy Industry, 15, 21, 88-89, William Harrison Interview, and Maria
78 See, for example, Bob Grubb Interview; Curtis Poland Interview; Jimmy Spring, Interview by Allison Weiss,
November 2, 2001, Lovettsville, Va., LHFM; Curtis and Betty Laycock Interview; Mac and Jim Brownell
Interview; and Sydnor Francis, Interview by Vivian Cholha, November 14, 1990, Folder 22, Box 1, LOHP.
79 Mac and Jim Brownell Interview.
Like most of the farmers who went into dairying in the county beginning in the 1920s, Jim Brownell viewed farming as a business and stayed abreast of agricultural innovation. He had a degree in animal husbandry and had done masters work in animal breeding. He rented land across the county and fed his cattle on alfalfa hay he raised himself. He was no romantic, but he maintained a strong agrarian attachment to the land. He recalled “you get a lot of personal satisfaction out of watching your animals grow and watching your crops grow. Like making a beautiful bale of hay or having a good looking crop of corn or a cow that does real well. . . . That’s good.” Brownell would become a leading voice for farmers coping with suburban growth as president of the Loudoun County Farm Bureau and eventually as a member of the county Board of Supervisors. From these positions of power, Brownell embodied southern, rural conservatism. He fought tooth and nail to keep taxes low, to resist the expansion of county services, including schools, and to keep political power in the agrarian and rural parts of the county. He was a major voice in the county’s decade-long attempt to slow the expansion of suburban development in Eastern Loudoun and the attempts to force suburbanites to pay higher taxes to pay for their services. 80

By the 1980s increasing overhead costs and debt service made holding on to the farm difficult. After decades of raising a family and managing a herd that peaked at 170 dairy cows, Brownell now faced the dimming prospects of passing the farm on to his kids. The oldest son moved to Virginia Beach. Their daughter, Susan, Brownell remembered, “was like my father whose greatest ambition was to get away from the farm.” Their second son, Bruce, also rejected the farm life. “He was born and raised on a dairy farm and he’s never milked a cow.” He chose instead to become a local developer, spending his energy planting farmland with subdivisions.

80 Mac and Jim Brownell Interview. See also Sarah Huntington and Gale Waldron eds., In Their Own Words: Recollections of an Earlier Loudoun (Lincoln, Va.: Meeting House Press, 2002), 7, 28.
The other two sons, Mark and Scott, both put in their time on the farm but eventually left as well. “They got disgusted with all the working and all the hours,” he recalled, “and the last one to leave, Scotty, he ran the thing for a while because I was involved in politics. . . . He had finally told [Mac] one day that he just couldn’t take it anymore. He just had to quit. The last boy quit, and we left.” The Brownell family sold out in 1991. Mac and Jim seemed resigned to their children’s choices. When asked if they hoped one would have stayed on the farm, Brownell replied, “Pretty hard to wish that on them. It’s hard to make money farming. . . . You’d like the boys to be farmers, but the figures don’t work out.” Jim Brownell’s story helps to sketch the social world and experiences of rural landowners in postwar Loudoun County. Western Loudoun’s fertile soils, proximity to urban markets, and the county’s long history of progressive agriculture underwrote this prosperity for a time. Forces from both within and without agriculture undermined their farming.  

Loudoun County farmers faced the same social and economic changes that all American farmers faced in the postwar years. Mechanization, improved transportation, school consolidation, farm consolidation, increased capital costs, regional specialization, the decline of home production, and the migration of farmers and their children from the countryside to the town all played out on the local stage. In Loudoun, these rural transformations took place in a suburban setting. Where anti-sprawl rhetoric capitalizes on popular images of static, traditional agrarian life hopelessly overwhelmed by subdivisions, the rural social world of Loudoun County had already dramatically changed by 1962 and continued to be subject to forces of an often ruthless agricultural economy.

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81 Mac and Jim Brownell Interview and Koklanaris, “Selling Out, but Not Out of the Family.”
82 On school consolidation, see Poland, Frontier to Suburbia, 345-350.
From the perspective of agricultural history, there is a profound irony in the movement of so many Americans to the pastoral landscapes of the metropolitan fringe. As Kendra Smith-Howard describes it:

The pastoral vision [of dairy farms] was the same idealized landscape that drew many suburbanites to the countryside in the 1950s and 1960s. But what these newcomers rarely understood was that the place they encountered was a place of modernization and mass production, not a landscape locked into a static past. Some of the cows grazing on the pasture, viewed by onlookers as pastoral symbols of a more relaxed life, were experiencing their own daily grind, commuting to the milking parlor and punching the clock twice a day at milking time. Smith-Howard goes on to emphasize the extent to which both suburban development and modern dairy production were products of an economy and society of mass production and mass consumption.

The remainder of this chapter uses her insight to anchor an examination of the attempts to preserve farmland and open space within Loudoun County from the 1960s to the 1980s. As the agricultural and economic supports for these pastoral landscapes increasingly came under threat from both without and within, Loudoun preservationists, gentlemen farmers, and suburbanites united to save and protect the agrarian landscapes that had brought them to the county in the first place. In doing so they formed an often tenuous alliance with farmers themselves, for whom the need to protect the value of their land trumped their desire to sustain and preserve agricultural land use. What was designed as a movement to preserve and protect farmland became, in practice, a movement to preserve and protect open space. Loudoun preserved a form of agriculture that fit most easily within urban and suburban conceptions of the countryside.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Loudoun County’s planning department and board of supervisors retained their strong agrarian political commitments. These entities used the policy tools at their disposal to contain suburban growth in the east and to limit the county’s tax

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burdens. These tools were the result of the earlier efforts of preservationists. As chapter 1
detailed, a small coterie of garden club activists had convinced the county to establish a planning
commission, rural zoning, a billboard ordinance, and a subdivision ordinance during the 1940s as
a means to protect the countryside from commercialism and early developments. These acts
passed in spite of resistance by rural conservatives who saw them as unnecessary expansions of
government power and an erosion of property rights. By 1955, with suburban growth beginning
to take hold and the threat of a Potomac Dam and the possibility of a PEPCO power plant
hanging in the air, the Loudoun supervisors began to take planning for growth seriously. That
year they adopted a memorandum of objectives that laid out in broad terms the county’s
principles for dealing with metropolitan expansion. In summary, these goals committed the
county government to “preserve the prevailing agricultural character of the county” and to
protect taxpayers from the “harmful results of haphazard and ill-advised” population growth. 84

This commitment to protecting the county’s farmers was also the central aim of the
county’s plans to cope with Dulles Airport and the suburban growth it would bring. This county
plan focused growth east of Route 15, where the Potomac Interceptor and water from Fairfax
City’s dams on Goose Creek could provide the required services to attract not just subdivisions,
but also the industries required to pay for them. The 168 square miles of Eastern Loudoun would
absorb new growth. This allowed Eastern Loudoun farmers to reap the final harvest of their land
through its sale to developers while protecting Western Loudoun from development. As long as
Western Loudoun farmers continued to enjoy agricultural prosperity and to remain distant from
the growth pressures of Eastern Loudoun, such a plan was politically feasible. 85

85 Pratt, “Problems Facing Loudoun Today” and “Scrap New Land Plan, Public Tells Planners,” LTM, March 14,
The problem came as growth pressures continued to move west, tax bills continued to rise, and the agricultural economy made farming less profitable. Farmers in the west increasingly wanted to exercise their right to sell out, a thought that horrified preservationists and those who had moved to Western Loudoun for the pastoral landscapes. This issue first came to a head when 130 landowners in the Lovettsville district of west-central Loudoun petitioned the county supervisors to rezone twelve square miles of rural land from the county’s three-acre minimum to one acre. Robert P. McClain, their supervisor, explained that it was unfair for landowners in the east to make a killing on land sales while the west was responsible for maintaining the county’s agrarian landscapes. “About the only thing these people have ever gotten from Loudoun County is their tax bills,” he declared. He and his constituents wanted something more. They wanted to be able to sell parts of their land to developers and cash in on the county’s dramatic growth. The supervisors voted 4 to 2 against the proposal. 86

These issues would swirl around the county’s proposed comprehensive plan later that year. The plan took on the impossible task of balancing the desire of rural landowners to maintain their property values with the demands of gentlemen farmers and the growing coterie of preservationists who wanted to limit growth, protect agriculture, and preserve open space. Planning director Beckham Dickerson submitted his department’s proposal to the planning commission in May. It continued the county’s plans to focus growth east of Route 15. At the same time, however, it conceded the eventual demise of the farming industry everywhere but the far southwest, around Middleburg, and north of Leesburg, toward Waterford, Taylorstown, and Lucketts. The remainder of Western Loudoun would remain in large-lot zoning for those willing to pay for the opportunity to live in the countryside. These large lots would keep the required services sparse and the general pastoral look of the land while allowing farmers to reap their final

harvest by subdividing their farms. At August hearings on the plan, preservationists from Waterford and along Goose Creek, centers of exurban settlement, were the strongest opponents. They called for ten-to-twenty acre zoning to more completely protect their scenery from development. This, in turn, inspired fierce condemnation from farmers who feared what such zoning restrictions would do to the resale value of their property. The plan ultimately passed in December with an amendment from the supervisors that reaffirmed the county’s commitment to the “protection and maintenance of agriculture for its own sake. . . [as] a desirable part of our economy.”

In light of these debates, such a statement rings hollow. Whether these farms were subdivided into lots of twenty acres, three acres, or one acre mattered little from the perspective of farmland preservation. Large rural lots were, in the parlance of the day, “too small to sow, too large to mow.” It kept the land from being developed into subdivisions and thereby decreased the county’s tax burden. It also protected the pastoral look of the countryside. It did so, however, without preserving the farm. The county’s move toward large-lot zoning protected open space for its economic, aesthetic, and, increasingly, its environmental benefits. The supervisors used the tools at their disposal, which were limited, and their funds, which were even more constrained, to craft a plan that attempted to balance the demands for open space and development while at the same time keeping taxes low. The resulting plan encouraged the subdivision of farmland into large lot rural homes for Washington commuters and those wanting to enjoy country life and open space. The county did not have the power or the political support

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to preserve agriculture. The best it could manage was the preservation of open space through zoning. 88

Neither farmers nor preservationists were satisfied with this solution. B. Powell Harrison, a local blue-blooded member of the Virginia gentry and a preservationist, proposed an idea that would have a far-reaching impact on the preservation of the Loudoun countryside. With further development looming, he proposed to fly the county supervisors to England to study that country’s highly successful land-use controls and farmland preservation programs. Harrison first brought up this idea while eating lunch with Arthur Arundel, the owner of the _Loudoun Times Mirror_. The next day Arundel offered $5,000 to help make it happen. Harrison made a few phone calls and had the rest of the $25,000 needed by that night. He convinced the director of the National Association of Counties and the executive director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, who was also a fellow Leesburg resident and a good friend, to come. Both organizations would act as official sponsors. Robert Stripe, a University of North Carolina law professor who had spent a year in England studying land-use law, agreed to take part and connected Harrison with Graham Ashworth, the chairman of the Northwest region of England’s Civic Trust. County supervisors from both Loudoun and neighboring Fauquier County, their spouses, planning officials, and five journalists—forty-two people in all—boarded a plane in January 1972 and set off to study preservation in England. 89

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89 The decision to include the Fauquier Supervisors had as much to do with protecting Loudoun politicians from accusations of receiving special favors from slow growth advocates as it did with concern over Fauquier’s future development. B. Powell Harrison, _Protecting Virginia’s Piedmont_ (Leesburg, Va.: Piedmont Press & Graphics, 1994), 4-6; A.G. and Agnes Grant and Burr Powell Harrison, Interview by Eugene M. Scheel, January 17, 1992, Leesburg, Va., Folder 1, Box 2, LCOHP, 19; and Raflo, _Iron Gates_, 242, “Supervisors Prepare for Tour of England,” _LTM_, January 13, 1972, A1.
Once there, the Virginians toured historic country homes, drove across the lush, rolling hills, and listened as British planners outlined their policies. The British countryside these Loudouners toured had been protected from urban encroachment by a landmark piece of Parliamentary legislation: the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947. The English Parliament had passed this piece of legislation in response to a widespread belief, as historian Jeremy Burchardt explains, that the “loss of rural land [was] damaging not only to agriculture, but at a more fundamental level to national identity itself.” The English believed that the preservation of open agricultural land was essential to the very survival of their culture. This act effectively nationalized the development value of rural land, made all such land tax exempt, and established strict land-use planning over its use and development. Developers who gained approval were required to pay a 40 percent tax on the initial development value of the land to the local community to offset the increased service costs. These strict controls put in place by the British system solved the most acute problems faced by metropolitan fringe counties in the United States.90

Powell’s investment paid off. Touring these iconic landscapes that shared so much with Loudoun’s farmland and Hunt Country impressed and even inspired the county supervisors. Here was living proof that urban growth could coexist, side-by-side, with picturesque agricultural landscapes. On a more practical level, county planners and the supervisors saw in the English model a solution to their most pressing governmental problems: paying for services and providing tax relief for farmers. There were a few problems, though. The English system worked because it restricted the property rights of rural landowners and placed strong planning agencies in authority over developers. Attempting either of these would have stirred up broad and spirited

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protest from both the development community and rural landowners. The second barrier was financial. The British system compensated rural landowners for the loss of land value that came with the loss of development rights. Loudoun did not have that kind of money. Finally, counties in Virginia did not have the legal authority to enact this type of land-use regulation. Adopting the British system in Loudoun was a political, legal, and financial impossibility. This did not stop preservationists and these local politicians from adopting incremental programs over the next ten years that attempted to achieve some of the benefits of the British system. Most prominent among these were transferrable development rights, scenic easements, and the land use tax. Each drew on both the British precedent and precedent from other counties across the nation. The goal of each was to preserve agricultural open space without saddling the county government with a major financial burden.

Of all the pressures driving Loudoun farmers out of the industry, taxation was the most emotionally charged. Farmer’s local property tax bills grew exponentially in direct correlation with the expansion of development in Eastern Loudoun. Taxes on an Ashburn farm, for instance, rose from $418 to $529 to $3,540 in 1963, 1967, and 1972 respectively. The figures for a Leesburg area farm were $1,181, $1,993, and $3,501 respectively. Farmers cited tax increases anywhere from 200 to 800 percent. Such rises were common across Loudoun and across metropolitan fringe counties in general during the period. These tax increases were the result of increased valuations, which were, in turn, the county’s response to suburban demands for increased services. It is a truism, confirmed by numerous studies, that residential development is a tax loss for suburban counties. A 1984 study of Loudoun, for instance, found that for every dollar of tax revenue collected, suburban areas required $1.28 in services. Agricultural areas, in

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91 B. Powell Harrison to the Virginia Advisory Legislative Council Committee for the Study of Land Use Policies, December 2, 1972, Small UVA; and “Vote Scheduled Friday on Land Use Taxation,” LTM, September 28, 1972, A1, A16.
contrast, required only $.11.\textsuperscript{92} As the county raised taxes and kept evaluations in line with property values, the county’s largest landowners had to foot the costs of suburban development. Farmers subsidized suburban growth in exchange for the rising values of their land.\textsuperscript{93}

This issue became acute by the end of the 1960s as tax valuations and therefore taxes continued to rise. In 1970 bitter complaints from farmers convinced the county to cut $1 million from its budget in order to stave off tax increases.\textsuperscript{94} Such victories were little more than a stop-gap measure in light of the larger economic trends. Just as importantly, rural landowners were losing their grip on political power, a fact that threatened to leave them at the mercy of suburban voters. Political power was shifting to the east. Symbolic of this was a 1973 school bond that passed while winning only 4 of the county’s 22 election districts, all of them in the east. That section could push through whatever debt its suburban residents demanded.\textsuperscript{95} As Loudoun farmers entered the 1970s, they faced the enviable problem of increased land values and the tax burden that went with it. Few farmers voiced their excitement at this fact. More common were comments like those of Purcellville-area landowner Carl Stowers:

> So many people move to Loudoun for its ‘country atmosphere, easy living, and slower pace,’ but no sooner do they unpack than they start wanting more police protection (mainly for the problems they brought with them); better, larger, fancier schools, public transportation; and publicly funded recreation and then they want to tax to death the very people who developed the county, who have been here for years and want to stay for a few years more seeking some kind of satisfaction and moderate living from agriculture. Well fella, we’re paying for your police protection, your schools and libraries your recreation—and you’re complaining and want more.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{92}The American Farmland Trust figures are slightly higher for agricultural land, but follow the same pattern. American Farmland Trust, Farmland Information Center Fact Sheet: cost of Community Services Studies (Northampton, Mass.: American Farmland Trust, 2006).

\textsuperscript{93} Eleanor Adams, a newcomer to the countryside and a member of the Loudoun League of Women Voters, conducted a series of nineteen interviews with farmers about the rise in property tax. Each voiced frustration at their rising costs and most supported the LUT as a way to deal with it. Eleanor Adams, \textit{Working Farmers: Survey Reveals they Want to Stay that Way} (n.p.: c.1973).


These rural landowners felt ill-used and imposed upon by both suburbanites and the local government even as the business of farming was increasingly competitive. Many chose to sell out to developers or urbanites moving to the country. For the county’s preservationists, what was at stake in this was more than the loss of farming as a way of life. The sale and development of agricultural land also threatened the persistence of the countryside that made Loudoun Washington’s “garden spot.” In light of the British example, these preservationists and the county supervisors looked for ways to limit the tax liabilities of the county’s farmers.

Farmland preservation became a national issue during the 1970s, as concerns over resource scarcity and population growth combined with anger over suburban sprawl to provide the political will to develop programs to preserve open space and agricultural production. The most popular policy tool to come from this was land use taxation (LUT)—a program that assessed farmland based on its productive value rather than its potential value if developed (best use value). Maryland became the first state to enact LUT legislation in 1956. By 1970, forty-one states had passed some kind of LUT law. Counties, however, were slow to embrace LUT laws because they threatened the county’s bottom line and therefore would require raising taxes on suburban voters—the surest route to political suicide.97

Loudoun supervisors, especially those from western districts, began exploring the possibilities of easing farmers’ tax burdens as early as 1965. The state’s 1966 passage of the Open Space Land Act allowed state agencies to accept donations of development rights but did not give counties the power the enact LUT.98 For that, the county would have to wait until 1972.

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when Virginia governor Linwood Holton signed the state’s enabling legislation for LUT. Under the law, landowners in participating counties who had at least five acres and a gross income of $500 a year qualified to have their tax calculated based on agricultural use. If landowners chose to develop their land, they would have to pay back taxes equal to the difference between their assessed taxes and the LUT rate plus interest.99

The law was designed to protect farmers. In practice, though, it was difficult to find effective ways to differentiate between farmers, gentlemen farmers, owners of farmettes, and speculators. The shifting nature of farming in the county often made these overlapping categories. Debate over the bill in Richmond pointed out many of these problems. Dr. Lyle C. Bryant, an economist from George Mason College, testified, “[i]t is my guess that the bulk of the tax benefits would go to real estate investors, typically already well-to-do, who are using farming as a cloak to help them save taxes while they enjoy appreciation in the value of their land holdings”100 Agricultural economists thought the minimum acreage and income levels were ridiculously low in an industry where profitable farms were hundreds of acres. The Loudoun Times-Mirror added its weight to the opposition, warning, “the genuine working farmer is apparently going to get his critically needed break, but so is the wealthy land manipulator who caused many of the local tax problems to begin with” and who would “sit back, play farmer, and

99 Dave Lamie and Gordon Groover, “A Citizens Guide to the Use Value Taxation Program in Virginia,” Virginia Cooperative Extension, Publication 444-037, November 2000; Monica Licher and Gordon Groover, Use-Value Taxation in Virginia: A Brief Description,” Horizons 18 (January/February 2006); 1971, Code of Virginia, Title § 58.1-3229–58.1-3244; and Raflo, Iron Gates, 226-28; On paper, Texas was actually six years ahead of Virginia in adopting a land use taxation amendment. Yet that state’s 1966 law’s restrictions stifled participation. It only applied to farm and ranch land with one owner whose primary occupation was agriculture. The law was poorly publicized and ultimately did little to prevent the development of farmland. In practice, one study found that, in 1970, only 1,053 of the state’s 205,109 farmers could have qualified. Where land use taxation became a major bulwark in preserving open space from development, similar programs had a negligible impact in Montgomery County. House of Representatives Intergovernmental Affairs Committee, Texas Land Resources: Problems and Possibilities, 64th Texas Legislature, Box 19, Citizens Environmental Coalition Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston, Tx.
enjoy land use taxation benefits.” Who exactly counted as a “genuine farmer” was, of course, up to the reader to discern.  

Support for the program came from farmers, developers, and preservationists. Powell Harrison and the Piedmont Environmental Council praised the LUT for restoring to farmers the freedom to remain in agriculture. He testified in Richmond that “[t]he Piedmont farmer is overworked, underpaid, overtaxed and not appreciated for the vital services he provides.” Exactly what those services were had changed a great deal from the agrarian producerism of earlier decades. When facing the imminent development of Dulles Airport, one Eastern Loudoun dairy farmer had warned, “If I closed down, it would mean the loss of thousands of gallons of milk to the Washington area. I have an 80-cow herd, and I ship milk to Washington every day.” In a suburbanizing county, during a period of agricultural surplus, such arguments carried little weight. The services provided by the farmer were not in what he produced, but in the fact that he did not sell out. Farmers kept taxes low by keeping their land in production. Just as importantly, they also produced the amenity of open space and the cultural and environmental benefits that came with it. Pastures and fields were a valuable commodity in Western Loudoun. The LUT had no power to prevent development or the selling of agricultural land. It could only remove an incentive for farmers to do these things.

After five hours of public hearings, the Loudoun supervisors voted on September 27, 1972, to join the LUT program. The final vote was split down the middle of the county, with Western Loudoun supervisors supporting it and Eastern Loudoun opposed. The county became

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102 Harrison, Protecting Virginia’s Piedmont, 4.  
104 Raflo, Iron Gates, 212.
one of only four jurisdictions in the state to do so in the first year of the program. The state’s legislation had emphasized its power to protect open space, scenic values, and agricultural production. The measure passed locally primarily based on its economic impact. Western Loudoun landowners, after all, had the most to gain from the program that would substantially cut their tax burden.

The passage of the LUT caused a rush of applications from rural landowners eager for tax relief. The county received 288 in the first weeks after its passage. As expected, the county’s largest corporate landholders—including Northern Virginia Development Company and IBM—lined up to secure their tax breaks. County leaders were able to push a bill through the state legislature in 1973 that closed the LUT to some speculators by tying the tax break to the county plan. Even with these reforms, the county still had to find a way to make up $518,000 in lost revenue from the LUT. They did so through a tax increase in 1973. The program continued to grow over the decade. The local soil conservation office had 937 cooperating landowners on file by 1976, most of whom had signed up in order to qualify for the LUT. That figure would reach 1,500 by 1980.

In spite of the reforms, the effect of the LUT was to subsidize speculators as much as farmers, a fact that even Powell Harrison, the LUT’s most active booster, admitted. Speculators

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106 Fauquier and Prince William Counties also passed the LUT. Fairfax County held hearings on the subject in 1973, but ultimately voted against it. Netherton et al, Fairfax County, Virginia, 566.
107 “Crunch on Soils Data Slows Land Use Work,” LTM, October, 19, 1972, A1, A2.
109 This bill required land to have been in agriculture for five years prior to qualifying. It also set higher production requirements and forced landowners to cooperate with the local soil conservation service to develop plans for their land. Most importantly, the bill allowed counties to link assessments to the county’s zoning plans, thereby ensuring that land zoned for development could not reap the same benefits as land zoned for agriculture. “Assembly Gets Bill Amending Land Us Tax,” LTM, January 25, 1973, A1; and “Stiff Land Use Tax Standards Released,” LTM, August 16, 1973, p. 1, 16.
could buy agricultural land, maintain it in agricultural production for five years while waiting for
the land to appreciate, and then develop it. Harrison was willing to accept this practice as a gain
for the county. In this he was in the minority. Most in Eastern Loudoun continued to resent
what they saw as county-maintained tax shelters for developers and gentlemen farmers. For those
in Loudoun who hoped to continue to farm on the same scale that they had in the 1950s, the LUT
was a poor savior. Edwin Potts, for instance, remembered

The sad part of [the growth in the county] is all these people moving out here are working in
Washington... and they buy 3 acres or 10 acres, and they call that land a farm. Back when they
put the farm use tax laws into effect to save the farms... they've got so many loopholes built into
that law... So they put four or five horses on [their land] and spend some money in veterinary
fees and buy some feed for these horses and they qualify for land use. They're the people that are
running the farmers out of business, and they're the people that are costing the county so much
revenue.

The LUT provided farmers with the freedom from the compulsion to sell, to use
Harrison’s language, yet it also gave them the freedom to wait for their right price. The
LUT removed one of the pressures farmers faced but could address neither the systemic
barriers to continued agricultural production nor the generational transitions facing
county farmers. The fact was that most Loudoun farmers would sell out anyway.

Farmland would pass to the hands of those who were willing to pay to maintain the land
in open space while they farmed with money rather than for money.

One of the underappreciated impacts of the LUT was to more deeply entrench the
division within the county between East and West. The LUT estimated the productive value of
land based on the productive capabilities of the land, which were in turn based on the USDA’s
soil classification system. In practice this meant stripping the county’s historical connections to
the city from estimates of its agricultural value. Proximity to the city and its markets had been

112 B. P. and A. G. Harrison Interview, 30.
113 Edwin Potts Interview. See also Henry Stowers Interview and Mac and Jim Brownell Interview.
114 On the limits of LUT laws, see Lehman, Public Values, Private Lands, 98-102.
the primary factor in the valuation of agricultural land into the 1960s. Changes in agricultural marketing and transportation combined with the rising importance of proximity in determining the land’s development potential had eroded the importance of proximity to agricultural land values. The LUT entrenched this trend in policy. The LUT provided the greatest benefit to the owners of the most productive soils of Western Loudoun. By making soil the criteria of agricultural productivity, the LUT made environmental criteria rather than agricultural productivity the central criteria of agricultural preservation.

Fears over the loss of the county’s rural land continued to mount during the 1970s and into the early 1980s as the national farm crisis took its toll on Loudoun’s already struggling farms. In order to cope with growth, the county began updating its comprehensive plan. Between November 1982 and July 1983, a committee of twenty-eight county residents, including farmers, businessmen, suburbanites, and preservationists, hammered out the details of what would become the county’s Rural Land Management Plan (RLMP). The overarching goal, as explained by John Dugan, Loudoun’s director of planning, zoning, and community development, was to “preserve the cultural, social, economic, aesthetic and environmental amenities provided by agricultural land use and reduce the economic and land use burdens on farmers that result from premature conversion of farmland.” The county would, in other words, attempt to protect the farmer so that the farmer could continue to provide the public amenity of his agricultural land use. Farming was important not because of what it produced, but because of what it maintained—agricultural open space.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ League of Women Voters (hereinafter LWV), Visions: Land and Community in Loudoun County, Virginia, conference proceedings, March 5 and 6, 1982, 8 (quotation); Preservation Society of Loudoun County (hereinafter PSLC) Newsletter, February 1984, Vol. 10, no. 1, Scrapbook, 1983-1984, Box 2, Preservation Society of Loudoun County Collection, 1973 - 2003 (hereinafter PSLC Collection), TBL; and “A Brief Summary of the History of Land Use Planning.”
Where the county’s large-lot zoning had promoted the carving up of the countryside into ten acre farmettes and country homes, the RLMP called for clustering new growth into rural villages. These villages, both historical and modern, would allow newcomers to enjoy the countryside without saddling the county with the infrastructural costs of low-density sprawl and without gobbling up agricultural land. Here again county leaders sought to emulate the British countryside, this time with a new policy tool: transferable development rights (TDR). The legal frameworks required to preserve open space and agricultural land in Virginia had been in place since the 1966 Open-Space Land Act. Any landowner could donate a conservation easement on his land to a non-profit or state governmental agency equal to the difference between the development value and the agricultural value of his land. These easements, which were long-term leases or permanent donations, provided landowners with a large tax write-off as well as a yearly drop in the taxes they would pay on the land. They ensured that the property would remain undivided and undeveloped. For those who could afford to donate such a large amount of money, conservation easements were a useful tool to preserve open space and agricultural land. Western Loudoun foxhunters used this tool extensively beginning in 1968. By 1980, 20,000 acres within the PEC’s territory was under easement. For farmers whose retirement depended on securing a steady stream of income on their land, such donations were out of the question. Much of this land was already moving out of agricultural production. The question was whether it would become large-lot subdivisions or remain in open space. The greatest barrier to the preservation of Loudoun’s countryside, then, was financial.

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116 LWV, Visions, 8-9.
118 PEC Newsreporter, October 1981; On tax policy and easements in Virginia, see PEC Newsreporter, May/June, 1981, p. 1. For an example of the amount of money involved, see Mellon, Reflections in a Silver Spoon, Appendix E.
TDR solved this problem by having developers pay the costs of farmland and open space preservation. Whenever a developer wanted to begin a new project in the east, the county offered him the option of increased housing density in exchange for his leasing or purchase of conservation easements on land in the west. Developers thereby secured a greater return on their investment by selling more lots. Farmers received the payout they required. The county saved money by not having to pay for services for development in the west and protected some land from future development.119 TDR promised to achieve some of the benefits of the British program, without transgressing the fundamental Virginia political principle of property rights. The first proposed use of TDR in October 1984 was slated to allow 112 extra homes within the development of Countryside in exchange for the preservation of 350 acres of farmland north of Leesburg.120 Unfortunately, the program required enabling legislation from the state to allow both the leasing of development rights and their transfer. The county supervisors voted five to three to request such legislation. Local state legislators and home builders were in support. The state’s Farm Bureau took a neutral position. Here Virginia’s political conservatism intervened, and the bill did not pass, forcing Loudoun preservationists and government leaders back to the drawing board. They were unable to make any farther progress before the county’s political pendulum swung toward pro-growth and development, closing the door on additional farmland preservation measures.121

Loudoun’s embrace of English planning models was a strong motivating factor in the county’s experiments with farmland preservation. This embrace was not without costs. The

British system reaffirmed deeply held romantic ideals about rural life that no longer fit the realities of modern agriculture. As historian Jeremy Burchardt argues, this legislation sought to protect “an unchanging, old-fashioned, ‘quaint’ countryside” where urban people could take refuge from the demands of modern life. English planning rested on an impossible dream: “that the countryside could be radically modernized [for agricultural production] and yet remain an unchanging refuge from modernity at the same time.” Rural tourism and landscape preservation obscured the “radical forces of modernization at work beneath the relatively unchanging visual appearance of the countryside.” The act’s aim was less the protection of agriculture than the preservation of a countryside for urban enjoyment. Loudoun preservationists had already turned down this road in the 1940s and 1950s. In drawing their inspiration and preservation ideas from the British system, Loudoun County placed this skewed vision of rural life at the heart of its preservation efforts. In attempting to preserve the county’s agricultural landscapes as open space, PEC and its allies buried the realities of industrializing, pesticide-dependent, agricultural production under a layer of romantic agrarianism. Agricultural land was open space, and open space protected the environment by promoting the recharging of aquifers, protected the county’s pocket book through tourist promotion and limited service demands, and protected the county’s cultural landscape and aesthetics by reaffirming its pastoral reputation. Yet agriculture was more than open space. It had also been the backbone of a rural culture and economy that did not survive suburbanization. Open space built on earlier preservation efforts in the county in furthering the role of agricultural land as something to be consumed rather than as the landscape of rural life.122

122 Burchardt, Paradise Lost, 158 (quotation), 163 (second quotation); On romantic agrarianism and urban romanticization of the countryside, see Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), and David B. Danbom, “Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America,” Agricultural History 65 (Fall 1991), 1-12.
Even as the political fight to preserve farmland and open space simmered in Loudoun County, development pressures and trends within agriculture continued to erode the economic position of the county’s dairy and general farmers. The PEC’s monthly newsletter put it well: “[i]n the farming community, there is uncertainty and ambivalence. Uncertainty about how long farming will be able to continue; ambivalence about [their] personal commitment to farming.”123 There were certainly some who remained adamantly opposed to abandoning their land and their business.124 For most, however, this was not the case. When farmers realized that suburban expansion was not slowing down, they abandoned their opposition to growth and instead supported policies that inflated the price of their land.125 The story of the decline of this type of agriculture in Loudoun is the story of hundreds of farm families each navigating the pressures of changing generations, suburban development, and industrializing agriculture. The experience of the Poland family is representative of the experiences of many Loudoun farmers.

Born in 1912, Charles Poland was a progressive farmer whose family roots in the county went back to the antebellum period. He and his wife, Ina, owned and operated a diversified farm just southwest of Dulles Airport. Charles started a hatchery during World War II to meet Washington’s growing demand for eggs. This business did not survive into the 1950s, and Poland began a second career as a home builder as a way to supplement his farm income. He continued to expand this business until 1973. At that point the family chose to sell off 94 acres of land to fund Charles’s retirement. They received $100,000, or ten times what they had originally paid for it. The land would ultimately end up in the hands of a Chinese investment group. The rest of the land they rented out to a company that raised beef cattle. Charles, Jr., who had secured

123 PEC Newsreporter, January/February 1981, 6.
125 Jim Brownell Interview in Huntington and Waldron eds., In Their Own Words, 28.
a job as a university professor in Fairfax County, inherited the farm and continues to defend what is left of it from suburban encroachment.\footnote{Charles Preston Poland Sr. and Charles Preston Poland Jr., \textit{A Forgotten Way of Life} (Indianapolis, Ind.: Dog Ear Publishing, 2012).}

Loudoun farm families continually renegotiated their economic position within a changing rural landscape. Off-farm labor and changes in production were part of rural life in the county before the construction of Dulles Airport, and they remained so afterward. The decline of this type of farm life did not come with the suddenness of a tidal wave or earthquake. Metropolitan development eroded the economic and social foundations of this type of agricultural production even as it provided economic opportunity to rural people. Programs like the LUT and TDR set up a safety valve to remove some of the pressures that were pushing these families to abandon agricultural production and to sell their land. In practice, however, these programs were incapable of preventing the transformation of Loudoun’s agriculture. Loudoun’s attempts to preserve open space were unable to preserve the agricultural economy as it had been. Just as in England, these programs, when they were successful, preserved the countryside. They could not preserve rural life.

Dairy farming and general farming were both in serious decline by the early 1980s. The cost-price squeeze, rising property values, difficulties finding labor, an aging farm population, and six-figure offers for their land pushed and pulled farmers out of business. Dairy farms had the highest costs and required the most labor. They were the hardest hit. In the land surrounding Round Hill, a rural hamlet in Western Loudoun, for instance, only one of the dozen or so dairies that had thrived there remained by this point. One had become a landscape company. Another was now the development of Hillwood Estates. One became an up-scale golf-course community. Three others were in the hands of developers. A seventh was awaiting sale once its owner
died. The Western Loudoun countryside was under development. Farming of every sort was under strain in the east. The decline of farming brought its share of heartache. When farmwife Joan Moore told of the auction of her Hunt Country farm, she added her story to the tens of thousands of those across the country who lost their land in the farm crisis of the 1980s.

Basically what occurred, of course farm prices were down, all produce was down, beef was down, and what was more important were the land values in Loudoun County went out of sight. Could we have convinced the cows to have triplets, a time or two a year, we might have stayed in it. But you couldn’t. We had eight children to educate, and we couldn’t do it. And that was pathetic. It was one of the worst days of my life.

Her husband left the farm life and went into the real estate industry.

The decline of full-time, large-scale agricultural production that accelerated during the 1980s cast a long shadow over the political and social landscape of Loudoun County. Preservationists, local politicians, and even suburban newcomers hearkened to tales of sorrow and displacement from the county’s grizzled agrarians. Theirs is certainly a story worth telling. Yet this decline was not the end of agriculture in Loudoun County. In fact there were signs of hope as early as the 1970s. The number of farms in the county actually rebounded from its low of 714 in 1974 to 836 in 1978 and continued to climb. The amount of land in farms followed a similar pattern, creeping from a low of 216,574 in 1969 to a high of 228,503 in 1978 before sliding downward again. The average size of farms in Loudoun also peaked in 1974 at 310 acres before rapidly declining to 273 acres in 1978 and 229 acres in 1982. Each of these trends points to the rise of smaller-scale, part-time agriculture in Loudoun. The passage of the Land Use Tax and large lot zoning both created strong incentives for rural landowners to turn to agriculture as a way to offset some of the costs of landownership. This rise in farmettes and hobby farms was also accompanied by a rise in so-called alternative agricultural crops. Proximity to the city had

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128 Joan Moore Interview.
created the local dairy industry and then contributed to its rapid decline. Proximity next fueled
the rise of a new metropolitan farming industry that could successfully produce and sell non-
traditional crops and rural tourism to urban and suburban consumers. Vineyards, specialty hay
and horse feed, Christmas trees, truck crops, pick-your-own berry farms and orchards, and,
above all, horse farms became the first fruits of a revitalized Loudoun agriculture that was well
established by the 1990s. Beef cattle and hay production retained their popularity as the easiest
ways to keep one’s land in agricultural use and for retired dairy farmers who were unwilling to
leave the land completely. For those seeking to make money in agriculture or to keep their small
rural acreages qualified for the LUT, however, the future was in alternative crops that could be
grown profitably on a fraction of the acreage required by grain, livestock, and dairy farms.\textsuperscript{129}
Substantial equity from their landownership, tax relief from measures like the LUT, and their
focus on specialty markets insulated them from the price swings that ruined so many traditional
farms by the early 1980s. These farms succeeded in spite of the fact that national and state level
extension service largely ignored them.\textsuperscript{130}

Their success was tied to the budding lifestyle markets related to agricultural tourism and
increased environmental awareness.\textsuperscript{131} Consumer-focused agricultural operations may have
drawn ridicule from weathered agrarians, but they were only continuing the same focus on urban
markets that had fueled the rise of the dairy industry in the first half of the twentieth century.
Farmers who figured out how to leverage their proximity to urban and suburban markets created
the beginnings of an alternate agricultural industry even as the county’s dairy industry withered.

\textsuperscript{129} Agricultural Census, Virginia, County Data; Wayne Rasmussen, in LWV, \textit{Visions}, 12 and \textit{PEC Newsreporter},
January/February 1981, 5.
\textsuperscript{130} Heimlich, “Agriculture and Urban Areas in Perspective”; Ralph E. Heimlich and Douglas H. Brooks,
\textit{Metropolitan Growth and Agriculture: Farming in the City’s Shadow}, Agricultural Economic Report 619,
VA-6B.
\textsuperscript{131} Heimlich and Brooks, \textit{Metropolitan Growth and Agriculture}, 6.
The majority of these metropolitan farmers were outsiders, those who had come to the countryside with money to invest, limited experience, and a willingness to embrace new business models. Quaker storekeeper and local curmudgeon Asa Moore put it well when he explained in 1971, “You got to be a person who comes back from somewhere else to have enough money to afford to farm [in Loudoun].” Alternative agriculture was a young man’s game and, increasingly, a young woman’s game. The older generations of farmers had little to do with it.132

The local extension office and county planners, in contrast, rushed to promote these new farming enterprises. One of the lessons the county supervisors and planners had learned from England was that tourist dollars were the financial foundation that made farmland and open space preservation work.133 They saw in alternate agriculture a way to expand this tourist industry. They hoped to have urban and suburban consumers directly underwrite the preservation of Western Loudoun’s countryside through agricultural tourism, farmers markets, and stable fees. The aesthetic and cultural value metropolitan consumers placed on the countryside became the glue that bound these disparate agricultural activities together with historical preservation and open space preservation into a tourist industry. Loudoun’s Blue Ridge foothills had first attracted tourists to the county’s healthful climate and picturesque views. Western Loudoun again took up this role beginning in the 1970s as urban and suburban consumers now were willing to pay to enjoy the county’s rolling farmland, historic buildings, and specialty foods.134

Horticulture was not a new pursuit in Western Loudoun. The region was part of an apple and peach belt that stretched from Winchester up the Shenandoah Valley and east to Leesburg. Orchard production thrived during the first half of the twentieth century. Competition from

134 John Dugan in LWV, Visions, 8.
northwestern growers, the increasing costs of production, and the scarcity of labor took their toll in the postwar years. By the early 1970s there was only one commercial orchard left in Loudoun.\(^{135}\) Even as this industry was fading, a handful of Loudoun farmers found another source of labor—suburbanites. A. F. Horning, a former employee of Capital Airlines, planted five acres of blackberries on his Round Hill farm. People visited from all across the metropolitan area to pay forty cents a quart to pick their own.\(^{136}\) Nurseries and Christmas trees were another popular alternative crop that enabled landowners to sell directly to consumers. The number of farms growing nursery and greenhouse products in Northern Virginia increased 21 percent from 1982 to 1987. Sales of their products tripled over the same period, from $.9 million to $2.7 million as suburban development in the region intensified. Peter Knop was one example of this type of modern Loudoun farmer. Knop maintained his day job as an investment banker even as he experimented in a grab-bag of various alternative crops including chestnuts, chinchillas, specialty garlic, and various ornamental plants. “[E]veryone says it can’t be done,” he boasted, but “we’re making money.” Christmas trees became a staple for this new breed of farmer.\(^{137}\) A landowner would plant 1,600 trees per acre, maintain them for seven to eight years with limited labor costs, and sell them for a small profit while keeping his land in LUT. By the 1990s there were close to seventy nursery and Christmas tree operations in the county including at least nineteen cut-your-own tree operations.\(^{138}\) The county’s farmers’ markets also grew during this period. Chip and Susan Planck, for instance, purchased a thirty-five-acre farm in the county in


\(^{136}\) Lind, Richardson and Rypka, Loudoun Harvest, 117-119.


1979 as a way to get their children into the countryside. The family opened Planck’s Wheatland Vegetable Farms and paid college kids to pick vegetables over the summers. Fred and Billie Hazel moved from Washington, D.C., to the county in 1962 in order to grow organic vegetables that she sold to suburbanites at the growing market in Leesburg.

None of these new crops generated the same amount of attention that grapes did. Vineyards and wineries were a perfect fit in a county that prided itself on its historic buildings, pastoral landscapes, and hunt-country mystique. It is fitting, then, that the first vineyard in the area opened across the county line from Middleburg in 1971. Archibald Magill Smith, Jr., was selling his first bottles in 1975. Lewis Parker, a retired pharmaceutical executive, became the first to commercially sell wines within Loudoun in 1984. A well-timed drought made 1991 a banner year for Virginia wines, putting the region’s wines on the national map and setting off a period of rapid growth in the industry. The county would add more than a dozen vineyards before the turn of the twenty-first century. There were forty in the county by 2014.

The impact of these eccentric newcomers was limited in the 1970s and into the 1980s. Berries, wines, Christmas trees, and vegetables did not suddenly transform the economic outlook for agriculture in Loudoun. Nor did these small-acreage operations do much to directly preserve open space. What they did provide was the germ of an agricultural tourist industry that would continue to expand in the county into the twenty-first century. They further cultivated an image of Loudoun as a place for wealthy Washingtonians to enjoy the good life. In this these alternative

139 Scheel, Loudoun Discovered, vol. 5, 50.
140 Huntington and Waldron eds., In Their Own Words, 32.
agricultural enterprises were overshadowed by the economic engine that sustained much of Loudoun’s agricultural land—the equestrian industry.

As chapter 1 detailed, Loudoun had a long and rich history of foxhunting and equestrian breeding. The county’s reputation only grew over the course of the twentieth century. When combined with neighboring Fauquier County, Loudoun was one of the most important equestrian areas in the nation—comparable to parts of the Kentucky Bluegrass, Saratoga, New York, and California’s San Fernando Valley. It was not just a place to raise and ride horses; it was a place to breed and train them. The county attracted elite trainers and breeders. The state’s largest training facility, the Middleburg Training Track complex, opened in 1956 and served between 100 and 125 horses every day by the 1970s.\(^{142}\) The Morven Park estate donated 300 acres of land in 1968 to found the Morven Park International Equestrian Institute as a national education center for horse trainers.\(^{143}\) The Leesburg estate would be the site of the Marion DuPont Scott Equine Medical Center, one of the world’s leading equine veterinary research centers, on 200 acres of Morven Park land beginning in 1984.\(^{144}\) In addition, the site played host to the annual Virginia Foxhound Club Show, the largest foxhound show in the world.\(^{145}\) It is difficult to find reliable statistics for the economic importance of the equestrian industry to Loudoun. What figures are available point to a substantial impact. One study in 1986 estimated that the 8,500 horses in Loudoun were worth $21 million dollars, a figure that was only a fraction of the money


\(^{144}\) The facility is run by the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, which worked in cooperation with the University of Maryland and Virginia Tech. “Land, $4 Million Given for Horse Clinic at Leesburg,” *Post*, August 14, 1980, C2 and Anne Crocroft, “Hospital for Horses Opening,” *Post*, October 11, 1984, VA-1, 3.

\(^{145}\) James L. Young, *Etiquette and Turnout in the Hunting Field of the Orange County Hunt* (The Plains, Va.: Orange County Hunt, Inc., 2002), Box Orange County, NSLM, 17.
invested.  The equestrian industry utilized an extensive formal and informal network of supporting staff, skilled laborers, and veterinary services. Horse owners supported feed producers, equipment dealers, tack shops, and blacksmiths. This critical mass of equestrian services brought some of the nation’s most competitive racehorse breeders to the county. Nor were these operations only in the countryside surrounding Middleburg. Bert and Diana Firestone purchased a 1,400-acre stud farm along Catoctin Creek near Waterford in the early 1970s. Originally from New Jersey, the couple raised a number of Derby contenders and one winner, Genuine Risk, in 1993.

Racehorses were only the most visible manifestation of the county’s equestrian industry. The postwar years brought a rapid rise in the number of Americans who spent their weekends and weeknights on horseback. By the late 1960s, interest in equestrian sports among the nation’s middle class had become a craze. Events ranging from dressage and competitive trail riding to roping contests and barrel racing gained in popularity, as urban and suburban families took up the sport. Even foxhunting took on a less elitist air, as doctors, lawyers, and other urban and suburban professionals replaced the wealthy as the most prominent members of the hunts. The American Horse Council, an industry trade group, estimated in 1977 that there were 3.2 million horse owners in the United States and that their combined investment and annual expenditures reached $13 billion. Nationally, the number of children enrolled in 4-H horse projects shot from 30,000 in 1950 to 320,767 by 1974. The Chronicle of the Horse, the industry’s premier publication, estimated that the number of horses in the nation doubled between 1963 and 1973.

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“Virtually wherever you go, in the country, in the suburbs, and even within city limits, there are horses and ponies, most of them in groups of two or three, on farms, vacant lots and backyards.”

Horses were becoming a fixture of the nation’s outer suburbs. In Northern Virginia, Fairfax County had the densest population of these backyard horses. A local survey of the county’s three western districts in 1978 estimated that there were 8,000 horses in Fairfax County, with at least half of these stabled at home. The land-use pressures of suburban growth pushed these horse riders into Loudoun County, where they combined with the established hunting circles and a growing amateur riding culture to make Loudoun the state’s leading equestrian county. Equestrian culture was certainly centered in the West, but it was also active in the east in the 1970s. This increased property values and therefore tax revenues, poured money into the local economy, and preserved open space. The equestrian set did more than financially underwrite the preservation of open space; they promoted it at the polls and within the community. The parents of suburban children joined foxhunters and gentlemen farmers in celebrating the county’s pastoral spaces and its open space. Economically, the horse became one of the most important components of Loudoun’s agricultural industry. This fact more tightly entwined recreation and labor, production and consumption, open space and agriculture in a way that would define the Loudoun County countryside into the twenty-first century.


153 On the ubiquity of horse culture, see Vinton Liddell Pickens, Interview by Barbara Dutton, July 25, 1990, Folder 35, Box 2, LCOHP.

Horses, Christmas trees, vineyards, truck farms, and even llamas and emus had joined hay, cattle, and horses in the cornucopia of the county’s commercial agricultural production by the close of the twentieth century. Large-scale grain, beef, and dairy operations were history in Loudoun, and so was the social and cultural world they supported. Agriculture, however, had not died. As late as 2002, just under half of the county’s land area was still in some form of agriculture, which also remained the county’s number one industry. The county had an estimated 15,800 horses, 294 commercial horticulture operations, 20 Christmas tree farms, and upwards of a dozen vineyards. Full-time farmers were hard to find, but part-time farmers were everywhere.\footnote{Bob Grubb Interview, Mac and Jim Brownell Interview; and Virginia Cooperative Extension Office, “Loudoun’s Agriculture, 1957-2007,” Folder 79, Ephemera, TBL} Agricultural production no longer defined the rhythms and values of Loudoun’s rural world. Instead it had become a service industry, fighting to keep pace with the ever-changing consumer tastes and preferences of Washingtonian commuters. Rural Loudoun died with the dairy industry. The Loudoun countryside, however, lived on, sustained by tourist revenues, gentlemen farmers, historical preservationists, and, increasingly, by alternate agricultural enterprises. Agriculture ultimately survived suburbanization.
CHAPTER 6
SOUTH AND SOUTHWEST ON THE METROPOLITAN FRINGE:
THE AGRICULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, TEXAS

A lean, grizzled man wearing patched overalls holding the reins of a gaunt horse, setting off into the pine woods with his hounds to manage his roaming herds of tick-covered cows and semi-feral piney woods hogs. A weather-beaten sharecropper, similarly dressed, trudging along behind his mule as it plowed the sandy soil in front of his sagging tenant shack. These two figures characterize depression-era rural life Montgomery County and across East Texas. By the 1970s this rural world had been lost. Changes in markets, technology, and production methods had propelled the rise of a modern ranching industry. Along with the closing of the woods, this agricultural transformation took scrub cattle out of the woods and placed them on newly improved pastures. The backwoodsman and his free-ranging cattle had no place in this new agricultural dispensation. The shift to pastures, purebred cattle, and registered quarter horses supported the adoption of the lifestyle, symbols, and values of western, conservative ranch culture. It propelled the development of a rural social and cultural world in which hobby farming, recreation, and show animals loomed as large as commodity production. This transformation reinforced the county’s role as a home for part-time ranchers, equestrian enthusiasts, and suburbanites looking for a few acres in the country. These newcomers joined locals in casting off the trappings of southern farming and cattle-raising. A pureblooded steer, proudly standing in a lush, green pasture, a 4-H award to its name and a registered pedigree, a corral behind him, and a pine forest in the distance: this was the aspiration of the county’s newest cattle ranchers. Cotton fields and cutover pinelands had become ranchlands. Montgomery County was now western. Its residents had “gone Texan.”
Rural historians have followed their subjects in making much of the twentieth-century convergence between rural life and urban life and the subsequent loss of rural distinctiveness. Yet, for all their increasing similarities, and in many ways because of them, self-defined rural people in Montgomery County, both newcomers and long-time residents, spent a great deal of time and energy proclaiming and promoting their distinct country lifestyle and values, often directly in opposition to the city. A subset of the county’s suburban newcomers joined with rural gentrifiers, ranchers, and longtime rural residents in articulating a distinct metropolitan fringe lifestyle and identity that combined the cultural trappings of productive agriculture and rural life with white privilege and Sunbelt conservatism. These metropolitan fringe residents embraced the countryside for an amalgam of reasons that included the status it promised, the amenities it offered, and the image it projected. In the process they molded the metropolitan fringe as an alternative to urban life even as they tied it more closely to the metropolis.

This transformation of agriculture had cultural impacts that were at least as profound as those on the county’s environment and landscape. Across the nation western style and culture reached its cultural zenith during the 1950s and early 1960s. Western storylines dominated radio

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and television, pulp novels and Sunday matinees. Cowboy singers climbed the billboard charts. Dude ranching, rodeos, theme parks, and western fashion all exploded in popularity. The cowboy image also had strong political currency. Its popularity fueled the rise of national figures like John Wayne, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan and suffused the dynamic conservative political culture that these men inspired. This collective American myth reaffirmed masculinity, conquest, and white privilege during a time of Cold-War uncertainty and racial tension.4

For Southeast Texas counties, the national popularity of cowboy symbolism and mythology during the Cold War was a godsend—a locally useful heritage that might cloak the region’s southern historical roots, social structures, and power relations under a veil of western nostalgia. In the era of the civil rights movement, national popular opinion associated southern identity with bigotry, ignorance, and social backwardness. In contrast, the cowboy symbolized American individualism, personal freedom, and martial strength. The first was a liability to a nation positioning itself as a global champion of freedom and democracy. The second became a powerful national myth and the symbolic foundation of an ascendant Sunbelt conservatism. At stake was more than simply the question of where exactly the West begins or who gets to wear cowboy hats. Texan’s concerted efforts to rebrand their state as part of the West was, as Randolph Campbell has argued, a way to escape the “burden of southern history.”5

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5 Randolph B. Campbell, An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1989), 1 (quotation). The state’s western image rests upon a myth rooted in exceptionalist histories and selective forgetting. The classic articulation the Texas myth is T. R. Fehrenbach, Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968). Walter L. Buenger and Robert A. Calvert were the first to systematically dismantle the myth in Texas through Time: Evolving Interpretations (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991) and the follow-up volume Buenger and
Texas historians have explored the ways these myths and images, and the historical memory that accompanied them, shaped the state’s twentieth-century history.\(^6\) This chapter brings these insights to bear on the metropolitan fringe. In doing so, it exposes the ways western mythology also helped to bind suburban newcomers to their rural neighbors. Western symbols and narratives reinforced a shared metropolitan identity that both defined the rural areas of Montgomery County and defined its position within the expanding metropolis. Since the publication of Nature’s Metropolis, historians have been aware of the role urban economic centers played in reshaping the environments of their hinterlands. Washington, D.C., had little in common with William Cronon’s Chicago. The District provided a steady agricultural market, but its business was government rather than trade. Its elites had little interest in the economic production of the city’s hinterlands. In contrast, Houston elites played a prominent role in reshaping Montgomery County’s agriculture. This chapter builds on Cronon’s insights by tracing the way urban areas shaped the meaning of agriculture and ranching. The city not only defined the shape of nature in the hinterland and the value of its produce; it also played a major role in defining the hinterland’s rural identity writ large. This transformation prepared the county for large-scale ranching by Houston’s middle class and business elite.\(^7\)

Montgomery County residents crafted a western identity in the decades following World War II as part of a broader engagement with the metropolis. A small group of rural landowners,

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from longtime residents and newcomers, turned to progressive agriculture and ranching in the post-depression years as a way to wring more profits from their land without the hassle of tenants or as a hobby and status symbol. They did so with the guidance and cooperation of Houston’s agricultural business leaders and the participation of ranch owners from Houston. The cultural celebration of ranch life that accompanied this economic shift followed a similar pattern. Montgomery County awoke to discover its westernness only when area ranchers with strong ties to Houston brought the celebration of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo to the county. Ironically, the city played a major role in crafting a western landscape and teaching the erstwhile southern county western culture. Houston’s money, its agricultural leadership, and its cultural gravity accelerated and channeled the development of Montgomery County’s rural landscapes into a rural enclave whose residents both drew their culture from the city and defined their lifestyle in opposition to it.

This western identity was, it is true, only one of the popular images of Houston swirling around the city during the 1960s. Houstonians also celebrated their city as a space age metropolis: the home of the Astrodome and NASA’s Manned Spacecraft Center. Corporate growth, a powerful business elite, and a vibrant port made Houston a thriving center of commerce and, increasingly, a global city. Migrants from the Deep South and Latin America also continued to place their cultural stamps on the city’s culture. Yet for Houston’s cultural hinterland the western image remained the most prominent vision of the city, from the ranchers who made Houston one of the nation’s busiest cattle markets to the suburbanites who rode horses on the weekends to the wildcat oilmen who wore Stetson hats and cowboy boots because they liked the way it made them swagger. The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, the city’s most popular cultural event, has continued to perpetuate this image into the twenty-first century.
Going Texan united small-town and rural residents with suburban and exurban newcomers around a celebration of a particular western-themed, metropolitan fringe lifestyle. As the children of both sets of people rode horses, completed 4-H projects, and showed their livestock they cemented this new, western, metropolitan fringe identity and in the process brought Montgomery County more in line with metropolitan fringe areas not only in Texas, but as far away as Loudoun County as well. Like suburban expansion itself, this rural lifestyle was ostensibly colorblind. Like the conservative politics that dominated Sunbelt suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s, it reaffirmed white masculinity, the value of hard work, and the nuclear family. This follows the transformation of the county’s agricultural economy from cotton and timber to improved pastures and ranching. It then examines the new rural world that took root in this transformed landscape. The local Go Texan celebration and the trail rides that originated within the county bound rural and exurban Montgomery County to the metropolis and reinforced its adopted western identity. As such, the agricultural and rural transformation of Montgomery County was one of the bonds that tied the county and its residents to the metropolis.

Montgomery County’s agricultural history up to this point was anything but exceptional. Except for a brief fling with specialty tobacco production and some small-scale truck farming, Montgomery County farmers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries endured an often bitter but relatively stable relationship with short-staple cotton production and timber harvesting. More prosperous landowners followed the southern system of tenancy and

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9 At its peak, 90 percent of Texas tobacco was grown within five miles of Willis, Texas. The experiment was short lived. Labor difficulties, shipping costs, large upfront investments, a general lack of expertise, and shifting U.S. tariff policies all took their toll on the industry. It had all but vanished by 1920. William Harley Gandy, “A History of Montgomery County, Texas” (M.A. thesis, University of Houston, 1952), 87-88; H. H. Harrington and P. S.
sharecropping common across the cotton South. Those not involved primarily in agriculture grew cotton to supplement the wages from their rural industrial work at sawmills and oil wells. For these marginal producers, the patch of white bolls behind the tenant cabin or homestead often meant the difference between debt and solvency, decay and a sliver of economic hope. The rock-bottom prices and government programs of the 1930s and the wartime labor shortages of the 1940s combined to weaken cotton’s hold in Montgomery County. Only 5 percent of the county’s land area (a fifth of the county’s farm acreage) was in any kind of row crop in 1934.\textsuperscript{10} The crop declined in importance, even among the county’s poorer farmers. A 1949 study of the county’s African American farm families revealed that fewer than half still grew cotton. Those who did averaged only 10 acres and produced less than a third of a bale per acre. Three-fifths of black farmers worked off the farm for a substantial part of their income and 80 percent of black families were dependent on some component of the timber industry for their cash income.\textsuperscript{11} The declining role of cotton meant that agriculture for county blacks became largely a subsistence

\textsuperscript{10} This number represents both the depressed crop prices of the Great Depression and the increased labor demands from the local oil boom that began in 1932. Both events dealt local cotton agriculture a blow from which it would never recover. Clyburn, “An Agricultural Economic Study of Land Use and Factors Affecting its use in Montgomery County, Texas” (M.S. thesis: Texas A&M University, 1940), 36.

\textsuperscript{11} Froncell Reece, “A Study of the Economic Status of Fifty Negro Farm Families, Montgomery County, Texas” (M.S. thesis: Prairie View A&M, May 1950), 9, 13, 21. The percentage of rural blacks in the county dependent on off-farm labor was even higher, as Reece’s sample included only farm families; B. T. Price, 1947 Annual Narrative Report, Negro Extension Service, Folder 1947, Montgomery County, Texas - Monthly and Annual Reports County Extension Agent. Special Collections, Prairie View University, Prairie View, Tex., 1.
activity. B. T. Prince, the local black extension agent, promoted home production of food as a way to improve nutrition and allow blacks to gain a modicum of financial independence.\textsuperscript{12}

The results of the county’s century-long relationship with cotton and extractive rural industry were sadly familiar: worn-out soils, empty pocketbooks, and unhealthy people. In 1947, county blacks averaged only a third-grade education.\textsuperscript{13} The county’s African American population, predictably, suffered the worst, but the majority of whites hardly prospered. Schools were poor, transportation was difficult, racism was pervasive, soils were deeply eroded, and off-farm labor was dangerous, unreliable, and un-unionized. Pellagra and alcoholism plagued the countryside. The only comfort on the public health front was that obesity replaced malnourishment as a major health concern beginning in the 1960s. These were the wages of a grinding rural economy that offered tenants and small landholders enough calories to survive but little hope of a better life.\textsuperscript{14} Large white landholders, the owners and managers of extractive industries, and those blessed with oil under their land managed to carve out decent lives for themselves. The rest rightly viewed rural life in the county as something to escape rather than as something to defend.

By the end of World War II, cotton had reached a dead end in the county. A 1941 congressional report on migration in East Texas referred to the area as one “peopled by stranded sawmill workers turned farmer on a small scale.”\textsuperscript{15} The small scale of agriculture was precisely the problem. County farms harvested, on average, only 26.7 acres of crops. That was from an


\textsuperscript{13} Price, 1947 Annual Narrative Report, 29.

\textsuperscript{14} Montgomery County Program Building Committee, \textit{Your County Program: Long-Range Program of the Montgomery County Program Building Committee} (Montgomery County, Tex.: Self Published, 1964), Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 18, 23-24.

average of nearly fourteen fields per farm. Such small fields and harvests were synonymous with a lack of mechanization and inefficient production. The county’s relatively poor soils made the kind of consolidation and mechanization that characterized the new cotton agriculture economically infeasible. Given these economic constraints, it did not take long for the county’s rural labor force to abandon the countryside to seek jobs in the growing economy of “Heavenly Houston.” Industrial wage labor was nothing new to these part-time farmers. For all but the most prosperous families, farm life meant little more than drudgery. These migrants did not permanently break the ties that bound them to the county, at least not at first. Their extended families often retained their homestead as a place of refuge, even as they entered the metropolitan labor market. Montgomery County contributed its share of the rural outmigration that defined so much of southern demographics and culture from the 1920s to the 1960s. In Texas, the decline in rural population was largest during the wartime mobilization of the early 1940s. From 1940 and 1950, Texas farms had an astounding net outmigration of 45.6 percent, or more than 910,000 people. The period from 1950 to 1956 saw the net loss of an additional 276,000 farmers. The highest outmigration rates were in East Texas, among the rural landless who had the least to lose by abandoning the farm life. These trends proved true in Montgomery County. Between 1940 and 1945, the number of farms in there dropped 41 percent: from 2,296 to 1,356. The amount of cotton grown dropped just as precipitously. White landowners used

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Agricultural Adjustment Administration funds to farther shift production from cotton, accelerating the outmigration. By 1955 local farms had a total of only 1,367 acres in cotton.\(^\text{18}\)

The decline of cotton’s profitability, the outmigration of labor, and their inability to justify the investment in mechanized cotton production combined to send landowners in search for alternative uses for their acreage. They found it in cattle. Modern cattle ranching offered landowners relatively steady returns, improved soils, and cultural prestige without the management issues that went with cotton tenants and sharecroppers. The move to cattle production was not without precedent. Open range cattle had a long history in the county. The animals produced by this system, however, were poorly fed scrub breeds that, while hardy enough to survive in the piney woods, earned their owners little profit. The elimination of Texas Fever through federal cattle dipping programs in the 1920s and 1930s removed a significant obstacle to more intensive cattle production in the county.\(^\text{19}\) The end of the open range in 1956 removed another by mitigating some of the risks that went with investment in fencing and purebred cattle and protecting improved pastures from encroachment by scrub cattle. County landowners had realized, as one local put it, that “[i]t is a lot easier to raise cattle than to farm, and better money too.”\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{19}\) In 1917, the Texas state legislature passed legislation requiring the dipping of all cattle in the state. The program began from the north in 1919 and moved southward. Claire Strom, *Making Catfish Bait out of Government Boys: The Fight Against Cattle Ticks and the Transformation of the Yeoman South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 133. See also Henry Mostyn, “Grover Cleveland Motsyn” in Celeste (Gayle) Graves, *Magnolia Memories* (Conroe, Tex.: Genealogy Department, Montgomery County Library, 1993), 503.

\(^{20}\) Stan Crawford, “The Bachmeyers’ Fifty Good Years,” *CDC*, November 16, 1966, p. 1 (quotation). The exact cause and effect relationship between government programs, declining cotton prices, urban job opportunities, and mechanization in the South’s agricultural transformation has been the subject of substantial debate. In Montgomery County, the weakness of the cotton economy and the dramatic increase in the availability of off farm jobs locally
Between 1950 and 1970, the ranchers and farmers who remained in Montgomery County adopted the business practices, production methods, and the culture of cattle ranching that had already been established in Harris County. In doing so, they transformed much of the county’s landscape and more fully tied themselves to Houston. The county had always served as a source of raw materials for the city. Now ranchers and businessmen from both sides of the increasingly porous urban/rural divide developed parts of the piney woods into a reflection of Harris County’s pastured landscapes.

The East Texas Chamber of Commerce and the Houston Farm and Ranch Club were the two most significant organizations in this process. The chamber of commerce represented the interests of the urban and small-town businessmen concerned with keeping taxes low, labor cheap, and business growing. These were goals that Montgomery County elites shared. Faced with postwar declines in the number of farms and farmers within its member counties, the chamber launched the Rural Progress Program in 1952 and the Build East Texas Program in 1963. Both traced the area’s agricultural failings to failures in farm management and agribusiness structures. Their solution was to ignore laborers and tenants and to educate white landowners in ways to improve their marketing, expand their conservation practices, increase production, and streamline their management. Maintaining the region’s agricultural vitality meant constructing a new ranching economy.

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21 For a visual representation of this agricultural shift, see Figures A and B, both from farm of Dick Calfee. Figure 6.1 is an image typical of agriculture in the 1940s. Figure 6.2 is an image of this new agricultural practice, complete with horse-mounted rancher and cattle. Gary Calfee, Private Collection, Willis, Tex.


21 For a visual representation of this agricultural shift, see Figures A and B, both from farm of Dick Calfee. Figure 6.1 is an image typical of agriculture in the 1940s. Figure 6.2 is an image of this new agricultural practice, complete with horse-mounted rancher and cattle. Gary Calfee, Private Collection, Willis, Tex.

The Houston Farm and Ranch Club was a great ally in this cause. Houston area ranchers and agribusiness leaders founded the Farm and Ranch Club as an offshoot of the Houston Chamber of Commerce Agricultural Committee in 1947. Its express purpose was to “advance agriculture and animal husbandry and the best interest of all persons engaged therein.”

Houston’s business culture embraced ranching as a status symbol, and many in Houston’s business community owned ranches in the surrounding counties. The city’s elite circles, therefore, showed a concern for the health of the ranching industry that went beyond its economic possibilities, substantial though they may have been. Montgomery County’s own

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23 The Houston Farm and Ranch Club, *Official Handbook and Membership Roster* (Self Published, 1965), Folder Houston Farm and Ranch Club, Box 1456, Harris County Judge William M. Elliot Collection, Harris County Archives, Houston, Tex. (hereinafter Elliott Collection), 6.

24 Houston was run by a relatively informal collection of business elites up through the 1970s. As Larry Jacobs, a Montgomery County realtor whose father commuted from his Montgomery County ranch into Houston in the 1950s, remembered it, “Even Houston back in the mid-60’s was a small town. There was a handful of people that if you knew them, you knew almost everything” Larry Jacobs, Interview by Author, August 17, 2012, Montgomery, Tex. See also Joe R. Feagin, *Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political and Economic Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 106-148, especially 132. On the popularity of ranch ownership among Texas elites, see Friedberger, “Rural Gentrification and Livestock Raising.”

agricultural elites were involved from early on. County extension agent George Clyburn and Dick and Fred Nutter, local agribusiness leaders, were both on the board of directors.\textsuperscript{26} Within a year the Farm and Ranch Club had grown from 7 members to 1,300. The group fit squarely within the tradition of progressive, scientific agricultural improvement. In this case it was not agricultural experts but metropolitan businessmen and gentlemen ranchers who took the lead in developing the cattle industry in Houston’s hinterland.\textsuperscript{27}

As Montgomery County landowners modeled their operations after Harris County ranches, they too joined this tight-knit agribusiness community. Some local businessmen used

\textsuperscript{26} Because the Farm and Ranch membership rolls provide member’s business addresses rather than their home addresses or the addresses of their ranch land, it is difficult to get any reliable sense of the geographic spread of Farm and Ranch Membership. Lester Goodson, for instance, was a prominent horse breeder and businessman near Magnolia and a member of the Houston Farm and Ranch Club, yet, the address listed is that of a car dealership he owned in the city. More than nine out of ten of those listed had Houston addresses. Ed Watson, “Fred Nutter Honored by Farm-Ranch Club,” \textit{CDC}, December 23, 1958, p. 1; Farm and Ranch, \textit{Official Handbook and Membership Roster}; “Ranch Club: Clyburn and Nutter Named on Committee,” \textit{CDC}, November 3, 1955, p. 9; “Seven Conroe Men to Attend Farm and Ranch Club Meeting at Hockley,” \textit{CDC}, July 18, 1956, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{27} Deborah Fitzgerald, \textit{Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
their ranching interests to strengthen their social connections in Houston. Jack Clarke was one example. The owner of a 7-Up bottling company in Conroe, Clarke poured his free time into purebred cattle, establishing himself as a Hereford judge and breeder. He eventually took up prominent positions in the metropolitan ranching scene, spending time as the chairman of the board of the Houston Hereford Club, a director of the Houston Livestock Show, and a member of the East Texas Chamber of Commerce Agriculture Committee.\textsuperscript{28} Ranching was a means for county elites like Clarke to enter metropolitan and state power structures. At the same time, Houston businessmen began to buy up, manage, and restore properties in the county, giving them a stake in the county’s agricultural development.\textsuperscript{29}

These ties brought the Houston Farm and Ranch Club’s focus to Montgomery County. Its programs aimed to improve the profitability and appearance of farm and ranchland and, thereby, local rural economies.\textsuperscript{30} In cooperation with area extension agents and agricultural specialists from Texas A&M University, the organization held workshops, field days, and farm demonstrations at Montgomery County ranches on the latest agricultural methods and crops.\textsuperscript{31} The club’s most significant involvement was in the introduction of improved pastures. Farm and Ranch worked with the East Texas Chamber of Commerce to sponsor pasture tours, to develop new pasture management programs, and to import improved pasture plant varieties. In one

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} “Jack Clarke Heads Agribusiness Group,” \textit{CDC}, September 24, 1961.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Larry Jacobs remembered that his father was one of the first to buy up and restore old ranches in the area while he commuted to his insurance agency in Houston. The elder Jacobs first moved his family to the area in 1957. Larry Jacobs Interview. When the San Jacinto River Authority threatened to inundate prime pastureland along the San Jacinto River in 1959, 25 of the 206 landowners who signed a petition opposing the move listed their address as either Houston or Beaumont. Dick Calfee to Board of Water Engineers, February 9, 1959, Folder Application# 002108, Correspondence, 1958-1966, 2002/ 207-13, Water Board Records, Texas State Library, Austin, Tex.
\item \textsuperscript{30} For an overview of the history of the Houston Farm and Ranch Club and a sampling of its activities, see Farm and Ranch, \textit{Official Handbook and Membership Roster} and Lynne Chesnar, \textit{February Fever: Historical Highlights of the First 60 Years of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, 1932-1992} (Houston, Tex.: Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, 1991), 219.
\end{itemize}
instance, they purchased twenty-five tons of crimson clover seed in Alabama and had it trucked in for club members. The Farm and Ranch Club touted the achievements of the most progressive ranches in the area, stamping its seal of approval on these operations and encouraging others in the area to follow suit. It brought in the seeds and disseminated the knowledge needed to transform Montgomery County’s agricultural landscapes.32

The agricultural barriers to increased productivity were substantial. The temperate climate and rich, high pH soils of Loudoun County, in contrast, allowed its farmers to adopt the highly productive cool-weather forage crops like alfalfa, timothy, and orchard grass. The hot and humid climate and more acidic soils that characterized Montgomery County and much of the Deep South required a completely different set of species for productive cattle-raising. The introduction of improved pastures to the Deep South depended on the breeding and introduction of specially adapted forage species—a process that only began in earnest after the turn of the twentieth century.33 Pasture improvement was the keystone of modern cattle ranching in the Deep South. They promised decreased erosion, greater farm profits, and less dependence on laborers who were increasingly moving to the city.

Establishing improved pastures required more than just sprinkling some grass seed on worn-out cotton fields. Modern ranching took capital, expertise, and machinery. Ranchers first bulldozing scrub trees and underbrush, grading, plowing, and disk ing the land. They then planted legumes, mainly clovers and lespedeza, and fertilized heavily with phosphorus and lime, to raise

32 See for example “Houston Farm-Ranch Club to Tour Montgomery County,” CDC, March 22, 1957, p. 8. Most of these tours occurred during the 1950s, when the club placed its greatest emphasis on improved agricultural practices. During the 1960s, it shifted its focus to supporting youth programs.
33 Varieties of clover, timothy, lespedeza, and alfalfa had been the central building blocks of pasture and hay production outside of the South since the early nineteenth century. The number of acres in these crops has historically been a good measure of the productivity of any given livestock or dairy operation. In 1945, Loudoun farmers harvested 26,582 acres of these crops. Montgomery County, in contrast, harvested only 103 acres. Statistics from Agricultural Census, County Data, Texas and Virginia, 1945. See also Vanessa Corriher, Hay Purchases: Grasses Not Adapted to Texas, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, June, 2012, E-614; Charles Stichler, Texas Alfalfa Production, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, B-5017.
the soil pH. Once the soil was ready, ranchers had their laborers sprig Bermuda, or, beginning around 1957, Coastal Bermuda. Every few years, local experts added a new plant to the mix, but the practices were the same.\textsuperscript{34} Rural white elites maintained control over the local agricultural education agencies and therefore ensured that their operations would benefit most from these production changes. Government soil conservation programs, administered through the local Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service committee (ASCS), which was itself run by prominent rural whites, offered matching grants to subsidize the construction of stock ponds and the converting worn out cropland or poorly managed forest into improved pasture.\textsuperscript{35}

Across East Texas, ranchers used bulldozers to scrape away tenant cabins and scrub forests to make way for improved pastures. In 1949 East Texans planted 177,600 acres, bringing the total acreage of improved pastures in the region to 712,750.\textsuperscript{36} Ranchers in Montgomery and Waller Counties had improved 61,747 acres by 1961.\textsuperscript{37} This figure reached 148,000 of the two counties’ 211,536 acres of pasture by 1969.\textsuperscript{38} Along with new pastures came new cattle breeds that could convert these new sources of protein into marketable weight gain. Hereford, Angus,

\textsuperscript{34} Hybrid Bermuda grass was first developed in Tifton, Georgia, in the 1940s. By 1969, the local Soil Conservation had also started recommending King Ranch Bluestem in addition to the host of other winter legumes and summer grasses already mentioned. Other grasses used included Dallis grass, Johnson grass, Weeping Love grass, Carpet Grass, and King Ranch Bluestem. \textit{District Program and Work Plan for Montgomery and Walker County Soil and Water Conservation District}, 1969, Walker County SWCD, 16-17; Corriher, “Hay Purchases.” E-614.

\textsuperscript{35} The county branch of the Farm Bureau, organized in 1958, the local Soil and Water Conservation District committee, and the local ASCS committee all served as social gathering places for the rural white elite. The meetings of these groups operated with many of the same informal power relations of a country club. “Montgomery County Farm Bureau Unit Organized,” \textit{CDC}, March 11, 1958, p. 2; The local ASCS committee distributed $76,000 in conservation funds in 1963, $41,000 of which went to improved pastures. It distributed a similar amount of money every year; San Jacinto Soil Conservation District, “Conservation Practices Approved for Montgomery County,” 1961, Folder Soil Conservation Dist.-Corresp., Box 257, SJRA; Dan Waters, “Soil and Water Conservation = Progress,” \textit{HC Magazine}, October 1, 1949, 6-7; David Beatie, “Dozer Spare that Tree,” \textit{Texas Game and Fish} (October 1964), 4-6. Improved pastures also drastically reduced the amount of food available for game species in ranching areas; Stock ponds were essential to increasing the carrying capacity of pastureland in the county. The local SWCD had constructed 2,486 stock ponds by 1961, close to half of which were in Montgomery County. San Jacinto Soil Conservation District Newsletter, January 1961, Folder Soil Conservation Dist – Corresp., Box 257, San Jacinto River Authority Records, Conroe, Tex.

\textsuperscript{36} “Permanent Productive Agriculture Predicted,” \textit{East Texas} (November 1950), 7, 14.

\textsuperscript{37} San Jacinto Soil Conservation District Newsletter, January 1961.

\textsuperscript{38} The Montgomery-Walker SWCD only published combined acreage statistics. “1969 Annual Report,” Folder Sample Newsletters, Walker SWCD.
and Brahman cattle replaced locally bred scrub cattle across the county, providing ranchers with increased returns on their investments and enabling them to keep pace with national production trends. With intensive management, yearly fertilizing, a decent water supply, and a substantial upfront investment, area ranchers could realize a dramatic improvement in the profitability of their business as well as in the look and relative health of their land. Improved pastures allowed grazing for 250 to 280 days a year and were more productive. Unimproved county pastures could support an animal unit for every 8.2 acres. By the late 1950s, county ranchers on improved bottomlands averaged around one cow per every four acres.

Each agricultural commodity carries with it its own distinct cultural and social world and its own criteria for mastery and achievement. Cattle ranching is no different. Improved pastures meant higher profits. They also meant county landowners could claim a new identity as progressive ranchers. Beginning in 1963, county and regional hay shows sparked strong competition among these landowners as each tried to outdo the others to produce the most nutritious hay. Those who did well gained regional prestige for their successes. Dozens of county ranchers would stake their reputations and their pride on the results of protein tests from Texas A&M labs. To keep pace with the cattle business in Montgomery County required

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43 As T. H. Breen noted for tobacco planters in the eighteenth century, the quality of a rancher’s hay “provided a medium within which the planter negotiated a public reputation, a sense of self-worth as an agricultural producer.”
money, energy, flexibility, education, and land. Adopting new methods proved too much for many conservative, old-time ranchers and farmers used to running piney-woods cattle in timbered pastures. Extension agent Morris Straughn remembered: “everybody had to change their whole thinking mode” to stay in business. Improved ranching also meant a new dependence on the implement dealer, the fertilizer companies, seed providers, and cattle breeders that did not sit well with longtime ranchers.

Improved pastures and the cattle industry they supported underwrote the persistence of local rural elites. Ranching ran the gamut from a part-time hobby to a full-time job. Carl Hicks’s family, for instance, had farmed cotton on 211 acres north of Conroe since 1936. Converting 80 acres of his eroded cotton fields to Coastal Bermuda and cattle allowed Hicks to retain his land and remain in ranching full time. For Hicks, ranching was a career. Its relatively small time commitment, however, meant that landowners could pursue careers in local politics or business while retaining the economic security and social prestige that came with ranch ownership.
Ranching paid the bills that came with large-scale landownership in a county with ever-increasing property values. Ranching also gave Montgomery County elites like county commissioner Bo Damuth and county judge W. S. Weisinger the time, resources, social connections, management skills, and economic freedom they needed to involve themselves in county politics. For these men, ranching was as much about status, lifestyle, and local power as it was about agriculture.

The hay defined the man. Breen, Tobacco Culture, 58-75, 58 (quotation); Morris Straughn Interview; “Prize Grass on display to the Public May 16-18,” CDC, May 14, 1956, p. 8; “Dobbin Grass Producer Makes Good Hay Record,” CDC, December 3, 1959, p. 12.
42 Morris Straughn Interview.
43 “Meet Carl E. Hicks,” CDC, May 13, 1964, s. 2, p. 8; Morris Straughn Interview.
The experience of one prominent Montgomery County farm family, the Browders, offers an example of this. Judge William Bridges Browder was born in Waverly, Texas, north of Willis, in 1883. A country boy, he eventually earned a law degree and served as a county attorney. After a brief stint working in Houston during the depression, he returned to Montgomery County to run hogs on the open range and to serve as the district judge of the ninth-circuit court. His sons John and Bridges followed in their father’s footsteps. In 1947, John and Bridges started the Browder Brothers Jersey Farm, a progressive operation that boasted the finest dairy cows in the county. The brothers were highly active in supporting local agricultural organizations and kept up with the latest agricultural methods. They did so as part-time farmers and ranchers. Bridges spent the bulk of his time in the real estate business in the county, including transferring lakefront land to developers. At different times he served as president of the county Board of Realtors, the local Chamber of Commerce, and the county planning commission. He also served as president of the South Texas Jersey Cattle Club. His brother, John, worked for twenty-seven years as a research chemist for Humble Oil while also acting as a senior partner in the dairy and serving on various dairymen clubs. Successful agriculture provided local status, a hobby, generally stable income, and a source of equity. In Montgomery County, most local elites, be they born in the area or only recently arrived, were part-time ranchers and farmers.

African Americans found it difficult to make the transition to improved pastures. Across the South, government-sponsored agricultural programs, county extension agents, and local farm organizations reinforced local racial hierarchies in lavishing their aid on white landowners.


Montgomery County was no different. A century of racism and exploitation combined with the agricultural difficulties common to all small-scale farmers in the region to limit the options for these farmers. By 1949 only 8 percent of black farmers had over thirty head of livestock and none had fifty. It was a rare African American farmer who had the resources to attempt the transition into modern ranching. Yet at the same time black laborers did the bulk of the labor that it took to convert the county’s ranches to improved pastures. The only black faces that peered out from the quarterly reports of the local soil conservation district were those of laborers.

These pictures showed blacks hard at work planting the fields with Bermuda grass sprigs, ensuring the prosperity of white landowners who had access to improved pastures, chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and tractors. It is little wonder that the vast majority of county blacks left the land for work in Houston. The proportion of black farmers in the county declined

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50 Montgomery-Walker Soil Conservation District Newsletter, March, 1959, Folder Newsletters 1955-1959, Walker SWCD. Black laborers worked both for long-time ranchers and newcomers. Larry Jacobs, remembered that his father, a Houston businessman, employed black laborers on his ranch in the 1950s. He remembered that one such laborer was “like an uncle to me.” Larry Jacobs Interview.
precipitously after World War II. Black farmers made up almost a quarter of farmers in 1940. This figure declined to 17 percent by 1950 and 10 percent by 1960. At the end of that decade only 5 percent of the county’s diminishing farm population was black.\textsuperscript{51} Black families that left their homesteads saw their lands fall into decay, carved up by tax liens and inheritance, and sold off by a next generation that had no ties to the land.\textsuperscript{52}

An East Texas businessman famously described the postwar changes in the region:

“Yankees have moved South; Negros have moved North; cotton has moved West; and livestock has moved East.”\textsuperscript{53} These broader shifts brought a measure of agricultural prosperity to Montgomery County. Mechanization, improved pastures, purebred cattle, and improved marketing combined with continued outmigration to drive farm consolidation. The number of farms dropped by a quarter from 1950 to 1964. In the same period the percentage of land in farms increased from 36 percent to 47 percent and the number of cattle increased 30 percent, from 26,300 to 37,600, both signs of the increasing modernization of the industry.\textsuperscript{54} Yet, even with these changes, Montgomery County did not become a regional leader in the production and marketing of cattle.\textsuperscript{55} Economically, cattle made up a sizable majority of the county’s agricultural income from World War II on.\textsuperscript{56} The industry never surpassed oil or timber in terms

\textsuperscript{51} There were over 500 black farmers in the county in 1940. Agricultural Census, Texas, County Data, Non-White Operators. Hispanic farmers and farm laborers did not arrive in the county until the 1980s.
\textsuperscript{52} One example of this is the family of Ned Jackson, one of the more prosperous black farmers in the county. Jackson had scraped the land together over years of hard work. Within a generation, however, his children had sold off parts and lost others to foreclosure. While the Jacksons at least had a chance of financial gain from increasing property values, most African Americans owned little land and therefore had little financial incentive to cling on to their roots in the county. Larry Jacobs Interview.
\textsuperscript{54} This was in spite of the closing of the range in 1956 and the selling off of scrub and range cattle that followed. Agricultural Census, Texas, County Data.
\textsuperscript{55} The county sold 19,976 cattle for $1,466,000 in 1964. In a state like Texas, this figure was mediocre at best. Brazoria County sold more than twice as many cattle for over $3 million. Harris County sold over 47,000 for $4.09 million. Agricultural Census, Texas County Data, 1964.
\textsuperscript{56} In 1969, cattle made up over 65 percent of the commercial farm sales in the county. The fading dairy industry still accounted for 25 percent. The remaining 10 percent were divided among hogs, hay (tied directly to cattle and
of employment, tax revenue, or gross income, but its extensive nature and its cultural significance meant that its modernization was the single most important landscape change in the decades before suburban development.

The cattle industry prepared the Montgomery County landscape for suburban country life by refashioning it into a reflection of regional and national expectations of the West’s wide-open spaces and grazing cattle and horses. These rural landowners did not consciously refashion their lands to appeal to exurbanites, but by severing the county’s ties with the landscape of cotton agriculture and adopting the landscapes and practices of modern livestock raising, they tied the county to the romantic image of the ranch. In the process, they also whitened the landscape, reinforcing popular conceptions of metropolitan fringe rurality. When suburbanites moved “to the country,” they joined with local ranchers in the celebration of a rural culture that had little room for rural blacks.57

Montgomery County’s agricultural transformation marked a process of convergence with Loudoun County. Where Loudoun’s excellent soils and prosperous agrarian tradition explained much of the county’s continued agricultural prosperity, Montgomery County’s poorer soils and relatively weak agricultural heritage ought to have pushed the county into agricultural obscurity. This is what, in all likelihood, would have happened had it not been for the proximity of Houston. Instead, the amount of money spent on agriculture and therefore the county’s productivity grew during the period. National agricultural market trends and the proximity of horses), and broiler production. These figures do not include nursery sales, which increased as subdivisions spread northward from Houston, or horses, whose economic impact had more to do with their upkeep than their production. Agricultural Census, Texas, County Data, 1969.

57 On the racial and cultural meanings of landscape, see David Delaney, “The Space that Race Makes,” Professional Geographer 54, No. 1 (2002): 6-14 and Denis Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984). This whitening was never total. The presence of the occasional rural black holdout added to the picturesque quality of rural life provided these families not try to participate as equals in rural social institutions. In fact, the very rurality of these blacks validated them as “good negroes” in a period where black deviance and urbanity were closely tied together. Bill Bergfeld, Jr., Interview by Author, July 19, 2012, Conroe, Tex.
urban centers overrode differences in climate, soil, and agricultural history to mark both counties as places of cattle production, rural recreation, and the suburban country life. Agricultural economies based on beef cattle, hay production, horses, and recreation came to define both counties by the 1980s. There were significant differences in the shape of the process. In Montgomery County, this transformation was the project of an urban-centered elite working to tie the county more fully to the metropolis. In Loudoun County, government workers, politicians, and nationally recognized equestrian breeders carried with them the money that shaped the direction of agricultural development. Washington, D.C. drew this educated, status conscious, and well funded set of people to Loudoun, but the city’s social world and economic structures had little direct role in channeling or supporting the actions of these exurban residents. Proximity to the metropolis shaped the rural development of both counties. In Montgomery County, this transformation was a metropolitan project. In Loudoun it was a metropolitan byproduct.

A group of farmers gathered on November 23, 1965, to close the door on Montgomery County’s agricultural past. That year there were fewer than 300 acres of cotton planted in the county out of an allotment of over 1,000 acres. With a quick show of hands, landowners put their allotments up for sale. The crop that had defined agriculture in the county since the 1830s was gone. Like sons turning their back in scorn on the freshly covered grave of an abusive father, these ranchers adjusted their Stetson hats, kicked the dust off their cowboy boots, got into their pickup trucks, and headed out to the ranch. Montgomery County was part of the cotton South no longer. Ranchers were remaking the county’s landscape into a western one. Bulldozers rumbled over broken-down sharecropper cabins and the thick underbrush that had begun to reclaim the abandoned homesteads. Tractors contoured and shaped the gullied fields into smooth curves, erasing the evidence of past abuse. A thick mat of Bermuda grass crept over the land, covering
the county’s cotton past in a thick mat of deep green. Cotton’s tenants moved to the city. Cotton planters had found a new commodity, and with it a new identity. Montgomery County was the domain of the rancher.  

Stan Crawford, a Conroe Courier correspondent, captured the complex mixture of memory and forgetting, of piney woods and improved pasture, of national cultural images and local heritage that merged in Montgomery County’s western identity. He titled his article “Cowboy.” In it, he described his trip to the Sharp Ranch near the town of Montgomery, in the west-central part of the county. Crawford profiled Garry Sharp, a rancher who had retired to the county to raise registered quarter horses. Sharp was one of the hundreds, and soon to be thousands, of Houstonians who fled the sprawling metropolis for the ranches and exurban homesteads of the north. As Crawford walked the pastures that had, only a decade or two before, been covered with cutover pine forests and gullied cotton fields, his eyes saw only the landscape of a true western. “It is a rustic setting, these rolling, thin-tree-environmented hills of western Montgomery County,” he explained. “It is an environment that takes you back to youth and dreams of western type adventures and the rugged, individualistic, everyday existence of that once and always Texas Knight in buckskin riggings.” He admitted that the heroic cowboy image, with his daring rescues and heroic shootouts, was a child’s fantasy that existed only in the movies. Yet even as Crawford debunked the romanticized TV cowboy image, he reaffirmed the county’s western image. The “real” cowboy, he pointed out, was defined not by his bravado but by his simple hard work and self-assured character. Rural life in Montgomery County promised “the city bound soul” the opportunity to carve out one’s own slice of this western lifestyle with its hard physical labor, its closeness to nature, and its solitude. For, as Crawford put it, “[t]here

58 “Local Farmers Vote to Sell Allotments,” CDC, December 1, 1965, p. 1, 3. Acreage figure is from Your County Program, 32.
exists today on ranches hereabouts a slightly modernized way of life directly descending from the days when cowboys were in their glory.” Garry Sharp, the modern cowboy, may have ridden the range in his pickup truck and slept outside only a few times a year, but he embodied the plain-spoken, hard-working cowboy. These ranches offered migrants like Sharp the opportunity to join local landowners in the pursuit of restorative labor, wide-open spaces, and peaceful, if rugged, repose from the hectic business world of Houston.  

A combination of factors played a role in crafting and disseminating Montgomery County’s western identity. The changes in agriculture and landscape described above laid the groundwork. Developers and the influx of Houstonians that they attracted reinforced this identity. A subset of suburban migrants came to the county to enjoy a lifestyle that revolved around the horse, open space, white privilege, and “country” values. Whether it was a wealthy businessman in the market for a thousand-acre ranch or a commuter searching for peace and quiet on a half-acre in a rural subdivision, the western myth and lifestyle was a valuable amenity. In a telling reversal, Montgomery County’s farm population, which bottomed out in 1960 at 1,931, rebounded to 3,199 by 1970—the result of urban and suburban migrants. Over the same period the rural, non-farm population went from 15,716 to 34,311, an increase of 118 percent. Many of these newcomers would ultimately join with locals in the celebration of this western identity and rural lifestyle.

This particular vision of rural life served both as a justification for their rejection of the city and, paradoxically, as a mark of their continued connections to the city. For such migrants,

60 This second figure included subdivisions and independent rural homes, people looking for their slice of the suburban countryside and those just moving for lower taxes and recreational or natural amenities. Lynn Curtis, Agriculture in the Gulf Coast State Planning Region: Implications for the Future (Austin: The Bureau of Business Research, The University of Texas, January 1975), 7 and “Extension Service for Year Cover Wide Range,” CDC, December 16, 1964, s. 1, p. 11.
white flight was not only a migration away from urban violence and integrated public space. It was also a migration to a countryside where the family would be safe, where black populations were small, and where kids could learn hard work, discipline, responsibility, and the joy of life in the outdoors. Responding to critics who saw 4-H as an anachronism in a suburbanizing county, the Conroe Courier responded, “[d]o you know that many people move here from larger cities, seeking a bit of acreage mainly for their children’s sakes? These parents wisely believe that having animals to care for gives a sense of responsibility.” Moving for the children meant escaping from the corrupting influences of the city and immersing them in the wholesome values of this western countryside. An exurban lifestyle promised a privileged upbringing for children that revolved around 4-H, the county fair, and equestrian sports. Those who moved to the country for the children found common ground with those whose roots kept them in the country in their shared insistence that raising a hog, a goat, chickens, or horses was an invaluable path to maturity. Even as agriculture became less important to the county’s economy, it became ever more significant as a lifestyle.

Western horse riding was the most culturally significant of these activities. Equestrian breeding and riding required more money, claimed more property, and incited more envy than any other recreational activity on the metropolitan fringe. In a world of automobiles, tractors, and All Terrain Vehicles, the horse was an economic and social anachronism. This fact only added to its attractiveness. Equestrian money, land uses, and social life attached markers of exclusivity, class privilege, and status to Montgomery County’s rolling pastureland and country homes.

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61 The families who came to the county for its rural life were uniformly white. Out of the hundreds of family histories compiled in Montgomery County History, there is only one example of a non-white family participating in exurban ranching or homesteading. Interestingly, this family was not black, but Latino. A small subset of rural blacks remained in the county and continued their involvement in 4-H programs. They were the exception and were rarely involved in the booming 4-H equestrian programs. Birdie Gilbert, “Rodriguez Family” in Montgomery County History, 457; Linda Dowlen Roberts, “A Growing Experience,” CDC, October 10, 1979, B1.
Whether they stabled their horses in half-acre rural subdivision lots, rented stalls from rural landowners, or rode on newly refurbished ranches, the thousands of white professionals and businessmen who moved their families to Montgomery County replaced productive agriculture with a landscapes of status and leisure. As Montgomery County extension agent Morris Straughn put it, this type of farming was not “not making money, [it was] spending money.”

Horse riding in Montgomery County had few of the trappings of Eastern equestrian culture. Tradition, geography, cultural expectation, and the influence of Houston ranching organizations combined to place the county squarely in the tradition of western riding. Where eastern riding followed the British tradition in focusing on decorum, status, and grace, western riding prized boldness, flexibility, and strength. Eastern horse shows featured jumping and dressage. Western shows featured barrel racing, cutting, and roping. Western riders embellished the cowboy image and the style that went along with it. Eastern riders usually rode thoroughbreds. Western riders preferred quarter horses. Eastern riders donned English riding clothes and the trappings of Anglo culture. This division was never absolute, and the cultural lines became even more blurred as the popularity of recreational horse riding spread. Which style an individual rider chose was certainly influenced by both personality and gender norms. Still, Montgomery County was dominated by western riders.

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62 Morris Straughn Interview; On the popularity of horses in the county, see “4-H Horse Clubs Growing at a Dead Run in County,” CDC, January 1, 1964, s. 2, p. 5. This was part of a national surge in the popularity of equestrian sports. W. A. Cowan, “The Comeback of the Horse,” Chronicle of the Horse, January 9, 1970, 6-8 and “Country Clubs for Backyard Horses,” Chronicle of the Horse, February 4, 1972, 2, 47.

63 For more on the equestrian cultural divide, see Barraclough, Making the San Fernando Valley, 119-121. The development of River Plantation, in southern Montgomery County, was a notable exception to the local dominance of western-style riding. The subdivision’s southern plantation revival theme and its almost exclusively urban clientele channeled its equestrian culture into eastern style riding. Even here, though, horse competitions also included western events. “RP Plans Horse Show,” CDC, November 2, 1976, p. 7; “River Plantation Holds Horse Show,” CDC, s. 2, p. 4. Loudoun County saw a rise in the interest in western riding as horse riding became more suburbanized and democratized. There is also some evidence that western riding became a way for non-elite rural families, many of whom had connections to the cattle industry, to emphasize their social and cultural distance from the county’s foxhunters. “Ready for the Rodeo,” LTM, September 6, 1962, A1, “Leesburg Has Rodeo Sunday,”
Quarter horses dominated Montgomery County’s equestrian scene. This all-around breed had a long tradition as a ranch horse in Texas. Its quick reaction times and mild temperament made it perfect for the type of riding that became popular in the area. Because of this, quarter horses were the fastest growing breed in Texas in the 1960s. Some area ranchers of means entered the world of quarter horse breeding and racing. A few high-quality quarter horse barns popped up in the area to serve Houston clientele, but most businessmen who owned well-bred horses maintained them on their own ranches. Race horses may have drawn the big money, but youth programs made up the day-to-day fare of the county’s equestrian scene. Parents believed that the experience of caring for and riding horses would build character in their children. 

Beginning with the Conroe Horse Club, local 4-H groups organized to serve this new horse culture. Members held their first western youth horse show in the spring of 1958 and their first field day in 1960. By 1964 there were four such 4-H horse clubs in the county. By the end of the decade, monthly 4-H horse shows were attracting upwards of 500 spectators to enjoy these western-themed competitions. Similar private shows spread across the county, as recreational subdivisions and private ranches also hosted equestrian events. These horse events became


“Final Plans for First Horse Show Completed,” CDC, April 10, 1958, 1, “4-H Horse Club Field day held at Otis Slaughter Ranch,” CDC, October 22, 1961, 3, “4-H Horse Clubs Growing at a Dead Run in County,” CDC, January 1, 1964, s. 2, p. 5, “Horse Show will Start at 1 p.m. On Saturday,” CDC, April 29, 1964, s. 2, p. 9, and “Spring Horseshow Draws 300 Riders to River Plantation,” CDC, May 2, 1972, s. 2, p. 1.
both widespread by the late 1960s. Horse and livestock ownership was expensive, requiring substantial investments in land, feed, equipment, and veterinary care. These expenses inspired grumbling among working-class rural people. One of the reasons for the failure of a major park bond in Montgomery County in 1968 was, in the Courier’s words, the fear that it “was inspired and pushed by a special interest group. . . . Specifically, the horse lovers and owners who constitute an elite minority in this county.”

Tracking exactly how many horses resided in the county is difficult. Agricultural census data only covers farms, not subdivisions, and therefore captures only a minority of the horses in the county. Even so, by the mid-1970s, this equestrian culture reversed what had been a decades-long decline in both the number of horses and the number of farms with horses. The former bottomed out at 712 in 1974. By 1978 it was back up to 985. Over the next four years it more than doubled to 1,982.

When developers pitched their recreational subdivisions, they combined the early twentieth-century image of suburban exclusivity, access to nature, and a family-centered home with strong western symbols and equestrian amenities—a suburban lifestyle of the saddle club rather than the country club. One advertisement promised, “delightful ranchettes and acreage, a mere 35-miles from Houston, where you can keep a horse, forget about high taxes and crowded neighborhoods, sing or shout without inhibition.” Jim Fuller, a prominent local developer, opened his Frontier Hills development in 1965. He described it as “Big Wooded Western Resort Subdivision” with “a real western atmosphere.” At the center of the development, Fuller placed a “western city,” a commercial strip done up in the shape of a frontier town. At the subdivision

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69 The way that the agricultural census was distributed also played a role in further undercounting the number of horses. It was the responsibility of owners of newly formed farms to opt in to the agricultural census. This meant that a large proportion of those purchasing ranchettes or farminettes were not represented in these figures. Agricultural Census, Texas, County Data; Cory Childs, Interview with Author, March 29, 2013, Leesburg, Va.
open houses held by the local chamber of commerce, Frontier Hill’s table boasted a collection of antique weapons that “helped to tame the savage land.” The “relics” in this collection “were probably used by our forefathers to fend off Indian attacks or by the Army to widen our Frontiers.” Residents, though, need not fear that such dangers would confront them. In Frontier Hills, the frontier was closed. As Fuller’s advertisers put it, “[b]ehind these locked gates is your paradise on earth.”71 To complete the western lifestyle package, the development maintained its own stables, rodeo facilities, and miles of bridle paths. Residents could ride across this frontier, embellishing their western fantasies to their heart’s content without the fear that any real danger or even unexpected adventure would sneak into their exclusive development.72

These equestrian amenities lured prospective home buyers to the county. Stagecoach Farms, Lazy River, Wigwam Springs, Southern Oaks, Arrowhead Lakes, Lake Bonanza, Tri-Lakes Estates, and Forest Hills subdivisions all opened in the county during the 1960s and offered equestrian facilities. Southern Oaks promised that “junior can have a horse.” Lazy River included its own rodeo arena, riding ring, stables, and bridle paths. Tri-Lake Estates ran its own yearly trail ride and western festival. Even in Oak Ridge North, a stereotypical cookie-cutter suburb situated along the interstate near the southern border with Harris County, residents could still secure extra large lots laid out specifically for horses. Some of these developments packaged horse facilities with western chic; others simply added these facilities to a list of recreational amenities. As the county’s equestrian reputation improved, the general caliber of these subdivisions went up. The Reserve, a master-planned subdivision near the Lake Conroe

71 “Frontier Lakes Offers Western Country Resort Type Living,” CDC, November 22, 1964, 12.
72 “Frontier Hills to Have ‘Western City’ Display,” HC, September 15, 1963, Special Insert, p. 7, “Conroe: Texas’ Most Beautiful City for Family Living,” HC, April 5, 1964, s. 11, p. 11 (first and second quotations), and “Frontier Lakes Offers Western Country Resort Type Living,” CDC, November 22, 1964, p. 12 (third, fourth, fifth, and sixth quotations). Such western-themed subdivisions were common across the suburbanizing West. See Barraclough Making the San Fernando Valley, 1-2, 93-94; For a more socially exclusive, less suburban iteration of this horse culture, see Mark Friedberger, “Mink and Manure.”
reservoir, later offered over two hundred lots with stable facilities for as many horses, ten miles
of bridle trails, a training track, three arenas, and accommodations for groomsmen and riding
instructors. Montgomery County’s western image and equestrian culture was, by the 1980s, a

The equestrian world was only the most popular of the county’s leisured agricultural
pursuits and youth programs. Raising show animals drew the most attention. It was also with
show animals that the line between suburban and rural lifestyles blurred the most. In reading
accounts of 4-H participants, it is impossible to determine where the farm animal ends and the
suburban pet begins. Changes within agriculture fueled this confusion. The new economics and
technologies of production had disconnected much of the value of these pigs, horses, sheep, and
goats from their commodity price. The Old McDonald farm with its diversity of animals and
products was no longer economically feasible when feed lots could produce these animals far
more cheaply and when grocery stores sold them below the family farm’s cost of production.
Keeping farm animals, therefore, took on new meanings for rural children, whether they lived on
the suburban fringe or in the countryside. Owners kept these animals knowing full well that they
would rarely see a financial return their investment. For those who kept such animals for
production, agriculture itself became a hobby—a voluntary decision, often in opposition to
economic cues, made for lifestyle reasons. For those who raised these animals to show, the
motivation was a mixture of economic speculation (for scholarship money) and the emotional
connections and companionship that characterize pet ownership. These animals were judged less
on market criteria such as their value as breeding stock or as meat, than on their appearance, their pedigree, and how well they were cared for. The 4-H kids pampered their animals, subjecting them to shampoo, hair spray, talcum powder, and a bevy of other beauty products. They showed a level of care and concern with them that had more in common with suburban dogs and cats than it did with traditional agriculture. One boy whose animals made it to the Houston Livestock Show brushed his calves’ hair three hours a day and quartered them in a room with three large fans and a fogging machine to keep them cool and ensure that they looked their best. Even cattle and poultry, which still played significant roles in the local agricultural economy, became more pets than commodities under such treatment. Such suburban families often defied the line between rural homestead and subdivision. Many county subdivisions welcomed and even promoted the raising of project animals. Those whose restrictive covenants expressly forbade livestock and poultry often made exceptions for 4-H.

The county fair, held every March, celebrated the lifestyle and rural values these residents had chosen for themselves and their children. County fairs have been so enshrined in popular culture as part of a timeless rural life that it is difficult to appreciate how quickly the fair expanded in a short a time beginning in the 1960s. The fair was anything but a ghost dance for rural life. It was a product of suburban and exurban growth. Its period of most rapid expansion coincided with the first wave of metropolitan development in the county. Where only a few area

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75 Martin and Winningham, Going Texan, 167.
77 See, for instance, Mike Bryan, “Raising Stock a Family Affair,” CDC, February 28, 1975, 1.
78 Other suburban kids boarded their show animals with rural landowners. Larry Jacobs Interview; Gary Louie, Interview by Author, November 9, 2012, Conroe, Tex.
Kids had shown animals in the 1950s, by the mid-1960s, youth clamored to take part, goading parents to dig deep into their pockets to help their children find a way to keep a show animal. Children who raised a cow or horse, they believed, could not go wrong. 79 Bob Youngblood, a local horse trainer, expressed this conviction when he claimed that caring for and riding a horse was “the closest to life a child can get.” 80 The county fair, and the country life it celebrated, was about growing character, not crops. It was about raising quality children just as much as it was about raising quality animals. 81 This conviction was a major factor in the fair’s growth. By 1974 over 30,000 people were attending annually in a county where the population had just topped 72,000. 82 Morris Straughn, a local extension agent, remembered, “it was unreal how it grew.” The county fair was the “in thing. . . if you wasn’t part of the fair. . . you were on the outside.” Participation in the fair served as a litmus test of one’s belonging in the county. Stuart Traylor, a lifetime member of the board, talked about membership in the fair association as a sign that “you’ve arrived,” a social achievement analogous to membership in a country club or social fraternity. Straughn explained that participation in the fair was “kind of a status symbol,” a badge of rurality. 83 When rural life and western symbols meant class and status, claims to belonging in this subculture were claims to local power.

The county’s 4-H clubs drew on the broader, western-themed, exurban culture to integrate new residents into the lifestyle. They started holding events related to western fashion,

82 The county’s population grew so rapidly in the early 1970s, with the opening of The Woodlands, a large master-planned community, and the Lake Conroe reservoir and a booming metropolitan oil economy, that it is difficult to get accurate population estimates. The 72,000 figure is from Dallas Morning News, Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1976-1977 (Dallas, Tex.: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1975), 336. The official U.S. census count in 1970 was just under 50,000. By 1980 that number had reached 128,000. Census of Population, Montgomery County, Texas, Population Schedules, 1970 and 1980.
83 Morris Straughn Interview (first, second, and fourth quotations); Stuart Traylor, Interview by Author, November 11, 2010, Montgomery, Tex. (third quotation).
horticulture, wildlife, and equestrian activities. This new 4-H applied its long-standing commitments to teaching practical life skills, building character, and developing citizenship to rural and exurban youth. These efforts were largely successful. The county added six new 4-H clubs in 1973-74 and claimed a substantial increase in participation that year. Ervin Kaatz, an extension agent, boasted, “[w]e can visualize a 4-H club or project group in every subdivision in Montgomery County.” While overly optimistic, such claims reflect 4-H’s role in exurban life.

The yearly “Go Texan” celebration that preceded the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo did more than any other institution to popularize this western myth in the city’s hinterland. By 1972 Houston hosted the largest livestock show in the world, drawing cattlemen, breeders, meat packers, and equipment dealers from across the region, state, and nation. For entertainment, the Houston Livestock Show offered a slate of western performers that was the envy of the nation. From the mid-1950s onward, Rodeo organizers sent touring “goodwill ambassadors” across East Texas to raise the Rodeo’s profile. These delegations came both as emissaries from the metropolis and as prophets calling locals to embrace what had become almost a civic religion of western culture.

Montgomery County responded to the call. Ranchers and local agricultural groups joined with the local chamber of commerce’s agricultural committee to establish a yearly Go Texan Day celebration in the county seat of Conroe. They held the first in 1965. The United Merchants of Conroe, facing increasing competition from Houston and Harris County merchants with the construction of nearby Interstate 45, jumped at the chance to bring crowds of people back to downtown. Ranchers and newcomers saw an opportunity to promote agriculture and rural youth

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84 “4-H Clubs Project Increased Growth,” CDC, May 26, 1974, D6; see also Roberts, “A Growing Experience” and “4-H is Youth Opportunity says Agent,” April 8, 1974, s. 2, p. 1;
activities. Many suburban residents saw it as a way to integrate themselves into the county’s social circles. Some joined in simply for the fun of the show. The yearly celebration of ranching and cowboy culture caught fire, quickly surpassing any of the county’s other parades and celebrations in scope and intensity.  

Houston Rodeo organizers had begun the tradition of dressing in western wear during the weeks leading up to the Rodeo in the early 1940s. Conroe leaders grabbed hold of the tradition and made it their own. Western street decorations for the month-long celebration went up on the courthouse square starting in late January. Organizers, backed by the Conroe Courier, called for residents to wear western gear and costumes throughout the month, even to work. For those unfamiliar with western clothes, the Courier published a special guide to instruct incompetent town folk, suburbanites, and uninitiated rural people on how to appropriately embrace a western identity. “Don’t mind if the real cowboys smile when you walk by,” the editor chided, “[j]ust because they’ve just slogged through a cow pen, don’t you feel self-conscious in your clean boot heels, smelling only of leather.” The United Merchants of Conroe carried western wear in their stores to outfit participants. Local horse clubs demonstrated proper western wear to their audiences. Western wear spread beyond just February. Cowboy hats and boots became a year-round symbol of local power and authority. Local Democratic politicians made sure that the Courier pictured them wearing these markers of identity and white authority whenever election

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days came around. Western wear became so entrenched, that some outside developers found it difficult to navigate local power structures unless they too donned cowboy hats and boots.  

The ceremonies began at 9:30 on a Saturday morning in early February. A western band played to set the mood. The parade included the president of the Houston Rodeo, L.M. Pearce Jr., and Houston chief of police, Herman Short, in addition to the usual hand-waving politicians, banner-toting service organizations, and the high school band. Local 4-H clubs, the home demonstration club, a group of self-described newcomers, and other local groups spent weeks constructing floats for the occasion. The newcomers’ 1966 float, which won first prize, cast their real-life white flight to Conroe as a frontier journey, complete with Conestoga wagon, clanging dishware, and pioneer gear. Residents of the newly opened, luxurious Panorama Golf Club formed the “Panorama Herd,” a line of golf carts full of women in cowboy hats. The Conroe Country Cousins, a square dancing club founded by air traffic controllers who moved to the area in 1965, spent weeks working on their often prize-winning western floats. The Go Texan parade brought suburban, exurban, and rural people together to celebrate Texas’ western identity.

Conroe’s shootout put to shame any of the spectacle that would follow a week later in Houston. On one level, it was a bit of theater for the kids—a chance for the crowds to enjoy a reenactment of their favorite western B-movies. Understood in the county’s larger cultural and social context, however, the shootout takes on a more complex meaning. The ceremony, symbols, and traditions that made up the shootout hint at the intertwining of the region’s deeply ingrained southern identity with the symbols of its newfound western identity. The shootout assembled local residents to celebrate law and order and the triumph of the white male over the

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89 ‘Newcomers Win Parade Float First Prize,” CDC, February 23, 1966, 1; “Conroe Country Cousins Square Dance Club” in Montgomery County History, 152.
forces of social decay. It also echoed many of the social and cultural meanings of southern lynching, repackaged within the trappings of western culture.

Residents looked forward to the shootout with eager anticipation. During the week leading up to the event, the Conroe Courier plastered fictional wanted posters for the “despicable seven” across its pages and posted daily accounts of their movements. The stage was set for an classic western showdown. Anyone who sighted the “bad guys” was supposed to call “the good guys.” County sheriff “Cowboy” Gene Reaves, a prominent local rancher and sawmill-owner whose local roots went back three generations and whose tenure as sheriff would last until 1980, led his group of western heroes. Reaves’ persona was intimidating to say the least. The Houston Chronicle once described him as “lean, rawhide-tough, with a face that has the impact of a fist.” He and his fellow “good guys” were clad in white. The showdown began promptly at nine in the morning, as the “bad guys,” wearing black, rode into the courthouse square to the “boos” of a packed crowd. From there, they kidnapped county judge Jonathan Thornberry and bank president Seth Dorbant. As they prepared to make their escape, the “good guys” swooped in and started a gunfight in the street, ducking behind covered wagons and hay bales and eventually subduing the despicable seven. They then marched the desperados up the stairs of the gallows, constructed especially for the occasion, and pretended to hang them all in front of the crowds that reached as many as 8,000 people. Houston KPRC-TV and KNRO radio both broadcast the entire spectacle to allow the wider metropolis to participate in meting out justice to these outlaws.90

Montgomery County residents celebrated and participated in a stylized, westernized street theater lynching. This event had profound racial implications.91 Even more importantly for this chapter, the Go Texan celebration demonstrates the power of western symbols and western identity to tie Houston to Conroe and the county’s newcomers to long-time agrarians. Historians of lynching in Texas have emphasized the way ritualized violence both rested upon and reinforced a sense of shared historical memory and white identity. In Conroe’s shootout, those suburban newcomers who joined the crowds took up a western historical memory and identity. Within the reassuring safety of street theater, these white suburbanites “lynched to belong.” They joined in as every February the shootout reminded locals that they lived in a place where white supremacy and traditional values remained unquestioned.92

At the same time, westernizing and fictionalizing lynching did significantly alter its meaning. The shootout spoke to similar social fears, but it did so through cultural performance. Where actual lynching was an act of direct racial and social oppression as well as personalized violence, this modern, western lynching was victimless and therefore lacked the strong edge of social oppression. Yet, western tropes also broadened the message of lynching beyond racial control. Like the conservatism that coalesced across the South and the nation at the time, the event’s appeal subsumed racism in a wider appeal to law and order, the reaffirmation of white men’s martial strength, and the perpetuation of white privilege. This appeal had deep cultural roots and strong support in the culture and politics in both the South and the West. As Michael Pfeifer has argued, lynching in both regions shared a commitment to what he terms “rough

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91 For a more in-depth discussion of the shootout’s racial and cultural implications, see Andrew C. Baker, “From Rural South to Metropolitan Sunbelt: Creating a Cowboy Identity in the Shadow of Houston,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 117 (July 2014) (forthcoming).
Figure 6.4: Photos of lawmen accompanied published images of violence and execution, establishing for readers the former’s approval of and participation in the latter. Conroe Courier. Feb. 4, 1968.
justice.” In contrast to procedural justice, rough justice was personal, violent, and enforced by the broader community. The shootout validated police-sanctioned “rough justice” as a means of preserving the racial and social order.93

Many in the county had reason to be attracted to this no-nonsense brand of justice. A civil rights protest at historically black Texas Southern University in southeast Houston boiled over into a riot in 1967, confirming some of the worst fears of Montgomery County residents. Houston police responded with excessive force, arresting 489 male students and trashing much of the campus, but the psychological damage was done. Urban violence had come to Houston, and many chose to leave the city rather than face the next outbreak. The threat of integration of the city’s schools also hovered over Houston’s white communities in the late 1960s. Lawsuits against Houston’s ineffective freedom of choice integration plan resulted in a 1970 decision that ordered city schools to begin busing. White flight on a massive scale ensued. Houston Independent School District (HISD) lost 38,000 students to the suburbs during the 1970s, and the percentage of whites enrolled declined from 49.9 percent in 1970 to only 25.1 percent by 1980. Montgomery County was a refuge for such people.94

In an era charged with social tension, when the city of Houston was supposedly rocked with racial conflict and perceived lawlessness, when urban whites fled to the safety of the

93 Michael J. Pfeifer, Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 2-4; Even a cursory examination of criminal complaints filed in the local district court and county court reveal that death threats, brandishing firearms, beatings, and other markers of this type of rough justice persisted within the county into the 1970s. See, for example: “Willis Attorney Killed in ‘Fist Fight’ At Cow Palace,” CDC, March 27, 1968, p. 1.
94 HISD leaders were able to shield most white students from the consequences of busing by defining Latino students as white and busing them to largely black schools, and vice versa. This did little to calm white fears. Figures from William Henry Kellar, Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 161, 164. See also Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001) and Brian D. Behnken, “Elusive Unity: African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Civil Rights in Houston” in Debra A. Reid, ed., Seeking Inalienable Rights: Texans and their Quests for Justice (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009): 123-145; On the TSU incident, see Kellar, Make Haste Slowly, 152-154.
countryside, this small-town performance reinforced the belief that, at least on the city’s metropolitan fringe, law and order persisted. These contemporary fears occasionally boiled to the surface in coverage. At one point the paper referred to the bank robbers as “punks,” a term that owed more to the era of the Kerner Commission than it did to the “Wild West.”

Large numbers of refugees from the city joined with locals in the celebration of the stabilizing myths of the western. For families who moved to the county to escape busing and the threat of urban riots, the figure of a white sheriff empowered to exact swift and brutal justice was a reassuring sight. A police force that could handle armed desperados could certainly handle drug pushers, unruly blacks, and juvenile delinquents. This shared celebration spoke to fears common to metropolitan whites. By adopting the trappings of a western lynching spectacle, town and rural residents marked out common ground with newcomers and reaffirmed their commitment to a justice system that acted swiftly to punish the guilty and would protect this suburbanizing county from urban violence.

Figure 6.5: One of the many trail rides as it made its way toward Memorial Park west of downtown Houston, c.1970. William C. Martin and Geoff Winningham, Going Texan: The Days of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo (Toronto, Canada: Herzig-Somerville, Ltd., 1972),30.

95 “As Always the ‘Good Guys Win’,” CDC, February 4, 1968, s. 1, p. 7.
If the shootout represented the darker side of Montgomery County’s adopted western culture, the yearly trail rides that followed it every year celebrated the community spirit and light-hearted fun that came with the western lifestyle. Having fled the city for the safety of the country, county residents yearly returned to the city to have this adopted lifestyle validated. Every year, during the week after Conroe’s Go Texan celebration, the Montgomery County and Sam Houston Trail Riders would begin their multi-day trek on horseback and by wagon to the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. The nearly one thousand riders from the county, a mixture of horse enthusiasts from suburban developments, small towns, and local ranches slowly made their way back to Houston each year, camping overnight on their way. Once in Houston, they gathered in the city’s Memorial Park with an estimated 5,400 other trail riders from as far away as western Louisiana. This larger group would then march through downtown in the city’s Go Texan parade. The Montgomery County trail rides promised family entertainment, including country dances and barbecues, often with a helping of drinking and carousing involved. These trail riders performed their western heritage on a metropolitan stage. For Montgomery County, the trail rides also advertised their county’s western culture to prospective homebuyers.96

Both Houston and its rural hinterland had much to gain through this celebration. The trail riders reaffirmed the bayou city’s western identity. Once in Houston, the riders paraded past the fabulous mansions of the Memorial area and through the streets of downtown. As they marched

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96 Local trail boss Malcolm King, for instance, had been inspired by the trail riders to move from Houston to a seven-acre ranchette in 1971 in order to allow his kids to participate; The trail ride tradition began as a Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo publicity stunt in 1952. The first, the Salt Grass Trail Ride from Brenham, followed the historical route used by cowboys in the 1870s as they drove their cattle to the pastures along the Gulf Coast. By 1972, that particular trail ride boasted 1,600 participants and claimed to be the largest organized horseback ride in modern times. The Sam Houston Trail Ride, which left from Montgomery, began in 1955. The Montgomery County Trail Ride, from Conroe, began a decade later. Martin and Winningham, Going Texan, 19-30, Chesnar, February Fever, 221, Ernesto Valdés, “The Trail Rides: The Oldest and Longest,” Houston History 7 (Fall, 2009), 37-39, Salt Grass Trail Association, Special Bulletin, February 1965, Folder Houston Farm and Ranch Club, Box 1448, Elliott Collection, and “Home of Trail Riders,” CDC, February 20, 1968, s.1, p. 6. Participation figures are from “Annual Pilgrimage,” CDC, February 21, 1968, p. 1 and Carol Clarke, “Trail Ride Winds to an End,” CDC, February 22, 1980, p. 1, 4.
down the skyscraper-lined avenues, trail riders joined the mayor and local officials on horseback in a combined celebration of a metropolitan western identity bound up in image of the horse and the cowboy. In an increasingly international city whose dramatic economic growth fueled rapid immigration from across the nation and the world, the trail riders asserted a vision of Houston’s shared southwestern heritage.97

The city, in turn, celebrated the lifestyle chosen by these rural and exurban residents. Houston invited these trail riders to parade their western identity in front of the cheering metropolis. In completing the ride, as the Courier put it, “[e]ach boy or girl, man or woman, experiences the same accomplishment in miniature of much longer trips their ancestors made in moving west.” Both rural and suburban residents could celebrate the frontier movements that brought them to the area.98 In effect, the city signed off on the white privilege and white flight that undergirded this horse culture in exchange for the rider’s participation in the city’s western festival. As Houston rapidly expanded its borders toward the county line during the 1960s and early 1970s, county residents began to defensively incorporate their subdivisions in order to protect their freedom from the city’s reach.99 Even as they fiercely resisted annexation, these residents basked in the city’s yearly celebration of their rural world. The Rodeo had begun as an attempt to tie the urban agricultural businessmen of Houston to the agricultural producers of the city’s economic hinterland. By the 1960s, the trail rides themselves had become one of the most important products the county shipped to Houston. As they paraded down the streets of Houston on horseback, their broad brim hats prominently displayed, their covered wagons in tow, the trail

97 On the cultural connections between southern cities and their rural hinterlands, see David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).
98 “Western Fever Takes Over,” 13 (first and second quotation).
riders tied themselves all the more fully to the metropolis and validated Houston’s own attempts to obscure its southern past and continued racial problems.\textsuperscript{100}

Within Montgomery County, this ascendant western identity both drew its strength from and obscured the county’s transformation from rural to suburban. The rural subdivisions that developers constructed across the county took land out of farming, ranching, and forest. They also erased the markers of southern rural life. The western-themed subdivision of Stagecoach Farms was an example of this. A white landowner built the community on top of acreage that had been farmed by a dozen black families who worked at Swinley’s mill in the 1930s. The owner saw a greater profit to be had in residential development than in farming. In the mid-1950s, he dredged Lake Apache and Lake Hardin and subdivided the land into large, horse-friendly lots. Open as they were only to people “of the Caucasian Race,” the plots found a ready market among Houstonians looking for a place in the country. The subdivision boasted its own home demonstration club and a strong community social life. Residents voted to incorporate their country subdivision of nearly 100 homes into the town of Stagecoach in March, 1974. The only evidence of the black farmers who went before was an old barbed wire fence among the underbrush on the outskirts of town. The development of rural subdivisions replaced the social world of the rural South with a whitened rural world of leisure, 4-H, and single family homes.\textsuperscript{101}

The irony of the shift to improved pastures and ranching in Montgomery County was that it paved the way for a set of rural and suburban land uses whose most important product was

\textsuperscript{100} Rural African Americans hosted their own trail ride as well, representing the often neglected black cowboy. The Prairie View Trail Ride, established in 1957 and originating near what is now Prairie View A&M University, brought its own interpretation of western culture. They rode into town blaring the theme from Shaft and the music of James Brown. Go-go girls on the back of the wagon and dancing horses rounded out their performance. This mixture of urban African American and western culture drew cheers from African American crowds. The Prairie View Trail Ride, however, did little to destabilize the larger meaning of the parade. The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo added a Latino trail ride, the Los Vaqueros Trail Ride, into the celebration in 1974. Martin and Winningham, \textit{Going Texan}, 50, and Ernesto Valdés, “The Trail Rides,” 38-39.

leisure rather than beef. Equestrian culture, gentleman ranching, and country subdivisions together formed a locally articulated alternative to suburban sprawl as it spread across the metropolitan landscape. Montgomery County ranchers reformed the county’s landscapes in a way that opened the area up to a particular brand of agrarian exurbia that would have otherwise been slow to take root in what remained a timber-dominated county of recreational subdivisions, lake-front resorts, and bedroom communities. The popularity of equestrian homesteads and gentlemen ranching in the county accelerated the inflation of land values and the transfer of land from full-time ranchers and rural landowners to Houstonians. Those who wanted to continue to ranch packed up their equipment and their livestock, made a fortune off their land, and bought even larger acreages farther from Houston. Others simply cashed out and retired in local subdivisions. As Morris Straughn, county extension agent in the 1960s, explained it, “people had never seen that kind of money.” The few who could afford to continue raising cattle in the county did so for a series of reasons that shared a great deal with those articulated by newcomers. Stuart Traylor, a long-time rancher in the area, summarized his decision to continue to ranch in the county this way: “we farm because we like to, that’s basically it.” Farming and ranching were now lifestyle choices—open for any who had the means to pursue them and containing their own amenities and values.

Western symbols, identity, and culture served two major functions in suburbanizing Montgomery County. First, western myths validated these racially and socially exclusive landscapes of open space and leisure. By explaining these landscapes as a lifestyle choice and by connecting them to landscapes that had no legacy of racialized slavery, suburban and rural

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102 County Commissioner Bobby Yancey was one of the many to do so as land values continued to rise. By selling his land, he was able to purchase 6,000 acres in Leon County. Stuart Traylor Interview.
103 Morris Straughn Interview.
104 Stuart Traylor Interview.
residents obscured the complex rural history of dispossession and segregation that created these metropolitan spaces.  

Secondly, western identity provided common cultural ground between locals and newcomers. Western culture promoted a set of shared values that defined Sunbelt conservatism: fierce independence, martial strength, and meritocratic individualism. The lack of explicit racism surrounding Go Texan Day allowed residents of this metropolitan fringe county to reaffirm a strong commitment to law and order, an idealized western past, and white privilege without being labeled bigots or cultural outsiders by the wider national culture. Newcomers who had little interest in southern culture and conservatism found common ground with these southerners within the values and rhetoric of the West. For the southerners who made up the more rooted segment of the county’s population, western myths reinforced and reaffirmed the particular blend of personalized violence, white supremacy, and masculine self-reliance that had defined region. At the same time, these myths reinterpreted these local values for the postwar world. In rebranding their lifestyles, their town, and their county as western, Montgomery County residents traded their membership in a region nationally portrayed as social pariah for membership in the West.

As Laura Barraclough argues in her study of California’s San Fernando Valley, “rural landscapes have been a crucial locus for the production and reproduction of white economic and social privilege. . . because they [naturalize] and make invisible inequalities and relationships of power, all in the name of regional and national heritage.” Barraclough Making the San Fernando Valley, 8. See also Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, eds., Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Place, Space, and Region (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 13-16.

CHAPTER 7
ENSHRINING THE COUNTRYSIDE
THE PRESERVATION CULTURE OF WESTERN LOUDOUN

County board of supervisors chairman J. Emory Kirkpatrick received a telegram on January 14, 1958, that opened a new chapter in the history of Loudoun County. The Eisenhower Administration had selected Chantilly, Virginia, located just across the Fairfax County line, as the site of the nation’s first jet airport. The *Loudoun Times Mirror* struck a tone of cautious optimism as it reported the news. The editor encouraged readers that the rapid population growth and suburban development that the airport would bring could be worth it if it also brought jobs and much-needed tax revenue. Many Loudouners, however, wanted none of it. Local resident Merlin Johnson penned his own response to the airport. “It is a bureaucratic invasion,” he proclaimed in a letter to the editor,

> as inevitable [and] devastating [as] a glacier. It is backed by the one invincible conqueror of our time—the Tax Collector. Soon, along with federal bureaus, we can expect to have civilization spewed all about our lovely landscape—schools, dedicated to the suppression of learning, homes replaced by boxes, the roar of traffic, the poisons of exhaust gases, maiming and murder by auto, juvenile crime waves, alcoholism, signboards, honky-tonks, gum wrappers, ever rising taxes, divorces, the pace that kills, boredom, anxiety, ulcers and meddling clubwomen.

In the face of such an onslaught, he feared, Loudoun’s “obsolete rural folk” were powerless.

What makes Johnson’s bilious spewing of southern, rural conservatism so fascinating is not his attack on modern development but the defense of agrarian Loudoun and its beauty that he interwove with it. Johnson went on to contrast Loudoun residents with urban society, “[w]e have child-like natures. Our delights are in such silly pleasures as the ghostly blue of the mountains, the lush rolling green of the fields, a lungfill [sic] of fresh air, a weedless garden, a goldfinch on the grapevine on the lawn, a moonlight lake over the pasture, the unexpected view from a hill top.” He feared the coming of “a
masterful people intoxicated by the joy of destroying other people’s rights?” Taken out of its context, this rapturous catalog of natural delights could just as easily have come from the writings of Aldo Leopold or an environmentalist tract. Yet these words came from the lips of an unreconstructed, agrarian conservative from Loudoun County.¹

Harry A. Finney, from the rural village of Lovettsville, took a similar stance a few years later in a letter to the editor opposing Sterling Park, the county’s first planned suburban development. “Please, since you consider this a time for imagination,” he castigated the Times-Mirror, which had written in support of the community,

try if you can, to imagine a time before the avarice of builders had converted watersheds into seas of concrete; when trees were not fit objects for destruction; when neighbors blessed with space and privacy occasionally were glad to meet and leisurely to pass the time of day. . . .

[C]ontemplate the tragic awakening from the American dream. Then blush for the rapacity which despoiled a continent and for your own recommendation for the final destruction of this splendid area which thus far has resisted, partially at least, the inroads of predatory realtors and their fright inspiring bulldozers. Perhaps you long for a bustling population of pulling, cry-baby alms seekers and for a chance to outtrival the Washington Post-Times Herald in bleeding, bleeding, bleeding from the heart. We’d like to see the [Loudoun County] Planning Commission hold the line.

Here, too, a Loudoun resident’s opposition to the bulldozer and its destruction of the county’s rural landscapes came packaged not with calls for grass-roots social activism and government-backed programs to protect nature but with a fierce condemnation of choleric, welfare-dependent suburbanites and the urban developers who catered to them.²

Historians looking for the roots of environmental activism have found them among socially progressive, middle-class, suburban white families angered over the destruction of nearby forests and creeks and the pollution of their air and water.³ People like Merlin Johnson

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and Henry Finney do not fit well within this frame. In Loudoun County, preservation and conservation groups found as much support among rural conservatives and blue-blooded socialites as they did among Loudoun’s suburban newcomers. They also drew support in their fight against development from rural people like Johnson and Finney who resented suburbanization as a federal and an urban takeover. Rural opposition to the increased taxes that came with suburban development was even more vocal. Understanding the complex shape of Loudoun’s response to suburban sprawl and environmental degradation requires a different tack. Rather than interpreting Loudoun’s response to suburban development through the lens of the national environmental movement, this chapter uses a wider angle lens to trace the outlines of local activism. What emerges is a diverse coalition of preservation and conservation movements working to protect and defend a broadly shared vision of Loudoun’s rural landscapes. The county’s past as a haven for both gentlemen farmers and those seeking suburban country life shaped its entry into the environmental decade. Loudoun’s slow-growth and preservation organizations had deep cultural and ideological roots in the same culture of preservation that motivated the anti.billboard activism of Vinton Pickens and Edith Sands and the conservation efforts of gentlemen farmers and foxhunters of Western Loudoun. The central tenet of this preservation culture was a deep commitment to the protection of rural land. Loudoun County’s preservation culture placed a preeminent value on the countryside—its aesthetic qualities, its

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history, and its sense of place. The ecological value of rural land added another set of values and justifications for a commitment already made. The shape of anti-sprawl activism was as much dependent on local factors as it was on the unfolding of a national environmental movement.\(^5\)

This approach goes against the tendency among environmental historians to divorce historical preservation from environmental preservation and to cede the study of the former to public historians and urban historians. It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the one without the other in Loudoun County. Here grass-roots opposition to suburban expansion and its consequences seamlessly combined the defense of the county’s historical buildings and homesteads with the defense of its open space and its wildlife. Both, in turn, supported an underlying commitment to the defense of a landscape whose historical homes, green pastures, stone walls, and rolling topography spoke to deep-seated cultural values among Loudoun preservationists and newcomers to the county’s suburban countryside. These Western Loudoun residents adopted as their homeland a rural world promising permanence, belonging, community, and rootedness.\(^6\) They defended this world and its placeness, for lack of a better word, against what they saw as an expanding frontier of crass commercialism, uniformity, transience, and

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\(^5\) Here this chapter builds on the work of Angela C. Halfacre, who uses the concept of conservation culture to characterize the shared commitment to protecting land, wildlife, and cultural heritage from unregulated development that she finds in the South Carolina Lowcountry. In her telling this particular constellation of conservation and preservation ideas sustained a strong commitment to the environment within a deeply entrenched social and political conservative culture. Where Halfacre uses the label conservation culture to emphasize the prominent role played by Lowcountry sportsmen-landowners, I have elected to use the label preservation culture to better capture the more prominent role played by historical preservationists and garden clubs in Loudoun’s activism. Conservationists were certainly active in Loudoun. The local Izaak Walton League chapter had a long history and wide membership among the county’s elite landowners. Yet, the group did little to exercise its potential influence in during the 1960s and 1970s and thereby abdicated its local leadership to other groups. Halfacre, *A Delicate Balance: Constructing a Conservation Culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012). On the Izaak Walton League, see Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day*, 47-48. For a more optimistic picture of the League’s involvement in environmental politics, see Karl Boyd Brooks, *Before Earth Day: The Origins of American Environmental Law, 1945-1970* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 95-97.

\(^6\) This chapter uses the term Western Loudoun to demarcate a shared identity and preservation culture that united those in the county fighting against sprawl and for environmental, historical, and farmland preservation. While local growth policy, the distribution of historical buildings and horse farms, and the relative proximity to the city would increasingly entrench this divide into a geographic east/west split, these boundaries remained fluid into the 1980s.
placelessness. In so doing they grasped hold of the meta-narrative that defined the historical preservation movement into the 1990s. There was a deep-seated irony in Western Loudoun’s taking up of this critique of a modern American frontier mentality. These migrants had left the city and come to the countryside in search of a new life, of a refuge from the economic opportunism and rapid development of the crabgrass frontier. They had moved to the metropolitan frontier to escape the economic culture and transience of the suburban frontier.7

In the process, these newcomers joined an already established elite rural community. At the same time, their arrival continued the process of reshaping this agricultural hinterland into a hotbed of rural gentrification. The Western Loudoun they defended was as socially exclusive and status-conscious as any elite suburb. American environmental activists have long fended off accusations that they represent the interests of the nation’s privileged classes. In Western Loudoun’s case, this critique hits rather close to the mark. Loudoun’s preservation movement retained and even celebrated the class-encoded aesthetic and social values and prejudices of the blue-blooded Virginians, foxhunters, retired military brass, and federal bureaucrats who filled its ranks. Beginning with the establishment of Hunt Country and continuing well into the 1970s and 1980s, Western Loudoun’s culture of refinement pervaded every aspect of the preservation movement, from the defense of farmland and open space to the creation of historical districts to the cleaning up of roadside litter. Refinement was central to Western Loudoun’s sense of place. Defending Western Loudoun, for these preservationists, was as morally significant as preventing the desecration of a Renaissance fresco or a Turner seascape. Western Loudoun was not only beautiful; it was priceless. While these activists never demonstrated the crass political calculation

and manipulation their accusers claimed, an elitist and occasionally aristocratic spirit seeped into much of the county’s opposition to sprawl.\(^8\)

Emphasizing the influence of a broader preservation culture on Loudoun’s response to sprawl should not obscure the significant impact that the broader national currents of environmentalism had on the county’s preservationist culture. Loudoun’s preservationists consciously bound their movement in the 1970s to the rising star of popular environmentalism. National critiques of pollution, waste, and sprawl stirred Loudoun residents on both sides of the suburban divide to continue residents’ efforts. Environmentalism provided activists with a new terminology and a more powerful grass-roots appeal, but it did not fundamentally shift the movement’s focus. Where much of environmentalism’s power came from its emphasis on chemical and nuclear pollution that people could not see, Loudoun preservationists continued to focus their energies on the sprawl, billboards, unplanned development, and roadside trash that demarcated a cluttered, disordered landscape with visual pollution.

Suburban Loudoun County came of age during the 1970s. The Loudoun County supervisors squared off against a building industry that had changed significantly since the first

\(^8\) One of the most prominent contemporary strategies to discredit environmentalism was to define this diverse and complex movement as merely a tool used by the nation’s upper-middle class to protect their interests and promote their values. Aaron Wildavsky, “Aesthetic Power or the Triumph of the Sensitive Minority Over the Vulgar Mass: A Political Analysis of the New Economics” in Roger Revelle and Hans H. Landsberg, eds., America’s Changing Environment (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), William Tucker, Progress and Privilege: America in the Age of Environmentalism (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982), and Bernard J. Frieden, The Environmental Protection Hustle (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1979). Such critiques were part of a larger political pushback against the successes of the environmentalist movement. Some of the most important work on environmentalism in the past two decades has taken up this critique, but with the purpose of uncovering the ways dominant environmentalist discourse has obscured fundamental class and racial differences in the way Americans have sought to protect nature. Ironically, one of the effects of this recent focus has been to reaffirm the aforementioned conservative attempts to discredit the environmental movement. By placing Loudoun’s environmental activism within the context of activists’ wider preservation commitments, this chapter reaffirms the diversity of the environmental movement while also exploring the local roots of this particular strain of conservatism and its ties to the land. Loudoun’s preservation culture was often supportive of and engaged in the environmental movement but was never subsumed within it. On the dangers of the elitist critique, see Bron Taylor, “‘It’s Not All about Us’: Reflections on the State of American Environmental History,” Journal of American History 100 (June 2013), 140-144.
postwar suburban developments of the late 1940s. Beginning in the mid 1960s, changes in development finance brought Fortune 500 companies into the development industry. Their involvement dramatically increased the scale and efficiency of suburban development. These companies purchased ever larger tracts and converted them into thousand-acre developments with increasing speed. Loudoun was no exception. U.S. Steel, Boise-Cascade, and Levitt and Sons were the most prominent corporations to stake a claim in Loudoun’s development.\(^9\) The involvement of these companies had a profound effect on the shape of Loudoun’s development politics. Earlier suburban development in other areas had subjected county leaders and residents to the death of a thousand cuts as single homes and small developments gradually inspired opposition when they multiplied and began polluting and bulldozing parts of the landscape. The sheer size of these developments subjected Loudoun politicians and residents to a high-stakes game where the board of supervisor’s approval or denial of one development would single-handedly transform thousands of acres and add thousands of people to the county population. This was the case for Sterling Park. It would happen repeatedly in Loudoun’s history.

This chapter first examines the county’s second major battle over development and its role in catalyzing and mobilizing Loudoun’s preservation culture in the war against sprawl. With this conflict as a backdrop it delves into the history of the four most prominent Western Loudoun organizations that made up the core of the county’s preservation culture. Opposition to sprawl and its effects motivated these groups—the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC), Keep Loudoun Beautiful (KLB), the Preservation Society of Loudoun County (PSLC), and the Waterford Foundation (WF)—to preserve the Western Loudoun countryside. The PEC was born among the horse farms and plantation homes of Western Loudoun and became a powerful advocate for environmental planning across the region. KLB began as an offshoot of local

\(^9\) Wiese, “‘The Giddy Rise of the Environmentalists’,” 31-34.
garden clubs. Its war on trash combined a defense of the county’s environment from pollution with a long-standing defense of a historically agrarian countryside from commercialism and clutter. These commitments would make KLB one of the state’s strongest advocates for container deposit laws. Historical preservationists, whether working independently or under the auspices of the PSLC or the Waterford Foundation, continued to restore, preserve, and develop the county’s historical roots in opposition to encroaching suburban development. In spite of their differences, each of these groups organized and defended a shared vision of the beauty and permanence of Loudoun’s landscapes against the sprawl and trash of modern urban and suburban life. Examining each reveals the value of looking at resistance to sprawl through a lens that places environmental activism within its broader local context. Furthermore, doing so reveals the continuing connections between city and countryside, even as newcomers to that countryside attempted to keep the city at arms length.

Western Loudoun’s preservation culture was born in Hunt Country and among the historical homes of northern Loudoun. It was mobilized and strengthened by the dramatic suburban expansion that began in the early 1960s. This growth exploded when federally funded metropolitan infrastructure improvements expanded a pre-existing demand for homes in the countryside. As earlier chapters have argued, Loudoun’s suburban history did not begin with the construction of Dulles Airport. It would be more accurate to say that the airport began the transformation from a county with suburbs to a suburban county. Dulles Airport and the Potomac interceptor sewer line combined with Sterling Park, their child, created Eastern Loudoun as a distinct region whose cultural, social, and economic ties bound it to the city. On the front porches of crossroads stores and behind the iron gates of the Leesburg courthouse lawn, locals grumbled
about the new Sterling Park and its strange city folk. The question on everybody’s mind was whether this development was a fluke or if it might be the shape of things to come.

The board of supervisors and the county’s planning department had already assumed the worst. Before the airport opened, county planners had begun to treat Route 15, the north-south state highway running through Leesburg, as agrarian Loudoun’s Maginot Line. Over the following half-century, this artificial boundary would mark an ever-sharpening division between the imagined communities of agrarian and historically minded Western Loudoun and suburban Eastern Loudoun. Where sectional lines had divided the county between North and South during the nineteenth century, metropolitan expansion now united Quaker northern Loudoun and Cavalier southern Loudoun against suburban eastern Loudoun. Eastern Loudoun’s poor clay-dominated soils, its economically marginal dairy farms, and its scarcity of stone farmhouses and historical villages each reinforced this division, but its fundamental cause was metropolitan expansion. Metropolitan residents seeking country life, historical roots, and agrarian beauty continued to flock to Western Loudoun. They increasingly scorned those who moved to the east for the more mundane benefits of good schools, cheap housing, recreation, and residential segregation. As this divide hardened, it erased Eastern Loudoun’s own history of catering to urban country-life-seekers and refashioned Western Loudoun into the exclusive heir of the county’s historical past. Sterling Park was not the only place in the county experiencing population growth. During the same decade, the rest of the county added nearly as many people, spread across the smaller subdivisions that popped up across the landscape, in the old town centers, and dotted across the countryside. Growth was centered in the east, but the West was anything but a timeless, historical, rural community.10

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10 Population statistics from “Loudoun County Growth Summary,” April 1, 1989, Folder County Population, Vertical Files, Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg, Va. (hereinafter TBL), 22. Leesburg was one of the three fastest-
The opening of Sterling Park became a political watershed on both sides of the east/west divide. The 1967 local election saw Eastern Loudoun voters replace longtime board of supervisors chairman and voice of the farmer Emory Kirkpatrick with young upstart Charles L. Waddell, who had fashioned himself as the voice of suburban interests. In the rest of the county, candidates rode opposition to suburban development into office. All told, five of the six supervisors either retired or lost reelection that year. Each had been on the board for over a decade. The message was clear: Loudoun residents demanded forceful action to deal with the wave of growth that had come to the county. With county redistricting in 1971, the first time since 1870, five new supervisors came onto the board again in 1972, including one from a newly created Dulles district in Eastern Loudoun. This political upheaval reflected major structural changes in the county. Between 1962 and 1971, the population increased 52 percent. Over the same period, the county budget increased 250 percent and the per-capita debt tripled. County government was becoming an entirely different animal.

These political shifts formed the background for Loudoun’s next growth crisis. The Washington Post reported on January 24, 1969, that Levitt and Sons, the iconic suburban


12 Political power had not kept up with population growth. In 1968, Broad Run district had 12,657 people, whereas the Lovettsville District had only 2,830. “Supervisors Draw New Alignments” LTM, August 7, 1969, A1, A2. The Supreme Court’s 1964 decision in Reynolds v. Sims applied the one-man, one-vote ruling from Baker v. Carr (1962) to the county level. Most counties did not remap their districts until after the 1970 census. Loudoun redistricted in both 1971 and 1975, adding a supervisor each time. “Redistricting Plan Voted,” LTM, July 1, 1971, A1 A2, A16 and “County’s Spurning of Levitt Zoning Application Heads News of 1971,” LTM, January 6, 1972, A3; For more on the political significance of reapportionment, see Jeffrey D. Howison, “‘This is Not a Cotton Picker’s Dream’: Reapportionment, Conservative Ideology, and the Urban-Rural Divide,” Journal of Urban History 37, no. 5, 680-693.

13 This per-capita debt figure does not include the cost of roads or water and sewer extensions. B. Powell Harrison to the Virginia Advisory Legislative Council Committee for the Study of Land Use Policies, December 2, 1972, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va. (hereinafter Small, UVA), 3.
developer, planned to purchase and develop 1,250 acres along the Potomac River in Eastern
Loudoun. The developer’s representatives attempted to calm local fears. “We are intrigued by
the beauty of the Loudoun countryside,” he explained, “and hope to act in such a way as to relate
to the history of the county.” Levitt submitted plans for a development they believed would meet
Loudoun’s high standards. Loudoun’s chief planner, however, was not impressed. He described
the Levitt application as containing “an amorphous mix” of low-density housing, “which sprawls
the whole length of the central portion of the tract.” The new board of supervisors had been
elected in 1967 with a mandate to limit growth and to keep taxes low. Feeling the weight of their
constituents’ calls to halt the county’s growth, the supervisors voted in August 1970 to freeze all
rezoning applications. After a series of additional hearings and discussions with the developer,
they voted on February 2, 1971, to reject Levitt’s proposal.14

The Levittown name that journalists and planners had heralded as the savior of a nation
facing an acute housing crisis after World War II had, by the eve of the first Earth Day, become a
symbol of the sprawl, waste, conformity, consumerism, and environmental arrogance of
American suburbia. News of Levittown’s application galvanized Loudoun’s disparate
preservation activists in their opposition to suburban growth. The Levittown threat particularly
stirred one well-connected Leesburg couple to action. Agnes Grant Harrison and B. Powell
Harrison would become tireless defenders of the county’s Piedmont landscapes and historical

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14 Loudoun’s zoning moratorium was modeled after Fairfax County’s frequent and persistent attempts, beginning in
1968, to sharply curb population growth and sprawl through zoning and sewer moratoriums. Russ Banham, _Fight for
Fairfax: A Struggle for A Great American County_ (Fairfax, Va.: George Mason University Press, 2009), 71-77, 103-
122; Helen Dewar, “Levitt Plans Development Near Dulles,” _Post_, January 23, 1969, B1, B8; Frank Raflo, _Within
the Iron Gates: Loudoun Stories Remembered_ (Dulles, Va.: TechniGraphix, 1998), 222-23 (first, fourth, and fifth
quotation), 224 (second and third quotation); Jay Mathews, “Loudoun Planners Reject Big Project, _Post_, February
14, 1973, C10; On the zoning moratorium, see “Freeze on Zoning is Extended,” _LTM_, January 6, 1972, p. 1; In
contrast with Levitt, the Sugarland development, a project of the Boise Cascade company, gained county approval at
the same time for a project that preserved a fifth of the land in open space. The first homes opened in January 1971.
homes and fierce opponents of the perceived degradation, shoddiness, and tawdriness of suburban development. Agnes became a crusader for beautification through her involvement in the Leesburg Garden Club and KLB. Powell, who had fought for the preservation of Leesburg’s historical downtown from the 1940s, served on the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Oatlands Council and would become one of the founders of the Piedmont Environmental Council, the region’s most powerful advocate for land-use planning, preservation, and environmental protection. Both Harrisons were blue-blooded southern elites. Powell Harrison was a Leesburg native who, after graduating from the Virginia Military Institute in 1933, had established a successful insurance business in his hometown. Powell’s upbringing had ingrained in him the racial and class paternalism of the inter-war Virginia gentry, and he retained a commitment to the traditions of “old Virginia” throughout his life. Agnes, who grew up in Burlington, North Carolina, shared this taste for hierarchy and deference. Both understood their social activism as part of their responsibility as Virginian gentry. Neither was opposed to economic growth per se. The Harrisons promoted industrial development and infrastructure improvements where it could bring prosperity without damaging the region’s essential character. The Levitt plan failed this test, and Powell Harrison took a leading role in opposing the developer. He later remembered the popular mood:

[Levitt boasted that h]e was going to build a Levittown down here that would absolutely put to shame the ones he had built up in New York. And the more he talked about it, the more everybody around here got absolutely horrified. . . . everybody you talked to was consumed with, ‘My God, do we want a damn shantytown with 50,000 people down here?’ What’s it going to do to this county?

“All hell broke loose,” he remembered. With the new county supervisors coming into office, and Levitt and the county locked in court battles, Harrison searched for a way to prevent the total
suburbanization of Loudoun County. His solution would have implications for Loudoun’s growth politics for decades.¹⁵

As chapter 5 details, he decided to fly the county supervisors to England to study that country’s highly successful land-use controls and farmland preservation programs. With the financial support of a small cadre of wealthy landowners and the institutional backing of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Association of Counties, Harrison led Loudoun and Fauquier County supervisors, their wives, and a handful of reporters on a week-long trip to England. Once there, the Virginians drove across the countryside, toured historical country homes, and listened to lectures on how the British had saved their iconic countryside from development.

Arthur Arundel, the publisher of the *Loudoun Times-Mirror* and a member of the Loudoun gentry, had also gone on the trip. In an editorial in that newspaper he outlined what would become the philosophical basis for much of Loudoun’s preservation movement. “The wealthy estate owner and gentleman farmer who once kept large green spaces between towns are fast disappearing, replaced by subdivisions and shopping centers,” he wrote. In order to protect the countryside “it is clear that we will have to swallow hard and then square up to one huge change in philosophy—that the rights of all the people, and generations to come, are more important than each man’s right to do whatever he pleases with his own property, without regard for his neighbors.” Not all Loudoun preservationists were willing to make this concession, and the bulk of their activities remained under the umbrella of volunteerism. Still, Arundel’s

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¹⁵ B.P. Harrison was the head of Colonial Leesburg, Inc. and a major proponent of the town’s effort to attract tourists and industry. For Colonial Leesburg’s goals, see Colonial Leesburg, Inc., *Opportunity, Leesburg, and You*, (self published: May 1949), Folder 1, Colonial Leesburg, Inc. Records, TBL; Agnes Grant and Burr Powell Harrison, Interview by Eugene M. Scheel, January 17, 1992, Leesburg, Va. in Folder 1, Box 2, LCOHP, 19 (first quotation); B. Powell Harrison, *Protecting Virginia’s Piedmont* (Leesburg, Va.: Piedmont Press & Graphics, 1994), 3 (second quotation); Raflo, *Iron Gates*, 215; Profile of the Harrisons taken from Philip Ehrenkrantz, Interview by Author, March 14, 2013, Taylorstown, Va. and A.G. and B.P. Harrison Interview.
statement did reflect a willingness among preservationists to use zoning, environmental regulations, and planning tools to restrict growth, even at the expense of the freedom of the individual landowner. This was a concession that most Loudoun farmers were unwilling to make. 16

From the perspective of environmental historiography, the fact that Loudoun’s environmental organizations looked across the Atlantic to England, rather than to New York or Los Angeles, for its models of dealing with sprawl is telling. On one level this strategy reflected the pervasive anglophilia that had long possessed the county’s elites. More importantly, it signaled Western Loudoun’s discomfort with the grass-roots environmentalism that dominated the American movement in the early 1970s. English land-use combined progressive legal solutions to the problem of sprawl with a continued trust in planning and experts that had more in common with the conservation of the 1930s and 1940s than it did with the ecological thinking and more radical politics of 1970s environmentalism. In England, sprawl was a problem of resource conservation and farmland preservation rather than environmentalism. Loudoun’s most prominent opponents of sprawl continued to see the issue primarily from this perspective. 17

Less than two months after the supervisors returned, on March 22, 1972, Circuit Court Judge Carleton Penn upheld their rejection of Levitt’s rezoning application. County officials, he ruled, could consider the economic effect of subdivisions as part of their zoning criteria. Fresh off their victory, with a popular mandate from the voters to limit growth and the vision of the English countryside to inspire them, Loudoun’s supervisors and planners moved decisively to set

17 This trip is covered in more detail in chapter 5. For an overview, see Harrison, Protecting Virginia’s Piedmont, 4-6 and Raflo, Iron Gates, 242.
up governmental machinery to slow growth and protect open spaces. They oversaw a comprehensive revision of the county zoning map and the planned community zoning ordinance. They set up ten-acre minimum zoning west of Route 15 to help preserve open spaces and established historic district zoning, which provided special development controls and architectural oversight to these districts.\(^{18}\) With their rezoning moratorium still in effect, Loudoun supervisors next passed Article 12, a planning tool that placed the county at the cutting edge of slow growth policy. The policy followed the English model by requiring developers to pay for the bulk of capital facility costs associated with new development. The developer community and local landowners were incensed and raised cries of socialism. Purcellville’s mayor remarked that “some of the county officials have spent too much time in England and not enough here in America.”\(^{19}\)

Levitt was willing to work with the county rather than risk being unable to develop its property. The company withdrew its Virginia Supreme Court appeal in early May 1972, partially out of fear that if the Virginia Supreme Court upheld Loudoun’s position, it might transform growth politics nationwide. Rather than risk this, Levitt filed a rezoning application under the new rules, agreeing to pay the county $866.92 per house it constructed, $1.9 million total, in order to offset the cost of schools, roads, and trash services. Other developers also re-filed, hoping to negotiate their way out of most of the costs threatened by Article 12.\(^{20}\)

Negotiations with Levitt continued through the end of 1973 and into 1974. In December 1973 the county went a step further in its zoning controls, claiming the right to block

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\(^{18}\) “A Brief Summary of the History of Land Use Planning in Loudoun County,” October 14, 1983, Unpublished, TBL.

\(^{19}\) Raflo, _Iron Gates_, 233.

“premature” subdivisions because of anything from lack of road access to insufficient classroom space. The courts struck this down as an overextension of county power and a violation to the state’s Dillon Rule, which reserved undelegated power for the state. At this point, Loudoun’s experiments in growth control began to unravel. By mid-March 1974, the state passed a bill, largely in response to neighboring Fairfax County’s persistent refusals to hear and approve rezoning applications for new suburban developments, requiring counties to respond within a year after applications were filed. Forced to act, Loudoun supervisors voted 7-0 against Levitt’s plan on July 2, 1973, finally ending the developer’s chances to build on his land. But in a landmark Virginia Supreme Court decision in January 1975, the courts ruled that development in keeping with county plans could not be delayed because the supervisors deemed it premature. This decision in neighboring Fairfax County ended Loudoun’s experiment with Article 12 and severely restricted a county’s ability to limit growth.21

The supervisors’ trip to England and their experiments in growth controls made three facts clear. First, it exposed the stark legal limits that state and federal governments placed on the county’s political power. Drastic land-use reform following the British example was simply beyond the legal reach of county governments. For this reason the supervisors’ initial response to the trip was one of cautious optimism. Land-use planning along the lines of the British model would require a committed board of supervisors, an engaged group of citizens, and, most importantly, the granting of new powers to the counties by the state of Virginia. Second, it demonstrated that preserving the countryside required the healthy development of urban and

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suburban areas. The English example taught these Virginians that suburban sprawl and urban decay both threatened to ruin the countryside. Effective urban planning at the metropolitan and county level would, therefore, undermine the demand for suburban housing and thereby take pressure off the countryside. Finally, and most importantly for historical preservationists, the England trip convinced the county supervisors of the importance of tourism to achieving the county’s preservation goals. As Loudoun supervisor Frank Raflo would later explain, “the tourist dollar is the basis for [the] preservation and conservation of a way of life.”

As Arundel pointed out, wealthy patrons could only preserve isolated pockets of the countryside. At some point, the landscape had to provide a service that urban consumers were willing to pay for. Loudoun may not have had Amish farmers for tourists to gawk at, but their rural landscapes and historical buildings could provide a similar romantic countryside destination for Washingtonians.

Ultimately the most significant impact of the England trip was its role in establishing the Piedmont Environmental Council. The PEC became a leading voice in Loudoun’s move toward more intensive planning, land use policy, and environmental controls. It also became a central institution in the crafting of the county’s preservation culture. The PEC’s institutional roots went back to 1969. George C. McGhee, a retired diplomat and wealthy foxhunter living outside Middleburg, was the first to propose a regional conservation and planning organization for the Virginia Piedmont. McGhee did so while serving as a member of the Virginia Economic Development and Conservation Commission. Beginning in January, McGhee began sending letters to prominent Western Loudoun landowners, including Paul Mellon and Arthur Arundel,

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23 David J. Walbert, Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

as well as to state planning professionals and academics. Governor Holton gave his support to the project in February.25 The PEC’s first organizational meeting was May 28, 1970, at the City Tavern Club in D.C. Close to a dozen men showed up, representing a veritable who’s who of the Virginia Piedmont, including John Warner and Powell Harrison and those mentioned above. The group selected forty founding members. The men in the room pledged $30,000 per year to get the group off the ground and planned to secure donations to increase that figure to $50,000.26 The initial membership included conservationists, farmers and gentlemen farmers, landscape architects, planners, and academics. After two years of floundering, Powell Harrison took the reins.27 He re-launched the PEC at the first Oatlands planning conference on August 4-5, 1972. The event solidified the connections between Loudoun and England, as Harrison brought in Graham Ashworth, the British planner and preservationist who had shown Loudoun supervisors around the English countryside. Here Ashworth lectured to a crowd of over a hundred preservationists from across the Piedmont about the benefits of English planning.28 The event generated a great deal of enthusiasm for the PEC, which had its first meeting on November 18 and was officially incorporated as a non-profit on December 22, 1972.29

Loudoun preservationists and conservationists took the lead in its creation, but the PEC’s founders never confined its mission or activities solely to Loudoun County. They organized it to represent and defend a nine-county region from Charlottesville to Leesburg. They placed Loudoun County within the cultural, historical, and environmental unit of the Piedmont. In so doing, PEC’s leadership implicitly challenged the inclusion of Loudoun County in the

29 For more on the founding of the PEC, see Piedmont Environmental Council Papers, Small, UVA.
Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Loudoun may have had economic and infrastructural ties to the city, but culturally, socially, and environmentally, Western Loudoun’s connections, both among newcomers and long-time residents, lay with the Piedmont. Even though Fairfax County was geographically and historically part of the Piedmont, PEC’s founders quickly dismissed the county as being too developed to save. Its Piedmont character had been swallowed up by development. Loudoun, therefore, became PEC’s advance salient in the war to defend the Piedmont against sprawl. If Loudoun fell, then the rest of the Piedmont was in jeopardy. From their headquarters in Warrenton, the PEC funneled funds, personnel, and policy studies to the county’s preservationists and spoke for them in the halls of power in Richmond.30

Over the coming decades, Harrison would make the PEC the region’s most important planning organization in the region and one of the most active environmental groups in the state. The private, non-profit group advocated for historical preservation, the defense of open space, and land-use planning and opposed polluting industry and mining. Under Harrison’s leadership, the PEC shaped Loudoun’s preservation culture, modeling it after a British strategy that relied on planning experts and political influence rather than grass-roots protests and impassioned resistance. The PEC was the project of well-connected experts and members of Virginia’s landed gentry. Its first stirrings came within the state government, and its institutional and financial support came from the National Trust for Historical Preservation and gentlemen farmers and foxhunters. When George McGhee first conceived of the PEC, he did so as the Piedmont Conservation League: a conservation watchdog that would use sound planning to protect the Piedmonts’ greatest resource—its land—from development that threatened the region’s rural character and heritage. McGhee envisioned PEC as “a purely private and voluntary organization

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30 McGhee to Arundel, June 2, 1970 and McGhee to Mellon, August 22, 1972, both in McGhee, “Early History of the PEC.”
dedicated to the conservation of the Piedmont.” The founders only integrated the word *environment* into their title after Arthur Arundel suggested that doing so would allow them to ride the coattails of the environmental movement that now had the ear of politicians in Washington and Richmond. The PEC, as a conservation agency, would ensure that development in keeping with the “essential rural character of the Piedmont” would continue without harming the region’s image or the quality of life of its people. From its founding, the PEC’s leadership had a profound faith in the power of expert planning to preserve the Piedmont.

This commitment to an expert-led version of environmental activism reflected the backgrounds and values of the people who founded the PEC. The PEC’s stated purpose was “to preserve the traditional character and visual order of the countryside, towns, and villages of the northern Piedmont region of Virginia—while providing for orderly economic progress which is sensitive to conservation of its land, water, air and other natural resources, as our legacy to generations to come.” Its “general objective” was “maintaining and enhancing the pastoral landscape.” The PEC was an elite-led conservation organization in an age of activist and sometimes anti-establishment environmentalism. Charges of elitism and snobbishness were inevitable for an organization that expected its first members to commit $1,000 to the cause. Harrison, for his part, believed that the PEC ought to be another example of the enlightened rule by Virginia’s “better sort.” In a 1972 letter to Graham Ashworth, Harrison bragged that the PEC

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33 McGhee, “Conservation of the Virginia Piedmont”; For generational rhetoric, see B. P. Harrison, open letter, December 11, 1972, Piedmont Environmental Council Papers, 2-3; For the contrast between selfish developers and wise planning, see M. M. Sutherland to McGhee, September 2, 1969.
had attracted a board of directors that included diplomats, high-ranking federal officials, and prestigious academics. As PEC’s country-club pedigree became a favorite target of developers trying to stir up class antagonism within the county, however, Harrison became much more defensive on the issue. In their battles with outside corporate developers, he later argued, the PEC was the voice of the people. When pressed, Harrison admitted, “my answer to [the charge of elitism] is that I don’t want to be a member of any organization unless it’s elite. These lousy organizations are no good; when you want to do something, you want to get the best. And you get the best, and you go after it. And if rich people got money, so be it.” Most of the success the PEC had against large-scale developers, who fielded their own skilled attorneys and large budgets, came from its ability to foot its own substantial legal bills and fund policy research.

The PEC followed its British cousins in idolizing the aesthetic rural character of the agrarian countryside. The PEC had only a passing interest in the warnings of Rachel Carson and the now-prominent science of ecology, with their warnings of chemical pollution and the destruction of biological harmony. The PEC’s reports used such arguments when it supported their policy proposals, but its goal was primarily the defense of the visual. The victim, in the PEC’s rhetoric, was not the suburban nature of the floodplain and the vacant lot. Nor was it the unspoiled wilderness of the Sierra Club. It was the agrarian landscapes that Vinton Pickens and Edith Sands had defended from the onslaught of commercial billboards and early subdivisions. It was Loudoun’s gentlemen farms and rolling hills that were at stake. As president of the PEC, Harrison made this clear in his December 2, 1972, testimony before a state committee studying land use policy. Harrison began by placing his concerns within the concerns of the day, warning of “the environmental decay which is spreading across Virginia.” As his testimony continued,

37 A.G. and B. P. Harrison Interview, 24, 25 (quotation).
however, his focus narrowed to warnings that “there soon would be filling stations at every cross roads, commercial development along all major highways blocking the view of the landscape beyond, and rows of houses along all of the back roads.” Using rhetoric that tapped into a deeper concern over the loss of power among Virginia’s traditional political elite, Harrison warned that a lack of control over growth had left the state descending into “a desultory chaos.” Rural Virginia, he explained, faced the “violence and the overwhelming force” of urbanization. “Like the main effort of a conquering army,” he continued, “it strikes suddenly and massively and destroys all before it; beauty, cleanliness, the old culture which has been built up over generations, visual order, and most of things which are essential to a quality life in a progressive civilization.” Harrison’s list is as telling in what it omits as in what it includes. The PEC was a conservative environmental organization. In comparison with the national environmental movement, PEC’s mission—“to preserve the character of the historic countryside of Virginia’s Piedmont, which requires the preserving of its quaint and historic towns, and the maintenance of an economically healthy farming community”—seems almost stolid next to the environmental movement’s warnings of overpopulation, chemical pollution, and the rape of the land. The PEC both reflected and reinforced the deeply conservative, high-brow character of Loudoun’s preservation culture. This preservation culture, the child of Virginia’s rural elite and profoundly shaped by its experiences abroad, rushed to the defense of order, beauty, history, and cleanliness.  

The organization’s conservatism played a substantial role in motivating PEC’s preservation activities. The organization was a tireless defender of Loudoun’s farmland and an active force in promoting tourism and the restoration of the county’s historical villages because

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38 B. P. Harrison to the Virginia Advisory Legislative Council Committee (first through sixth quotations); Harrison, *Protecting Virginia’s Piedmont*, 4 (seventh quotation).
its members hoped to defend their privileged landscapes. In an effort to forestall further development, the group also became a strong advocate for improved planning and services to suburban Eastern Loudoun, something that the more radical environmental groups of the day would have seen as a betrayal of the movement’s goals.  

They continued to host the Oatlands conference throughout the decade and organized three more trips to England, making sure that every Loudoun official and politician who so desired could experience the land and its beauties for themselves.  

Their work in education, policy development, and public advocacy made the organization the most prominent in the region. The PEC’s significance lies in what it shows about the possibilities and limits of an environmental movement born not in the city or suburbia but in a gentrified countryside. The PEC represented the continuity of elite, southern conservationist thought from the first half of the twentieth century into the environmental era of the 1970s and beyond. Protecting the environment in the Virginia Piedmont meant the defense of a highly class-encoded countryside whose value had far more to do with its aesthetic qualities and its historical past than with its environmental significance.  

As a planning organization, the PEC conducted its most important work outside of the public spotlight. Keep Loudoun Beautiful (KLB), in contrast, organized a prominent, grass-roots movement to confront what the Loudoun Times-Mirror identified as “a steadily mounting layer of trash creeping across this county, butchering its landscape, polluting its waterways and poisoning its earth.” Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, KLB became the highest profile

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39 A pamphlet laying out PEC’s program for beautifying and historicizing the region’s towns quickly became their most popular publication. PEC, Main Street Manual (Winchester, Va.: Winchester Printers, 1978).


41 PEC’s greatest achievement came in 1993-1994, when the organization played a prominent role in turning back a proposed 3,000 acre Walt Disney theme park slated for construction adjacent to the Manassas Civil War Battlefield in neighboring Prince William County. Joan M. Zenzen, Battling for Manassas: The Fifty-year Preservation Struggle at Manassas National Battlefield Park (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 166-183.
environmental organization in the county. This prominence had significant implications for the shape of Loudoun’s environmental movement. Like the PEC, KLB combined contemporary environmentalist rhetoric with a longstanding commitment to preserving the beauty and health of the countryside that had its roots among the county’s garden clubs. Trash was a stain on the countryside. It degraded the landscape, lowered property values, ruined scenic vistas, and generally undermined the county’s pastoral image. More broadly, trash was a persistent reminder that modern, urban, consumer-driven America had followed these migrants out to the countryside. The fight to clean up Loudoun’s countryside, under the auspices of KLB, functioned within the central tenets of the county’s preservation culture.

Loudoun was not alone in facing significant solid waste problems. Across the nation, local communities, municipalities, and states grappled with a “garbage crisis” in the 1970s. This rising tide of solid waste was one of the most ubiquitous environmental issues of the day. Americans emerged from World War II ready and eager to consume their way to prosperity. By the 1950s, the nation was awash in consumer goods, as market segmentation, planned obsolescence, and Keynesian economic policies filled American kitchens and living rooms with the latest products from GE and RCA and thereby filled the nation’s dumps, roadsides, fields, and forests with last year’s latest products. Yet in most studies of environmental politics solid waste cleanups take a back seat to accounts of opposition to air and water pollution and efforts to protect wilderness areas and endangered species. The prominent involvement of the national

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non-profit Keep America Beautiful (KAB), which became a symbol of corporate deflection of environmental reform, has tainted the legacy of trash cleanups. KLB was certainly not a radical environmental organization. Even as the group reflected the values and social world of the county’s preservation culture, it had few qualms about challenging the systematic causes of litter. Where KAB, as historian Heather Rogers described it, channeled the stirrings of environmentalism away from industry reforms and toward “the eyesore of litter and . . . the notorious ‘litterbug’,” KLB mobilized Loudoun residents to call for state and local policy changes even if it meant taking on entrenched business interests.44

In a county that had no chemical plants, no smog beyond what came from burning trash, and few issues with septic tanks leaking detergents and sewage into groundwater and streams, solid waste pollution was the pollution that motivated Loudoun residents to organize.45 Through local lobbying and on-the-ground clean ups, the group fought roadside litter, dumping, inadequate landfills, and policies that created these problems. Unlike farmland preservation and governance. They do little, however, to trace the issue’s role in shaping the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Likewise solid waste issues receive marginal attention in accounts of environmentalism—accounting for only two pages in Samuel Hays’ Beauty, Health, Permanence (pp. 80-81), a passing mention in Hal K. Rothman’s Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the Twentieth Century (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000) (pp. 125-26 and 129), and no mention in either Adam Rome’s Bulldozer in the Countryside or Christopher Sellers’ Crabgrass Crucible. In contrast with the silence of these works toward solid waste, the budding field of environmental justice has used solid waste to craft a scathing critique of the nation’s environmental racism and environmental inequalities. Such issues, however, played little role in Loudoun’s fight to control solid waste. On solid waste and environmental justice, see Robert D. Bullard, Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality, 3rd ed. (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 2000), David Naguib Pellow, Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2002), and Montrie’s A People’s History of Environmentalism.

44 Rogers goes on to describe KAB as a “seasoned anti-environmentalist” and as one of the nation’s most successful “greenwashing corporate front[s].” The American Can Company and the Owens Illinois Glass Company, creators of the one-way can and bottle respectively, founded KLB in 1952 as a way to channel the public’s frustration with litter into individual clean up measures rather than policy changes. Rogers, Gone Tomorrow, 141 (second quotation), 142 (in-text quotation), and 144 (first quotation).

45 In a letter to the editor, a local woman complained about the Loudoun Times Mirror’s lack of coverage of Earth Day and the national environmental movement. Loudoun residents, she feared, felt immune to air and water pollution, and therefore were lackadaisical when it came to the primary environmental issues of the day. Anne B. Drenning, Letter to the Editor, LTM, April 30, 1970, A4; “Trash Removal,” LTM, April 23, 1970, Scrapbook, Folder 6, Box 5 (hereinafter KLB Scrapbook), Keep Loudoun Beautiful Collection, TBL (hereinafter KLB Collection) (quotation).
anti-sprawl activism, the fight against trash also united Loudoun’s more socially active suburbanites with entrenched preservationists in the defense of the county’s landscapes. It united them to protect the beauty of their county from the most visual markers of pollution and mass-consumerism.\footnote{Loudoun’s litter cleanups built on the local garden-club activism described in chapter 1. They were also part of a broader movement spearheaded by first lady Lady Byrd Johnson to beautify the nation’s roadsides by picking up trash and restricting road signs. Loudoun had already done the latter. KLB activists were the latest group to pursue the former. On the Johnson Whitehouse’s beautification efforts, see Lewis L. Gould, “Lady Bird Johnson and Beautification,” in Robert A. Divine, ed., The Johnson Years, Volume Two: Vietnam, the Environment, and Science (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 150-180; Earl Hale Jr., “Presidential Proposal and Congressional Disposal: The Highway Beautification Act” in Richard A. Cooley and Geoffrey Wandesforde-Smith, eds., Congress and the Environment (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970), 32-46; and White House Conference on Natural Beauty, Beauty for America, (Washington: GPO, 1965), 17-22.}

The causes of the garbage crisis were easy to discern. American waste production increased from 88.1 million tons in 1960 to 121.1 million in 1970 to 151.6 million in 1980, a rate well above population growth.\footnote{Melosi, The Sanitary City, 190-94, 206; On the “garbage crisis” in post-World War II America, see Melosi, Garbage in the Cities, 190-226. 338-354; Blumberg and Gottlieb, War on Waste, 10-15; and Rogers, Gone Tomorrow, 102-127.} The most dramatic increase came from beverage containers where an industry-wide adoption of non-returnable bottles and cans foisted this new disposal problem on local American communities. Industry consolidation, logistical costs, changes in advertising, and retailer frustration with the hassle of managing returnable bottles each played a role in the rise of disposable containers. The results were dramatic. Between 1959 and 1972, the quantity of beer and soft drinks consumed increased 33 percent per capita. Over the same period, the number of containers consumed skyrocketed by 221 percent. The typical beer bottle made 30 to 40 cycles in the 1950s. In the 1970s, used bottles and cans made one trip, from the store to the garbage or the roadside, tossed wherever it was most convenient.\footnote{Thomas W. Fenner and Randee J. Gorin, Local Beverage Container Laws: A Legal and Tactical Analysis (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford Environmental Law Society, July 1976), 3-4; On waste and the beverage industry, see Blumberg and Gottlieb, War on Waste, 237-240 and Rogers, Gone Tomorrow, 134-141.}

The garbage crisis was an especially acute problem for metropolitan fringe areas like Loudoun County in three ways. First, as the nation’s busiest rural byways and the closest open...
space to urban areas, scores of motorists dumped their trash along these county’s roadsides. At the same time metropolitan fringe counties had weak enforcement structures and few available funds to directly confront litter. KLB members counted seventy-five roadside dumps across the county in 1970. Finally, these counties found themselves playing host to a flood of garbage from both inner suburbs and their own new developments. Relatively low land prices and their proximity to these communities made these counties prime locations for private waste disposal businesses whose management ranged from unscrupulous to exploitative. Limited governmental oversight added to the temptation for private operations to abuse their property. This was certainly the case in Loudoun, which had a long history of hosting the city’s waste. Metropolitan fringe areas like Loudoun were the trash hinterlands for the nearby metropolis. With the spread of suburban development in Fairfax in the 1960s, the number of privately owned open dumps in Loudoun climbed steadily. By 1970, there were twenty-six in the county, ranging from a half acre to fifteen acres. The most pernicious of these dumps was owned by H. E. Alward of Fairfax County. Alward’s trash company filled his open dump just north of Dulles Airport with refuse collected in neighboring Fairfax. Eastern Loudoun residents filed frequent complaints of roaming hogs and vermin and of noxious fumes coming from the site. The Federal Aviation Administration had even complained about the danger Alward’s frequent, unregulated,
and often uncontrolled fires posed to landing aircraft. Another private dump in the county, this one located next to the Broad Run Farms subdivision, would eventually be put on the superfund list when it contaminated groundwater used by residents. These two dumps represented only the most serious abuses by landfill operators in the county.

Litter and trash dumps may have been a normal part of life in rural America. They were unacceptable in the Loudoun countryside. Here litter cleanups and local advocacy for sanitary landfills unified environmental advocates across the suburban divide. They also demonstrated the complex mixture of continuity and change that defined Loudoun’s preservation culture. KLB’s leadership built on the foundation provided by the garden club women who had fought for rural zoning and had opposed billboards so strenuously in the 1940s. The next generation of these women continued to act as the county’s aesthetic guardians through local garden clubs into the 1960s. They were the reason that Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall pointed to the county as a “shining and rare example” of a place that was winning the war to “erase roadside ugliness.”

In November 1965 Mrs. J. Earle Weatherly, litter committee chairman of the Purcellville Garden Club, organized KLB as a way to consolidate the county’s anti-litter groups. The organization had launched by the following year. As such, KLB shared strong ties to the blue-blooded PEC, the county’s deeply rooted garden clubs, and, ultimately, to the municipal housekeeping of the Progressive Era. Loudoun preservationists responded to the popular

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53 A. E. Moran and P. W. Smith had gotten county approval for their dump by claiming they were filling their land above the flood level of the nearby Potomac. “Close Landfill, Report Urges,” LTM, March 22, 1973, A16.


55 Municipal Housekeeping and the City Beautiful Movement both organized middle and upper class women to clean and uplift urban areas as a way to improve public morality. For the broad outlines of this movement, see Melosi, Garbage in the Cities, 87-110 and William H. Wilson, The City Beautiful Movement (Baltimore, Md.: Johns
excitement swirling around the first Earth Day and Governor Linwood Holton’s call for Virginians to clean up their state with vigor. Agnes Harrison, a prominent Leesburg garden club member and wife of soon-to-be PEC head Powell Harrison, took the lead. A meeting at the Oatlands carriage house the week before Earth Day brought forty people to discuss the roadside litter problem. Another two weeks later brought seventy-five people to Leesburg to discuss the county’s landfill problems.\textsuperscript{56}

KLB’s board reflected the continued influence of Loudoun’s social upper crust within the county’s preservation activism. Only one board member, Sybil Wanner, was from Eastern Loudoun, and she and her husband were established residents in the older subdivision of Broad Run Farms. They also maintained ties with Leesburg government and society. The remaining board members included three prominent men from Leesburg (one a retired general) and Mary Godfrey, the wife of the famous radio personality Arthur Godfrey. This was in addition to Agnes Harrison and Mrs. Earle Weatherly, both of whom were ladies of high reputation.\textsuperscript{57} The group’s membership and participation, however, quickly expanded beyond this conservative base. KLB members took on the role of a local litter watchdog. Their efforts had an immediate payoff, as the county had twelve convictions for littering that year when the rest of the state only accounted for six.\textsuperscript{58} From these modest beginnings, KLB fashion itself as a leading voice in Loudoun’s preservation movement. These concerned citizens educated the county’s youth and fought for local recycling, a bottle deposit law, and the closing of the county’s poorly run dumps. KLB


\textsuperscript{57} “KLB—All for a less Dirty Loudoun County,” \textit{LTM}, August 27, 1970, Folder 2, Box 5, KLB Collection; On Sybil Wanner, see Berta Mikesell, “Formula for a Rich Life,” \textit{LTM}, undated, Folder 2, Box 5, KLB Collection.

\textsuperscript{58} “KLB Fetes Mrs. Weatherly at Luncheon,” \textit{LTM}, [undated], Folder 2, Box 5, KLB Collection.
formed a successful coalition that united society ladies and suburban country residents with environmentally and civically engaged suburbanites who feared the despoiling of the landscapes they had left the city for and with Western Loudoun farmers, for whom litter meant injured cattle and hours of lost labor.\(^5^9\) The KLB brought together local 4-H clubs, Boy Scouts, civic groups, churches, and the Izaak Walton League in their yearly clean up. In its second year, the event yielded 587 cubic yards of trash from the county’s roadsides. By the early 1980s, KLB’s 400 members maintained forty area leaders to coordinate the thousands of people who participated.\(^6^0\)

KLB’s shifting rhetoric played a major role in widening its appeal. Earth Day revitalized local trash cleanups and sewed the fight for environmental health onto an already existing beautification movement. KLB’s updated rhetoric reinterpreted anger at the despoiling of the county’s agrarian landscapes through the environmentalist categories of pollution and waste.\(^6^1\)

Yet beauty remained the central goal. The *Loudoun Times-Mirror* explained the local environmental spirit this way:

> [KLB] in Loudoun is born of the final disgust with the appearance of the roads which wind their way through this county. Along some of them, there seem to be more beer cans and other assorted debris than there are blades of grass. . . . [T]he reason literally thousands of Loudoun residents are working now to clean the county up is because they are concerned with its appearance, not only to themselves, but to the tourists who come here because they think it beautiful.\(^6^2\)

Within the national environmental movement, trash cleanups were symbolic of the green critique of the throw-away culture of consumerism. In Loudoun the popularity of these trash clean ups

\(^5^9\) Farmers were never as involved in the KLB’s efforts as Agnes Harrison would have liked. While some showed up to county hearings to complain about litter, few were more than loosely tied to the movement. This was in spite of local extension agent Bill Harrison working with the KLB to promote farmer involvement. A.G. and B.P. Harrison Interview, 4; A.G. Harrison to the farmers of Loudoun County, July 5, 1977, Folder 4, Box 3, KLB. Bill Harrison, Interview by Author, July 28, 2013, Leesburg, Va.

\(^6^0\) “County Clean-up Called a Success by All,” *LTM*, May 6, 1971, Folder 2, Box 5, KLB Collection; Kay Preston, “Nothing Else is Enough,” *LTM*, April 1, 1982, A17; By 1987 KLB membership had climbed to 700. Newsletter, January 1987, Folder 1, Box 5, KLB Collection; For a summary of KLB activities, see “KLB—All for a less Dirty Loudoun County,” *LTM*, August 27, 1970, Folder 2, Box 5, KLB Collection and Kay Preston, “Nothing Else is Enough,” *LTM*, April 1, 1982, A17.

\(^6^1\) They especially focused on reshaping the environmental consciousnes of local children. KLB representatives, for instance, made sure that a copy of Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971) was in every county school. Gloria R. Seavers to A.G. Harrison, March 17, 1972, Folder 12, Box 5, KLB Collection.

\(^6^2\) “A Community Effort,” *LTM*, April 15, 1971, Folder 2, Box 5, KLB Collection.
came less from their subversive message than from the way they built on and reinforced a long-standing local commitment to beautification.

Agnes Harrison is especially instructive on the way the new and the old mixed within KLB. When asked why she joined the movement, Harrison recalled that her first involvement came when she caught local workmen throwing beer cans on her lawn in Leesburg and called the sheriff to put a stop to it. This is certainly far from the type of radicalizing experience that inspired green crusaders. Yet, like many environmentalists, she also found inspiration for cleaning up her corner of the world through the images sent back to earth by the first Apollo missions. Environmentalism gave global significance to Harrison and her fellow garden club members’ war against ugliness. As head of KLB, Harrison called for county residents “to get Loudoun clean and to keep Loudoun clean.” This cleanliness now included sanitation, beautification, and environmental purity. Even as she headed this new cleanup crusade, Harrison articulated a broader vision for this new brand of garden club environmentalism that cared about: “highway planning and zoning, the removal of billboards and automobile graveyards, the cleaning up of our public ways, the planting of trees, and . . . air pollution control.” The new ecological vision and the popular fervor that came with it transformed this garden-club environmentalism, yet it also reaffirmed the culture of preservation’s overarching commitment to the defense of the aesthetic purity and agrarian character of Loudoun’s privileged landscapes. In Loudoun County, at least, popular environmentalism rested on a foundation of garden club activism and retained much of its Virginian character.  

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63 A.G. and B.P. Harrison Interview, 8-9.
64 Reid, “To Get Loudoun Clean,” LTM, April 23, 1970.
65 The air pollution mentioned here is in reference to trash-burning dumps. A.G. Harrison to Board of Supervisors, April 27, 1970, Folder 4, Box 3, KLB Collection.
66 This focus on the class and social backgrounds of KLB’s leadership is not in any way an ad hominem attack on the movement. Quite the opposite. KLB’s substantial record of environmental achievements was dependent on its status as a locally rooted organization. Had KLB been led and organized primarily by suburban newcomers, it would
These strong ties to the traditional sources of local political power gave KLB a leg up in the fight over what to do with the county’s rising tide of solid waste. The group brought substantial political pressure on the supervisors in 1965 to open a new public sanitary landfill. Doing so, they hoped, would lead to the closing of the county’s poorly managed private landfills.\textsuperscript{67} When the county supervisors proposed opening a sanitary landfill south of Leesburg on Evergreen Mills Road, their plans met strong opposition from local residents who formed the Loudoun Environmental Improvement Citizens Association (LEICA). The LEICA was one of the thousands of NIMBY groups across the nation who seized the environmental banner as a rallying point for their resistance to the construction of garbage incinerators, landfills, and other locally unwanted land uses. As with these other groups, the LEICA was ad hoc in character, single-issue focused, and resistant to compromise. Historically, the placement of this type of facility has often been at the expense of politically disenfranchised and economically marginal communities, often communities of color. In Loudoun, the dump was slated for a rural area whose nearby residents were mostly educated, politically engaged, and financially well-off whites, many of whom had only recently moved to the county. It was these privileged exurbanites who made up the membership of LEICA and who fought to protect their country life from being spoiled by a nearby dump.\textsuperscript{68}

Across the country, groups like the LEICA often became strong proponents of alternate approaches to waste management. In Loudoun, however, KLB had already claimed that mantle.

\textsuperscript{67} KLB Scrapbook, 2.
\textsuperscript{68} LEICA’s membership included 135 residents at its peak, a number that was a fraction of KLB’s membership. Bredemier, “Loudoun Votes Landfill Dump”; NIMBY stands for “not in my backyard.” On the characteristics of NIMBY resistance to waste disposal projects, see Blumberg and Gottlieb, \textit{War on Waste}, 73-77. For a profile of LEICA, see KLB Scrapbook, 3; On environmental racism, see Bullard, \textit{Dumping in Dixie}; NIMBY resistance to Board of Supervisors zoning decisions went back at least to the 1950s. Marshall Andrews v. Board of Supervisors of Loudoun County, 107 S.E. 2d 445 (1959).
Seeing in the LEICA a threat to their larger cleanup efforts, KLB leaders portrayed the group as a narrow-minded citizens’ organization whose newcomers to the county cared only for the “depreciation of [the] value and image” of their neighborhood.69 The Loudoun Times-Mirror used its editorials to further develop this attack. “This county needs tough, even militant, action on behalf of its natural assets,” the paper argued, “not summertime back yard soldiers fighting their own war under the banner of a totally different cause.”70 KLB, in contrast, used its popular mandate to maintain political pressure on the county supervisors.71 The LEICA fought tirelessly to defend its members’ homes. They prepared reports calling for the county to explore incineration or to move the landfill elsewhere. They hired a top-notch lawyer and filed four lawsuits against the county. They even took their grievances to Washington and flew in an expert witness from New York to testify about the benefits of incineration.72 Their efforts bore little fruit. In December 1970, after four months of contentious wrangling over the issue, the supervisors voted unanimously to begin construction on the landfill. It opened on March 15, 1971, after the LEICA had exhausted its legal appeals.73 From that point, county political leaders made Loudoun a state leader in the effort to close down private dumps.74

KLB wielded substantial political power when it came to local environmental issues. The conflict between KLB and the LEICA exposed the local social and political limitations on the effectiveness of the type of grass-roots, newcomer-dominated, quality-of-life environmental

69 KLB Scrapbook, 3 (quotation).
70 “LEICA and Landfills,” August 13, 1970, Folder 2, Box 5, KLB Collection.
71 KLB Scrapbook, 1-3.
politics that defined the LEICA and so many other suburban environmental groups. KLB’s success came from its ability to combine popular mobilization and the larger environmental enthusiasm with the respectability and local rootedness of Loudoun’s garden clubs. In Loudoun, suburban environmentalists had to work within an institutional structure already dominated by local white elites.

This strong local support gave Loudoun the freedom to attack the roots of the litter problem. As KLB members cleaned up the county’s roads, they realized that close to 90 percent of the county’s roadside litter came from disposable bottles and cans.\(^{75}\) This led the group to take up the deposit law. Such laws had become popular across the nation. Oregon’s popular and cost-effective deposit law, the first such state law in the nation, had gone into effect in October 1972.\(^{76}\) In Loudoun, Jim Brownell, a conservative farmer and Republican county supervisor proposed a similar local deposit law in January 1971. KLB rallied popular support, and, on May 17, 1971, the supervisors voted 5 to 0 to become the first political entity in the state to ban the sale of non-returnable soft drink and malt beverage containers. An estimated 1,200 states, towns, cities, and counties across the nation had proposed some sort of bottle bill by 1976, yet Loudoun remained one of only five counties in the nation to have one on the books by that point.\(^{77}\)

These first glimmers of success drew powerful opposition across the nation from well-financed industry lobbyists. In Loudoun, retailers, distributors, and bottle industry

\(^{75}\) “Summary of Spring Clean Up, 1972,” Folder 12, Box 5, KLB Collection.

\(^{76}\) Fenner and Gorin, Local Beverage Container Laws, 11.

\(^{77}\) Including Loudoun, four of these counties (Fairfax, VA, Montgomery, MD, and Howard, MD) were in the D.C. metro area. Fenner and Gorin, Local Beverage Container Laws, 13; Exactly where Arthur Arundel stood on this issue is unclear. As a leader in the PEC, he had a strong interest in any law that might protect and preserve the Piedmont landscape. The LTM, which he owned, supported the bottle bill. Yet his family’s fortunes came from a highly-successful Pepsi-Cola bottling company whose business would have suffered from such a bill. Industry lobbyists from such companies were fiercely opposing bottle bills across the nation. Shapiro, “Arthur W. ‘Nick’ Arundel.” On Loudoun’s passage of the law, see Brett Phillips, “Disposable Containers on Way Out?” LTM, January 21, 1971, Folder 2, Box 5, KLB Collection and “Board Adopts Ban on Disposable Containers,” LTM, May 20, 1971, A1, A12.
representatives brought legal action to stop the ordinance from going into effect. They succeeded. Loudoun’s circuit court ruled in July 1976 that the county had no power to regulate the sale of alcohol and that the ordinance was “constitutionally vague.” Popular support for the ordinance, however, remained strong, and the supervisors considered an updated version in the summer of 1977. The KLB assembled a diverse cast of Loudouners to testify in its behalf. Local veterinarians and farmers testified about the damage litter did to cattle and farm equipment. Western Loudouners testified to the desecration of the county’s pastoral beauty by bottles and cans. The group even got a former bottle-industry insider to describe the crass commercialism that drove the opposition. The supervisors passed the ordinance in October 1977 only to have the courts prevent the implementation of the section of the law dealing with alcohol. The state Supreme Court ultimately struck down the ordinance in August 1980 as a violation of the Dillon Rule. From that point, industry lobbyists were able to prevent a state law from passing in Richmond. The same reversals characterized the fate of bottle bills across most of the nation.

Court decisions and industry pressure on the state legislature destroyed KLB’s dreams of a countryside free of litter. As the county entered the 1980s, trash and illegal dumps continued to dot the county like pockmarks, to the point where some in the KLB despaired of ever restoring the county’s beauty. Yet it would be a mistake to see the KLB as a failure. The group worked with the county to clean up more than sixty unauthorized dumps. Through its local lobbying efforts and their popular campaigns, it forged a local movement that crossed class lines and the

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78 Loudoun County Board of Supervisors Minutes, July 11, 1977, Folder 4, Box 4, KLB Collection.
79 Environmental policy analysts used the failings of the Loudoun bill as a case study for other local jurisdictions hoping to pass a bottle bill. On the fate of the Loudoun ordinance, see “The Top Stories of the Seventies,” LTM, January 3, 1980, A1, A5, A13; McClain v. Board of Supervisors of Loudoun County, Virginia, Circuit Court of Loudoun County, in Chancery No. 4156 (1976), Fenner and Gorin, Local Beverage Container Laws, 14, 40-41, 44-45, and “Trashing Virginia,” Post, September 1, 1980, Folder 3, Box 5, KLB Collection.
81 Newsletter, Spring 1983, Folder 1, Box 5, KLB Collection.
suburban divide. The KLB did so while retaining much of the respectability and values of the garden clubs from which it sprang. It focused popular attention on the most obvious stains on the landscape and took substantial strides to remediying them. Loudoun residents organized to fight the most obvious threat to the beauty of their landscapes. For some, this focus on trash may have distracted from what was, with hindsight, the more pressing issue of development. KLB’s leadership, though, allied their organization with the larger slow-growth, preservation coalition in the county. As with the PEC, KLB’s environmentalism retained a strain of garden club activism that ensured the organization would emphasize landscapes over environments, beauty over health, and would be concerned more with trash than with pollution.

As the heads of both the PEC and KLB, Powell and Agnes Harrison were the most visible examples of the character of Loudoun’s preservation culture. Where environmentalism’s roots lay among nature-seeking suburban newcomers fretting over sudsy well water, the bulldozing of second-growth forests, and air pollution, environmental activism in Loudoun was part of a wider preservation culture whose leadership came from the villages and gentlemen farms of Western Loudoun. Some members of this coalition like prominent radio and television personality Arthur Godfrey became forceful proponents of the full breadth of environmentalist thought. Some had little interest in the movement’s warnings about the systemic dangers caused by mankind’s abuse of the natural world. Most were somewhere in between, joining their genuine concern over the health of the environment to a deeply entrenched movement to preserve the look and exclusivity of Loudoun’s historical and agrarian landscapes. As development continued to spread in Loudoun, suburban areas slowly developed their own distinct environmental activism whose aims and rhetoric better lined up with national trends.

Loudoun’s long-running preservation culture, however, has continued to cast its lengthy shadow over the county’s environmental activism into the present day.

Suburban development brought the bulldozer to the Eastern Loudoun countryside. There its sharpened blade ripped up the old-field red cedars, the barbed wire fences, and the crumbling barns of agrarian Loudoun. Suburban development was a process of nature destruction and nature replacing, as critics of sprawl have argued for decades. In painting this destruction primarily in terms of the environment, however, journalists, environmentalists, and the historians who have followed their lead have lost sight of the extent to which sprawl dramatically reshaped hybrid landscapes that were as much cultural and historical as they were natural. In Montgomery County, most people, but certainly not all, celebrated this transformation from rural to suburban as economic development and therefore for the common good. In Loudoun, however, suburban development threatened to replace celebrated historical farmsteads and pastoral landscapes with modern American suburban developments. The threat of suburban development in the county from the mid-1960s on unified and activated what had been an individualized and disparate movement for historical preservation and turned it into an organized campaign for the preservation of the county’s land and historical homes. Protecting this vision of Loudoun from sprawl, crass materialism, and the spreading crabgrass frontier sometimes led preservationists to fight to protect the environment; it always led them to preserve the county’s historical buildings and villages.

As Chapter 1 demonstrated, Loudoun County had played host to well-off suburban migrants since the turn of the century. These outsiders used their substantial resources to purchase and restore Loudoun’s plantation mansions, farm houses, and village homes. The national popularity of this type of historical preservation exploded in the 1970s, as urban
professionals sought out retreats from modern, consumer life. Loudoun’s historical homes
became some of the most prized restoration projects in the metropolitan area. Historical
restoration allowed commuters and retirees to join Loudoun elites in reviving and embracing an
earlier suburban ideal of pastoral landscapes, fine gardens, exclusivity, and refinement. In
revitalizing old homes on the metropolitan fringe, these newcomers grafted themselves into the
deep historical roots and respected heritage of these abandoned farmhouses and dying villages.
As with the environmental critique formulated by nature-seeking suburbanites, this version of the
suburban lifestyle was an implicit critique of modern suburbia. Historical preservation promised
these migrants something that suburbia could not offer: a deep sense of place, of permanence,
and of belonging. When suburban development knocked on their doorstep by the 1970s, these
now-naturalized residents led the charge against sprawl in Loudoun. They understood themselves
as champions of the heritage, the past glories, and recent revitalization of these communities.
Yet, at the same time, their embrace of historical preservation was as much the product of a
sprawling Washington, D.C., as were the expanding inner suburbs that they condemned.
Claiming historical authenticity became another way for the county to benefit from its proximity
to the city while, at the same time, defining its landscapes in opposition to the city. They had
found their suburban arcadia in the ruins of the past, and they would fight tooth and nail to
defend it from suburbia.

In this Loudoun County was far ahead of Montgomery County, Texas. Yet to say so is a
bit like pointing out that Montgomery County was ahead in the development of its energy
industry. Each was as much a question of resources as of their development. Here club women

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83 On the rising popularity of historical preservation in the 1970s, see Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory, 618-654
and Hamer, History in Urban Places; Historical preservation groups in Loudoun and across the state were led by
upper-middle-class whites from well-paying, white-collar professions and who often held advanced degrees. Alice
M. Bowsher, William T. Frazier and Jerome R. Saroff, Virginia Historic Districts Study (Charlottesville: University
of Virginia School of Architecture, August 1975), 43-44.
restored a tiny handful of historical homes and promoted the town of Montgomery’s ties to the era of the Texan Revolution. In 1954 they established the Texas Trek, a historical homes tour similar to the Waterford Fair. Unlike Waterford, however, this event embraced a hodge-podge approach to antiquarianism, including a classic automobile show and a country store. This was emblematic of the broader differences between the two county’s historical preservation. The commitment of these clubwomen to preservation may have been strong, but the county’s stock of historical homes was thin. Historical buildings in Montgomery County were largely unassuming wooden structures whose pedigree went back over a century. There were never more than a dozen homes worth showing, and even those would not have been old enough in Loudoun to garner a passing glance. The contrasts went deeper than this. Where Montgomery County’s preservation culture expanded little beyond the garden club set, Loudoun’s preservation culture expanded rapidly, integrating metropolitan residents into its fold. Where Loudoun historical preservation reached tenant houses and outbuildings as much as plantation homes and embraced historical districts and villages, Montgomery County preservation remained focused on the preservation of elite homes. The movement did not attempt the preservation of streets or towns in this period. Montgomery County hosted a historical homes tour. Western Loudoun thoroughly historicized much of its landscape.\footnote{The most developed historical preservation movement within this region of Texas was in Galveston. Lonn Taylor, “Ima Hogg and the Historic Preservation Movement in Texas, 1950-1975,” \textit{Southwestern Historical Quarterly} 117 (July 2013): 1-26. “The Montgomery County Historical Commission,” in History Book Committee, Montgomery County Historical Society, \textit{Montgomery County History}, 1981 (Winston-Salem, NC: Hunter Publishing Company, 1980), 124-125 and “Historical Group to Meet with Co. Court,” CDC, January 13, 1964, s. 1, p. 13. On the Texas Trek, see “Popular Texas Trek Scheduled April 19,” \textit{HC}, April 5, 1964, s. 11, p. 5 and Terri O’Connor, “Montgomery Turned Back Time during Texas Trek,” \textit{CDC}, April 22, 1970, p. 1, 3. For an example of the types of homes preserved, see Stan Crawford, ”The Houses of Montgomery County,” \textit{CDC}, March 2, 1966, p. 1, 4.}

John Lewis was the most important figure in Loudoun’s historical preservation movement. Lewis was a native Virginian whose father had worked at the United States Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C., during World War II. Fears of possible food
shortages and attacks on the city drove the Lewis family to Loudoun, where they purchased an abandoned 140-acre farm north of Leesburg. There Lewis spent his young adult years bringing the farm back into production and integrating himself into the local community. After a brief stint with the Army in Korea, he began purchasing, restoring, and then selling historical properties. This gained him a reputation among Washingtonians looking for fashionable homes in the countryside and eventually his employment in 1970 as the person at the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission responsible for Northern Virginia. While in that position, he documented and researched over seven hundred historical homes in the county and spearheaded multiple preservation causes in the county. Like many of Loudoun’s preservationists, Lewis combined a strong love of rural freedoms and a deep distrust of modern life with a seemingly contradictory brand of political activism that pushed for strong environmental protections and government-enforced limits on development.  

Lewis was driven by a deep commitment to the preservation and restoration of the county’s natural and architectural landscapes. His studies of Loudoun’s historical homes and villages combined an architect’s sharply critical eye and desire for aesthetic unity with an acerbic critique of modern progress, whether in the form of highway construction or subdivision development. One short selection from Lewis’s study of the town of Hillsboro is representative:

> Hopefully in the future Hillsboro will be spared the ravages and destruction of so called transportation ‘improvement’, and can continue to maintain the pleasant unspoiled rural character for generations to come to enjoy, as it has been passed down to us. There is no question that the historic and highly sensitive environmental qualities of the area should be preserved and respected. Unfortunately it is the nature of certain people with limited ability, aided by reams of senseless regulations, to ‘improve’ such places that have existed without their interference for one hundred

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85 In his autobiography, for instance, Lewis fondly looked back on the period when “[t]he citizens of the county and town . . . operated in the grand tradition in which you were permitted to do anything reasonable that did not intrude upon your neighbor’s reasonable endurance, and all lived for months, or a lifetime, without any direct contact with any law, whether federal, state, or local, nor any bureaucratic interference.” John G. Lewis, *Ladies, Liquor, & Laughter: Mischief of an Architectural Historian, 1930s-70s Loudoun County, Virginia* (Taylorstown, Va.: Friends of Catoctin Creek, 2007), 26.
years or more. Thus [the area] shall face from now on constant threats to its obliteration without a continual vigil of all its concerned citizens.  

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The continual refrain in his notebooks is the desire to preserve the “quality” of Loudoun’s communities.  

Lewis and his fellow preservationists uncovered Loudoun’s historical homes with the same sense of discovery and joy that an antiquer would have in finding a piece of abused early nineteenth-century furniture at a garage sale. The value of Loudoun’s historical homes was a value best appreciated by those of good taste. Protecting these areas from development was, at the same time, both a fight against the desecration of the beautiful and a fight to protect a valuable commodity: Loudoun’s history.  

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Appealing to this historical preservation market offered Loudoun’s small towns a path back to prosperity that allowed them to continue to keep their historical character. Leesburg was one of the first to jump on board. During the 1960s, Powell Harrison and Mayor Frank Raflo led a coalition of local politicians, property owners, and preservationists to develop the town’s historical look as a way to attract tourists and increase property values. Many of these same people had briefly mobilized to protect town storefronts from modernization and redevelopment in 1949.  

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Now members convinced the town council to adopt brick sidewalks, iron lampposts, buried utilities, sign controls, and the town planning tools needed to craft and protect this image. This culminated in the creation of the Leesburg Historic District in 1970 and a more concerted


87 Notebooks of John G. Lewis.  

88 Designation as a historic district carried with it the promise of rapid appreciation of property values. Preservationists had few qualms about using these financial incentives to encourage preservation and restoration. In Georgetown, Washington’s historic enclave, row houses within the historic district sold for more than three times the average price of a similar house outside the district. John B. Rackham, “Values of Residential Properties in Urban Historic Districts: Georgetown, Washington D.C. and other Selected Districts,” Information Sheet 15, (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1977), 7.  

89 Colonial Leesburg, Inc. Collection, TBL and A.G. and B.P. Harrison Interview, 12-15.
effort to lure suburban and urban tourists to the quaint town. As Raflo explained, “[y]ou can build all the pseudo-Colonial stuff you want but you can’t build a 200-year-old shopping center. And that’s what we think Leesburg’s main street can be.”

The Preservation Society of Loudoun County (PSLC) became the most important advocate for historical preservation at the county level. The organization was founded in 1973 by two local women, Evelyn Johnson and Mary Alice Wertz. Rapid development, the destruction of trees in Leesburg, and the continued threats of a dam in Loudoun mobilized these women to organize. On February 14, 1974, they joined with ten other concerned citizens to create an organization to “preserve the natural and cultural heritage of Loudoun County” that was so important to “maintaining Loudoun’s high quality of life.” As with suburban environmentalists across the nation, the society opposed extractive industry, in this case uranium mining, and promoted government limits on the development of wetlands and mountainsides. Their most prominent activities, however, were related to historical preservation and protecting the county’s built environment. PSLC also worked on beautification projects and opposed unplanned development. Immediately after organizing, the group planned a trip to Charleston, S.C., to learn the latest in historical preservation techniques. Upon their return they started offering workshops and yearly awards to promote private historical preservation. Each year the group traveled to Richmond to visit the city’s preserved heritage sites and to lobby for increased state government support for their goals. They would later became major proponents of transferrable

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92 In 1931 Charleston had become the first historic district in the nation to institute architectural controls. Along with New Orleans and Savannah, it was a national leader in the expanding field of historical preservation.
development rights as a way to protect Western Loudoun’s open spaces from development. For the PSLC, environmentalism and historical preservation were both part of the defense of the county’s landscapes.⁹³

Through the tireless efforts of John Lewis, the PSLC, and their suburban and Western Loudoun allies, Loudoun’s villages one by one passed through the series of hurdles to gain recognition from the county as historic districts. This special zoning designation, created in 1971, offered increased architectural controls and development protections and brought with it recognition by the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. The county led the state in the number of such districts and the acreage in them as well as in the number of structures on the state’s historic register throughout the period.⁹⁴ The mill villages of Waterford, Taylorstown, and Aldie gained this designation during the 1970s. The Goose Creek Historic and Cultural Conservation District was the most ambitious of these projects, and John Lewis took the lead in getting it approved. Where most districts were geographically contained villages, the Goose Creek district sprawled over 10,000 mostly rural acres. The district, the county’s eighth, went into effect on February 7, 1977. It embodied the preservationist values of Western Loudoun. Its claim to preservation reaffirmed its timeless agrarian character. The roads were unimproved, the stone houses and frame barns still stood, and, as the Loudoun Times Mirror put it, the “Quaker ethos of simplicity, harmony, and industry” still reigned. Historic zoning, which remained


voluntary, ensured that the land would retain its farms and pastoral beauty while also continuing in private ownership and remaining sheltered from the public.95

John Lewis’s petition for Goose Creek’s historical zoning is telling as much for what it says about preservationists’ fears and rejection of the symbols of modern rural life as it does about the area’s historical *bona fides*.

This is an area which at this time in our history has no stores or gasoline stations, with the exception of the modest country store. . . . There are no trailers or trailer parks; there are no drive-in eateries; there are no movie houses, junkyards, billboards, commercial or industrial operation. There are only about 25 newer homes in the area, most of which have been built within the past 10 years, the major portion blending in with the overall rural scene. So far there are no scattered subdivisions, except those recently proposed. . . . In addition, there are no regional shopping centers, super highways, government installations or facilities. The preponderant character of the area is rural; the major uses of the land follow historic and traditional agrarian patterns.96

Such a statement captures the deep class-encoded vision of rural life that Loudoun preservationists like Lewis protected. Goose Creek was a rural area without the markings of modern rural life: trailer parks, junkyards, industry, and scattered development. Preserving Goose Creek’s rural countryside and historic homes was separate from, and in many ways antithetical to, the preservation of a living rural community. A great deal of these farms and homes had, by the early 1980s, been purchased by Washington commuters, retirees, and weekend restorationists who reveled in the area’s charm, beauty, and rural image. Goose Creek, and all of historical Loudoun for that matter, served as a permanent refuge, a rural escape from the acids of modern suburbia and modern rural life. Yet, as chapter 1 argued, this escape from suburbia was itself a reaffirmation of the suburban ideal and its capacity to restore and refresh those whom urban life had alienated from the countryside. Only by the 1970s, to paraphrase historian Becky Nicolaides, Hell had moved to the suburbs. The national media’s critique of


suburbia that reached its highpoint in the 1970s had refashioned the housing development, rather than urban centers, as the site of man’s alienation. The popular environmentalism of the period offered an escape from this alienation through restored harmony with nature, a rejection of consumerism, and grass-roots activism. The local preservation movement took an alternate path. Loudoun’s landscapes had been an image of pastoral wholeness and a place of repose and restoration from the early years of the twentieth century. Loudoun’s preservationists had no deep need to save the earth or the nation from the ravages of pollution or exploitation by soulless corporations. They already had their vision of beauty, health, and permanence. Environmental activism, historical preservation, county planning, each of these was a tool to achieve the larger goal: the defense of privileged rural landscapes from the careless neglect and aesthetic ruination that marked modern rural and suburban life.

Strategically, these historical preservationists armed themselves for their political battles through local history research and genealogy. New residents spent hours in genealogical libraries not to trace their own heritage, which would have emphasized their status as outsiders, but to demonstrate the historic credentials of their newly purchased homes. Each generation back these residents traced the ownership of their homes meant another blow to the plans of outside developers. At the same time Western Loudouners’ claims to belonging were only as strong as the depth of their home’s historical pedigree. Like the thoroughbred horses many western Loudouners were also raising at this time, the pedigree of preservationists’ historical homes and the stories that went with them were markers of status and belonging. History became an object

to possess; a badge of honor that set authentic Western Loudoun apart from the Anywhere USA that was Eastern Loudoun.\(^98\)

As with environmental preservation, local history research sanctified the landscape. Environmentalists filled the countryside with endangered species and threatened ecosystems, Loudoun preservationists, in contrast, filled the county’s landscapes with ghosts of the past, endangered stories, and threatened architecture. When, during this period, local historian Eugene Scheel wandered the county collecting the place names and forgotten histories that made up the county’s cultural and historical geography, he was doing more than simply recording tidbits of historical lore for posterity. This was a political act; a statement that these places were not empty fields ripe for development but were instead historical communities with a claim to preservation.\(^99\) Loudoun’s historical preservationists decried the abomination of sprawl and tacky development above all else.\(^100\)

Across the county, preservationists organized, researched, and invested countless hours in restoring and preserving the county’s homes and villages. A key institution in the county’s first such historic village, the Waterford Foundation provides the clearest picture of the continuing evolution of Loudoun’s historical preservation movement. A group of Washington commuters and concerned locals founded the Waterford Foundation to preserve the town’s buildings and revitalize its craft production. Using funds from the wildly popular Waterford Fair, the foundation underwrote the restoration of a large number of eighteenth-century buildings in this Quaker village in northern Loudoun, many of which the foundation owned and maintained. In

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\(^98\) See also Robert and Ruth Boley, Interview by Janney Wilson, August 26, 1998, Folder 2, Box 1, Oral History Project, TBL.

\(^99\) Scheel would eventually include 177 communities and 1,000 place names on his map. Robert R. Lind, Karen T. Richardson and Donald G. Rypka Jr., *Loudoun Harvest—Faces and Places, Past and Present, in Loudoun County, Virginia* (Leesburg, Va.: Carr Printing and Publishing Company, 1973), 44-46.

\(^100\) For an example of this type of religious language, see Sale, “Waterford: Quaker Charm,” 41.
practice, Waterford was a hybrid between Colonial Williamsburg and a commuter village. For fifty-one weeks of the year, it was a bohemian bedroom community for Washington professionals and successful artists. During the long weekend of the fair it became a bustling festival of craft demonstrations, house tours, and historical reenactments. The fair opened up this exclusive exurb to outside visitors, the bulk of whom came from D.C.’s inner suburbs, the very suburbs that Waterford residents left behind them. These tourists came to celebrate and experience the historical authenticity of Waterford. For the rest of the year, perceived historical authenticity was a treasured amenity and a never-ending project for socially conscious residents.¹⁰¹

The preservation of Waterford was a textbook case of gentrification, except that instead of restoration reclaiming urban neighborhoods from urban blight, the Waterford Foundation and its members reclaimed this rural village from rural neglect and decay. Still, the motives were essentially the same. Wealthy, socially progressive whites rejected the inauthenticity and transience of modern suburban life and instead established a historically and culturally authentic, walkable community. The amount of effort, money, and thought residents put into their homes and their willingness to drive such long commutes are both evidence that these historic communities offered something that closer-in suburbs could not offer. Waterford’s local

¹⁰¹ Waterford real estate was some of the most exclusive in Virginia. A small historic town house would, in 1986, sell for more than $300,000. Historical living and the town’s arts scene attracted a subset of Washington society that was well-traveled, well-educated, progressive, and well-off. Some 20 percent of the houses in Waterford in 1980 were occupied by families that went three generations back. Another 20 percent were families who had been in the town since the period of its first revival. The remaining 60 percent were recent migrants to the town. John F. Harris, “Loudoun’s ‘Different’ Village,” Post, August 31, 1986, B1, B3; Family statistics from Constance K. Chamberlin, Waterford: The Challenge (Waterford, Va.: Waterford Foundation, Inc., 1980), 5. Waterford’s history paralleled those of most urban historic districts. Hamer, History in Urban Places.
historical roots, its aesthetic, and its active community life gave residents something they could not find in Washington’s suburbs.102

Gentrification, predictably, inspired resentment among locals and displaced residents. Polly Rogers, one of the founders of the foundation, recounted, only partially in jest, that “the CIA is not more suspect of evil and underhanded doings than was the Waterford Foundation in the eyes of the citizenry.”103 Area residents not only chafed at the loss of local control; they also grew frustrated with the appropriation of the minutest details of the village’s history. As the foundation continued to interpret the village’s history, more historical plaques and markers went up, further sanctifying the village and thereby making it unfit for common use. Just as galling to many locals, the Waterford Foundation fought to preserve many of the inconveniences that rural people would rather have done without. Waterford had no restaurants, only one small store, and no entertainment. Foundation members, who were willing to drive into Washington’s inner suburbs for these things, fiercely opposed both the highway department’s attempts to build a bypass around the town and LCSA’s attempts to provide water and sewage treatment. One newcomer smirked that, if left to themselves, locals would “have [a] 7-Eleven on the corner. . .[with] 10 pickup trucks in the front.”104 Such symbols of rural life were, for preservationist elites, symbols of the commercialism and historical inauthenticity that they were fleeing. For locals, however, convenience and commerce were signs of a healthy rural economy and community. Foundation members wanted refined rural landscapes without rural life.

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102 Proximity to pastoral nature and gardening complemented this appeal, but it was always subservient to it. For more on Waterford’s appeal, see Maria Koklanaris, “Preservationist in Waterford Lives not in the Past,” Post, August 24, 1989, VA-C1, C9, Douglas Watson, “Tiny Town of 300 Readies for Annual Tourist Invasion,” Post, October 3, 1967, C5, and Frances Lide, “Homes of Waterford,” Post, October 1, 1972, M2.
104 Harris, “Loudoun’s ‘Different’ Village,” B3 (quotation).
The Waterford Foundation was sensitive to accusations that they were taking over the village and its history. One quarter of Waterford’s population at the beginning of the century was African American. Many of the workers who helped restore the old houses beginning in the 1930s were black, yet the very success of their labors priced these workers out of their town. Most had sold what property they owned and had moved elsewhere by the 1970s. The last African American resident in Waterford, Mary Elizabeth Wallace, died in 1999. The foundation made token efforts to preserve a place for African Americans in the community, including inviting an African American onto the foundation board, but the economic realities and social transformation that came with historic preservation whitewashed the Waterford community, in spite of the foundation’s efforts. Ironically, in preserving the village’s history, the Waterford Foundation de-southernized the town. Waterford had always had as much in common with the villages of Eastern Pennsylvania as it had with other towns in the Virginia Piedmont. Twentieth-century portrayals often reinforced this, emphasizing the “hard-working, religious small farmers, tradesmen, or artisans” who lived in Waterford. The displacement of the town’s large African American population between the 1930s and the 1970s helped to create a Waterford that was a New England mill village with a more interesting Civil War story.

The foundation also continued to face the tensions between preserving the character of the living village of Waterford and opening the town’s buildings to the tourists who underwrote the preservation efforts. The Waterford Foundation had, for the bulk of its existence, taken on many of the roles commonly performed by homeowners’ associations. It maintained common areas, represented the community to the county, and protected the property values of the town’s...

residents. The foundation shared this role with the independent Waterford Citizens Association (WCA). The foundation took on an even larger role when it reorganized along more professional grounds beginning in 1970. In April of that year, the Secretary of the Interior declared the village to be a National Historic Landmark. The village was one of only three in the nation to receive that honor.

Landmark status was a two-edged sword. It brought national visibility and outside grant money. At the same time it pushed the foundation to take more seriously its role in interpreting the history of the village and presenting it to a national audience. Even more significantly, the Department of the Interior drew the landmark boundaries not at the edge of the historical village but forty feet beyond the point where the sight line from Waterford vanished over the first hill outside of town. The Secretary’s report emphasized that the “completely unaltered rural setting” was a major reason that Waterford received the designation. With this statement, the U.S. government extended the Waterford Foundation’s mandate to include the preservation of the square mile of agricultural open space surrounding the village. The foundation had preserved the buildings; now it moved to defend its rural setting from encroaching suburbia. If it were unable to do so, it would lose the landmark status. As the foundation’s new executive director explained in a 1980 report, “The visual integrity of the National Historic Landmark is very fragile, and can

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107 By 1972, the foundation owned close to a dozen buildings, including the old mill, the town jail, the village green, the Methodist Church, the old Waterford school, and the town’s only general store. It was, in many respects, a private government. Marian Marsh Sale, “Waterford: Quaker Charm, Virginia Hospitality make a Very Special Blend,” The Commonwealth: The Magazine of Virginia (October, 1972), 38.

108 Locals founded the Waterford Civic Association (WCA) in 1954 to defend Waterford’s local school against the county’s school consolidation program. From that point, the WCA promoted the quality of life concerns of the village’s residents, a stance that sometimes brought it into conflict with the Waterford Foundation. Practically, the WCA put on the social events common to any small town or suburban development. Waterfordcitizens.org. Accessed October 7, 2013.

109 On the professionalization of the Waterford Foundation, see Chamberlin, Waterford: The Challenge; The Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (PL 89-665) created the National Register of Historic Places and established state historic preservation offices to encourage states to preserve historic sites. The state followed suit that same year when it established the Virginia Landmarks Register. Only a small percentage of sites on the National Register have been recognized as National Historic Landmarks.
easily be destroyed by the addition of only a few poorly sited new houses.”

Into the 1980s, the farmland around the town could be divided into 10 acre lots without the need for county approval. The 179 acres immediately surrounding the village were zoned for one house per acre. If these lots were built on, the village would triple in size. Suburban expansion into Western Loudoun drew the Waterford Foundation to take a larger role in the county’s preservation culture. From 1970 onward the foundation’s primary concern was the defense of what came to be known as the village’s viewshed.

Foundation members had always been strongly opposed to the suburban development of Western Loudoun. Now the Waterford Foundation itself went on a decade-long crusade to find and enact any and every form of growth control they could to protect their viewshed. Foundation members secured historic zoning through the county in 1972. Around this time they also purchased two large sections of nearby farmland to prevent their possible development in the future. Funds for this type of purchase, however, were limited, and more of these types of purchases risked further alienating local residents. The foundation instead focused its energies on securing scenic and architectural easements on Waterford properties and the surrounding countryside. These easements permanently prevented future development on these sites. The foundation launched this program in 1975. By 1980 forty-two property owners in and near the

110 Antoinette J. Lee and Jill A Chappel, Waterford National Historic Landmark: Its Significance and Protection (Waterford Foundation, May 1989), WFR, 53-54; on the danger development posed to Waterford’s status as a historic landmark, see Waterford Foundation, Long Range Plan (c. 1989), WFR.
112 The Waterford Foundation defined this viewshed as all the landscapes visible from the town’s historic district boundaries. Waterford Foundation, Long Range Plan. For their support of KLB, see Meeting Minutes, March 7, 1972, WFR. For their ties to PEC, see Meeting Minutes, March 1972, WFR, 4. For their support of the PSLC, see Koklanaris, “Preservationist in Waterford.”
village had donated preservation easements that covered many of the village buildings and 219 acres of open space surrounding it.\textsuperscript{115} When necessary, Waterford residents were willing to put limiting growth ahead of the environment and even their own health. Waterford’s densely packed homes continued to rely on well water and septic tanks into the 1960s. Even after LCSA studies demonstrated that these inadequate facilities were polluting Catoctin Creek and threatening the health of the town, residents still fought attempts to construct a sewage treatment plant in the area because of fears that this would open the door to development. After nearly a decade of wrangling over the issue, the LCSA constructed a small treatment plant just outside the village in 1974 with a capacity to allow the population to double. Events would prove these Waterford citizens right.\textsuperscript{116}

In spite of the foundation’s intense efforts to protect the village viewsheds, development came to Waterford in 1986. Richard W. Clement, the president of Lee High Properties, a Fairfax County development firm, announced that his firm had purchased a 77-acre plot of land bordering the village. The company planned to build a 32-house subdivision with a historic motif and significant open spaces that would allow the development to blend into the village and capitalize on its image rather than tarnish it. Clement voluntarily submitted his plan to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Park Service, and the Waterford Foundation to ensure his development meshed with the historical character of the village. His plans found little enthusiasm in Waterford, to say the least. After two years of heated negotiations and vociferous protests by Waterford residents, the developer agreed to drop the number of houses to fourteen, to keep them out of the town’s viewsheds, and to sell the foundation the fifty-five acres of land he was not building on. A state grant, guided through the


state legislature by now delegate Charles Waddell provided half of the $200,000 money the foundation needed to purchase the land.\(^\text{117}\)

This episode was a qualified success for the foundation. It preserved the landmark. In the aftermath, the foundation also began an initiative known as the Waterford Compact, in which the foundation secured the right of first refusal to any properties sold within the boundaries of the historic landmark.\(^\text{118}\) Through scenic easements, local political activism, and outright purchases, the Waterford Foundation secured the visual markers of historicity and open space surrounding the village. The foundation represents, in microcosm, the characteristics of the wider Loudoun preservation movement. It subsumed environmentalism and anti-sprawl activism within a larger preservation agenda. The foundation’s commitment to preserving not only the town’s historic buildings and viewsheds, but its character as a “living village,” meant that the tension between private exclusivity and public access, historical preservation and development would continue into the twenty-first century.\(^\text{119}\)

The activism of groups like the PEC, KLB, PSLC, and the Waterford Foundation had a great deal of success in preserving and protecting their vision of the Loudoun countryside from development and suburbanization. To a substantial degree, however, such successes increased development pressures. The county’s push to increase tourism revenue and attract wealthy homebuyers has only added to the county’s reputation as Washington’s “garden spot”: a land that combined proximity to urban markets with “the charm and relaxed beauty of a history-studded

\(^{117}\) Around the same time, the foundation also spent $805,000 on nine acres of land in the southern part of town to prevent development there. For more on the battle with Lee High Properties, see Folder Waterford Preservation 1986, WFR; Harris, “Loudoun’s ‘Different’ Village”; Cornelius F. Foote Jr., “Waterford Gains Pact on Landmark Status,” Post, October 13, 1988, VA-118; Waterford Foundation, “Long Range Plan,” c. 1989, WFR.


\(^{119}\) For an example of the Waterford Foundation acting like a home owners’ association, see Donna Acquaviva, “Wooden Fence Makes Better Neighbors in Waterford Dispute,” Post, January 17, 1985, VA-4 and Harris, “Loudoun’s ‘Different’ Village.”
rolling countryside.” Outside consultants had, from the mid-1960s, called on Loudoun’s leadership to follow the example of Colonial Williamsburg; Lexington, Virginia; and Charleston, South Carolina; in promoting historical tourism as a county industry. One of the most important lessons from the supervisors’ trip to England was that historical and farmland preservation would only work if funded by tourist money.  

Hunt Country, rolling pastures, and historical villages were all major tourist destinations for Washingtonians escaping the city. The county’s modest efforts on this front and the expansion of historic and craft fairs during the period produced some fruit.  

By 1978 one out of every five retail dollars spent in the county was travel related, and the county was eighth in the state in tourist income. Even as they enshrined the countryside, preservationists and tourism promoters lured more and more pilgrims to Loudoun to enjoy its beauty and history. Keeping these tourists from settling in the county was always a difficult task.

It is not surprising that developers began to package and sell Loudoun’s history to middle-class homebuyers. Where Montgomery County’s subdivisions embraced an image of backwoods leisure, an objectified and commodified history became the defining characteristic of Loudoun’s image. History was not simply what had happened. It was a quality, a style, an amenity. This is what allowed Loudoun tourist pamphlets to print the otherwise nonsensical

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statement “The history of centrally located Loudoun is surpassed only by its beauty.”

Suburbia has humorously been described as a place where developers cut down the trees and name the roads after them. In Loudoun, developers have more commonly named suburban streets and model homes after historical figures and plantation mansions. Historical preservation increased property values and added to the county’s reputation as an exclusive refuge from suburbia. At the same time this added prestige drew even more developers who were eager to profit from the county’s preserved landscapes.

For many in Loudoun, historical roots became a badge of belonging in an increasingly transient, suburban county. Barbara Haller, a resident of the Countryside subdivision in Eastern Loudoun, is instructive on this point. Haller had long felt that she was a Loudoun outsider because she and her subdivision had no roots in the county. As part of a college course on Loudoun history, however, she followed the example of her Western Loudoun counterparts and researched the history of her subdivision. Her work gave her a new sense of empowerment. The developer had, in her mind, preserved the subdivision’s connections with the past. He had named the Home Owners’ Association the Countryside Proprietary, after the Proprietary of the Northern Neck of Virginia; named each section of the development after a historic Loudoun home; and even retained an old barn silo as part of the new shopping center. These historical connections surely do not meet most people’s definitions of historical authenticity. Yet, for Haller, they gave a sense of belonging that she had longed to feel. “Now,” she explained, “as I roam through Countryside, I am constantly reminded of historical events and of the people who have created

123 Virginia’s Loudoun County: Recreation, History, Beauty, c. 1971-1980, Ephemera 73, TBL.
124 Sterling Park’s model homes were named after villages in Loudoun. The communities of the Countryside development were named after iconic Loudoun plantation homes, embodying the development’s goal of “honoring the past, relishing the present, building the future.” Ashburn Village promoted itself as a community “with roots in the past.” Sterling Park: A New Level of Leisure Living in the Rolling Hills of Virginia (Arlington, Va.: M.T. Broyhill, 1965); Program, Loudoun County 4-H Fair, August 8-12, 1989, 74; Bili Layton, “A History of Countryside,” May 12, 1992, unpublished, TBL.
Loudoun’s incredible past. I no longer feel estranged from local history. Rather, I am very much a part of it.”

It is easy to smirk at the shallowness of such historical preservation. Yet the differences between this type of historical preservation and that of Waterford and other restorationists are differences of degree rather than kind. Loudoun has long been a place where newcomers can buy historical roots. The type of shallow historicity that Countryside could safely peddle in Eastern Loudoun would have been poison for Western Loudoun’s image. Western Loudoun appealed to the high-paid executives and middle-managers of the myriad corporations that relocated to the Washington, D.C., metro area during the post-World War II period. Its historical homes had to be of a more ancient vintage. Loudoun boosters specifically targeted such migrants even as Dulles Airport opened. In a 1963 speech to 300 county, state, and national civic leaders at the Goose Creek Country Club a few miles east of Leesburg, Virginia Governor Albertis Harrison called on Loudoun’s power brokers to do all they could to attract industry to the county to pay for suburban growth. They would not do this through the normal southern litany of tax breaks, weak regulation, and low-wage labor. To the contrary, the governor advised them to “[d]evelop art, music, theatre, libraries as well as good housing, stores and other services.” The “educated, cultured people” who came with high-paying industry demanded natural and cultural amenities. Loudoun had the first in spades. They moved to develop the second, through historical and environmental preservation, crafts fairs, and equestrian culture.

Loudoun elites actively cultivated this image for its economic benefits. Loudoun became what journalist Joel Garreau would later term “nice.” “Nice” is country clubs, scenic vistas, boxwood-framed historic homes, and horse farms. “Nice” includes all the markers of class- and

race-segregated, manicured landscapes. Loudoun County’s image included all of these. It was a marketable commodity whose value to the county went well beyond the residential tax values they brought in. Loudoun’s public relations literature integrated this Western Loudoun image into its advertisements. It portrayed the county as “uncrowded and unspoiled” and as “a land of quiet roads with stone fences and rolling field and woods” where a “tranquil country environment, rich in history and in beautiful surroundings,” awaited newcomers. Yet, at the same time it celebrated the “rustic and unspoiled” countryside, it also emphasized the county’s large lots of undeveloped land ready for development. Using Loudoun’s lack of development as a way to lure development set the stage for frustration and disappointment by those moving to the county.127

The niceness of Western Loudoun was part of the lure that would, in time, bring technology and defense industries to Eastern Loudoun and would continue to attract the wealthy to Western Loudoun.128 Whether in chamber of commerce brochures, condescending Washington Post editorials, or in testimony before the board of supervisors, the belief that Loudoun’s landscapes are something special has long held sway. The Waterford Foundation, the PEC, the PSLC, and KLB each held this conviction and fought to preserve their particular segment of the county. The number of local preservationist and conservationist groups ballooned

127 Loudoun County Marketing Council, Loudoun County, c. 1975, Ephemera 196, TBL, (quotations); Garreau, Edge City, 92-94; This combination of rural beauty and urban proximity has been the constant theme of Loudoun’s industrial development and tourism literature. Suburban development, on the other hand, is rarely mentioned in these pamphlets. Chamber of Commerce, Virginia’s Garden County; Loudoun County Marketing Council, Loudoun County; and Loudoun Tourism Advisory Committee, Virginia’s Loudoun County, November 1982, Ephemera, TBL, 61.
during the 1970s as Loudoun’s towns became historic districts and its creeks and streams became state scenic rivers. By 2007, there were thirty-nine such groups in the county. These groups were primarily staffed and lead not by Eastern Loudoun suburbanites but by activists from Western Loudoun. Those who moved to Loudoun for the countryside became the strongest advocates of slow growth and preservation.

Two examples should suffice. Eleanor Adams and her husband were quintessential Western Loudouners. Both had attended elite universities and moved to a farm house in Sterling in 1963 when her husband got a job at the CIA headquarters in Langley. When development got too close in 1968, the couple picked up and moved to a 215 acre farm off a dirt road north of Waterford. There they ran some cattle, gardened, kept horses, and became involved in the local community. Originally from a small Alabama town, Eleanor Adams became enamored with both the agrarian beauty and the cultured sophistication of Western Loudoun. When she saw these things under threat from development, she devoted an increasing amount of time to their protection. The catalog of her activities is extensive. She spent time on the boards of the local soil conservation office, the Waterford Foundation, and Loudoun’s local PEC committee; she was part of a group of landowners who successfully fought to get a natural gas pipeline that was slated to go through her farm moved; and she worked with the League of Women Voters and a series of county committees to develop policy solutions to the decline of agriculture in the county. For Adams, the defense of Western Loudoun’s agrarian community and culture was just as important as the defense of the county’s landscapes and environment.

Peggy Maio provides another example. She and her husband moved from the inner Maryland suburb of New Carrollton to a six-acre spot outside Round Hill in 1978. Her husband

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129 PSLC, *Citizens Guide to Historical, Cultural, and Environmental Organizations in Loudoun County*, (2007), TBL.
worked for the IRS in downtown D.C., and the couple wanted enough land to garden. Peggy Maio was a self-described civic activist. Once in Loudoun, she joined the PSLC and worked on a committee developing Round Hill’s comprehensive plan. PEC recruited her to monitor local politics in the county. In that position she promoted the PEC’s larger goals of planning for a livable Eastern Loudoun and an economically sustainable, agrarian Western Loudoun. Environmental planning and historical preservation played a part in achieving these goals, but Maio and the PEC fought first and foremost to preserve the open spaces and historic towns of the Piedmont through policy and planning more than through grass roots activism and protest.\(^{131}\)

When asked if they were environmentalists, both women were hesitant to answer. Adams emphasized the way environmental, agricultural, and historical preservation were each part of a larger effort to preserve the county’s landscapes. For her, “[t]here was a strong sense that this really is a special area” and any tool that helped preserve it was worth trying. For Peggy Maio, environmental arguments were a significant part of the rationale for slow growth, but the tactics and strategies often associated with popular environmentalism had no place in her work. As PEC’s representative to the county, she spent her days in county offices and committee meetings. Respectability, personal connections with politicians and developers, and pragmatism rather than ideological posturing and grass-roots organizing were the tools of her trade. For both women, the passionate defense of Loudoun from despoiling developers took them in a direction both saw as distinct from popular environmentalism.

As Merlin Johnson closed his letter to the editor in January 1958 that began this chapter, he proposed a far-fetched solution to Loudoun’s coming growth problems: “Other primitive peoples, such as the Indians are protected as instructive relics of pre-historic periods. Why can’t we turn Loudoun County over to the government as a museum? Surely it would be most

\(^{131}\) Peggy Maio, Interview by Author, March 28, 2013, Waterford, Va.
inspirational for the bureaucrats to come out and study us. They would leave with a deep gratitude for the advance of civilization which has freed them from the cruel necessity of providing for themselves. By thus serving our masters, we could hope for survival.” In one sense, Johnson completely misread the government bureaucrats who would continue to make Loudoun their home over the following decades. Most did not come to be reminded of the joys of modern convenience. Instead they came to live among the same agrarian landscapes that Johnson had praised, but without the labor that went with it. Yet, in a more general sense, Johnson’s words were prophetic. Agrarian Loudoun survived by becoming Washington’s garden spot: a tourist destination and a place for commuters and gentlemen farmers to reenact their own vision of historic, agrarian life. Protecting Western Loudoun, however, was not the work of the federal bureaucracies that Johnson despised. It was rather the work of a diverse group of preservationists—Loudoun agrarians, foxhunters, suburbanites, and suburban country dwellers—each of whom saw something worth protecting in the county’s pastoral landscapes. 132

CHAPTER 8

LIFE IN THE FOREST:

SUBURBAN DREAMS AND RURAL REALITIES ON THE METROPOLITAN FRINGE

As suburban developments began opening their doors beginning in the late 1950s, a new breed of settlers claimed the Montgomery County woods for their own. Tip Eckel and her family were a part of this migration. Writing for a 1980 local history collection, Eckel recounted her family’s trek north from Houston. Where the county’s original frontier families had had come by ox-cart and wagon, her people “made the arduous trip from southwest Houston to Conroe in a caravan consisting of two cars, a recreational vehicle, an Allied moving van, and a pick-up truck.” “Braving the many hazards of [18] wheelers and fast cars,” she continued, “the harrowing trip across the county line took approximately 45 minutes.” Once they moved in, the family “bravely faced the daily hazards of life in the country, fighting off attacks of giant cockroaches, termites, ticks, snakes, and other dangers.” The county’s environment had even worse things in store, as many of their neighbors “were surprised to find that they had a home on a lake—or even in a lake—when it rained.” The rural “natives” also took their toll on the suburban frontiersmen. Newcomers faced “vicious attacks of tire slashing, broken window-shields, and mailbox beatings,” and local youth, who were themselves “seeking new frontiers, blazed trails through the golf courses and made ‘doughnuts’ on the greens in their trucks.” The Eckel family took all this in stride, as the lot of the “settlers who left the security of the big city to help settle Montgomery County.” Like so many others across the nation, the Eckels abandoned life in the city, packed up their belongings, and searched for a better life on the metropolitan frontier.1

The Eckels were certainly not the first to paint their suburban experience as a continuation of the nineteenth-century frontier myth. Journalists and historians have long made connections between suburban white flight and the deep American obsession with mobility and the search for new opportunities on the frontier. Work may have kept Americans tethered to cities, but improved transportation and the promises of leisure, nature, security, and social homogeneity lured an ever-increasing number of urban professionals out of the city and to the countryside during the twentieth century. People left the city to escape perceived urban violence and integration, they left in the hope of a better life and better school districts for their children, they left for lower taxes and greater personal freedoms, and, finally, they left to be closer to nature. This constellation of push and pull factors that brought the nation’s middle class to the metropolitan fringes has been well documented by historians. What suburbanites found there, however, remains surprisingly understudied. Suburban historians have been so focused on explaining why suburbanites moved and how these movements undermined urban areas that they have done very little to document what happened once suburban residents moved in. As a result there are far more academic studies of suburbanization as a process than there are histories of suburbs as communities.

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As a result, suburban historians have underappreciated the very real challenges suburbanites faced as they took up residence in the homes and communities developers had carved for them out of rural landscapes. This is certainly understandable, for focusing on the world suburbanites made can easily lead to casting these privileged whites as either tragic victims of circumstance or as triumphant frontiersmen who overcame obstacles to build their new world. Historians whose sentiments continue to lie with decaying urban cores have little stomach for tales of suburban tragedy or suburban triumph, for they have painted the entire project as a symbol of the deep failings of American culture and society. This narrative of suburbanization as an abdication of white America’s responsibility to the nation’s cities is both useful and accurate. Suburbanites rejected the city and its problems, rejected school and residential integration, and rejected the tax burden that urban services and the urban community placed on them. Whatever obstacles they faced on the metropolitan fringe, then, were their just deserts. As emotionally satisfying as this interpretation is, it is not sufficient to explain the history of the metropolitan fringe, where rural people, landscapes, state structures, culture, and society continued to exert significant pressures and constraints on the direction and shape of suburban development. The white privilege, professional skills, and economic resources of suburban migrants did not automatically give newcomers success wherever they turned. In fact, suburbanization in Texas could be more a hard-fought campaign than a victory parade. Suburban expansion there was often a wild-west of shoddy-development, fly-by-night developers, naïve suburbanites, and a county government barely keeping up. In many cases it bore little resemblance to the seeming order and inevitability of a creeping “crabgrass frontier.”

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6 In contrast, Western Loudoun newcomers saw themselves as fleeing to the country in order to embrace permanence rather than the opportunism and creative destruction that marked the metropolis. Most newcomers to Montgomery County were far more comfortable with these aspects of modern, metropolitan life.
The historiography of environmentalism is one of the few to explore the cornucopia of suburban debacles that new residents found on the metropolitan fringe, and the payoff has been substantial. Adam Rome and Christopher Sellers have both traced the roots of environmentalism to the environmental hubris and destruction that accompanied suburbanization. This chapter builds on their work, but with a different end in mind. Rome traced the evolution of national environmental policy in response to suburban environmental destruction. Sellers pursued a similar end by exploring grassroots suburban environmental activism. Suburban newcomers in Montgomery County, Texas, faced many of the same problems Rome and Sellers explore—septic overflows, flooding, and sprawl. Their responses, however, do not fit well with these historians’ conclusions. The obvious and traumatic failures of the county’s suburban development did not inspire a local grass-roots environmental movement; however, this is not to say that there was no grass-roots mobilization or civic engagement. Suburban residents here poured their civic energies into managing suburban private governments, fighting for passable roads, opposing unscrupulous developers, and negotiating an often unresponsive county government. Where, nationally, environmental activists cut their teeth on such protests, locally, suburbanites advocated for increased government regulations and improved services without drawing into question the broader national commitment to economic growth, consumerism, and development.  

Where Rome and Sellers find a direct connection between the environmental failures of suburbanization and the rise of environmentalism, this chapter uses these failures as a window into the complex, contested, and often tenuous process of transforming a rural county into a metropolitan one. In this case the “crabgrass crucible” did not forge a new environmental

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movement, but it did forge the structures of a metropolitan county. The metropolitan fringe offered suburban newcomers freedom from urban violence, integration, and the noise, pollution, high taxes, and hectic pace of city life. It promised access to wooded nature, good schools, and open space. Yet these benefits were not without cost. The metropolitan fringe also offered developers freedom from regulation and oversight. Many exploited suburbanites’ limited knowledge of the land and its dangers to their own benefit. The suburban nature newcomers moved into could be unruly and imposed limits that many suburbanites were not prepared for.

Rural people also exerted their own social influence to limit suburban power to shape local government. Rural county government was weak by design, and it was slow to bend to suburban demands. Suburban Montgomery County received three inheritances from its rural predecessor: timbered landscapes; a weak, rural government; and an environment that placed strict limits on suburban development. Suburbanites claimed the first inheritance with vigor and celebration. The second they thought little of until the third revealed the often tenuous nature of their ties to the land. Only then did they begin the slow process of refashioning the rural government for their own purposes, appropriating new government structures, and claiming their share of federal money and programs designed to rescue suburban developments from disaster. Many suburban newcomers like the Eckels saw themselves as bold new frontier settlers colonizing the rugged Montgomery County wilderness. For all the obvious problems with this self-image—the county was certainly no wilderness—it did contain a kernel of truth. In moving beyond the city limits, these migrants abandoned the comforts, services, and support that the city could provide and took upon themselves the task of constructing a new world within rural Montgomery County. Not all succeeded. How suburban frontier families coped with rural inheritances is the subject of this chapter.
This chapter first explores the environmental history of the now-emptied timbered landscape and how developers refashioned it into a suburban amenity. Suburban development, in turn, presented the county government with regulatory challenges for which it was entirely unprepared. Environmental limits and regulatory failures combined with the opportunism of developers to create a procession of failed developments and angry homeowners across the county during the 1960s and 1970s. These prominent failures in turn drove residents to push for expanded regulation and increased power at every level of government. The chapter closes with an examination of three county developments as a way to focus in on the distinct options available to suburban newcomers. In one, residents mobilized to successfully guide their development through the hazards of metropolitan growth. In another, grass-roots mobilization was not enough to overcome the environmental obstacles residents faced. The developers of the third, The Woodlands, put to shame the work of other county developers. The Mitchell Corporation planned, invested, and controlled the development and its environment to such a great degree that residents could enjoy the beauty and amenity that came with life in the woods while avoiding the hazards that hampered so many other county developments. The development’s size, its deep pockets, its powerful lawyers, and its extensive planning allowed it to dictate its terms to the overwhelmed and underfunded county government. The Woodlands bypassed the problems that faced so many of the county’s developments and completely replaced rural Montgomery County with an idealized suburban “new town” within the heart of the county’s wooded lowlands. In this, The Woodlands fulfilled the vision offered by so many of the county’s developers. Outside this new town and its satellites, however, the rural Montgomery County discussed in chapter 5 continued to exert its influence, if no longer an overwhelming power, over the suburban developments south of the San Jacinto River. The conflicts between
the rural north and east and the more suburban and metropolitan west and south that had become entrenched by the 1980s would continue to define the county’s political world into the twenty-first century.

Like so much in Montgomery County’s history, suburban development began with the woods—the symbolic core of the East Texas landscape. The county’s first white settlers saw the thick pine uplands and swampy hardwood bottomlands as a nuisance and a barrier to progress. These slave-owning migrants from across the South girdled and burned the woods to make way for cotton agriculture. Lumber production, where it occurred, was a localized affair. This all changed with the arrival of railroads in the decade following the Civil War. Rail access brought with it northern capital and management. Timber companies snatched up tens of thousands of acres of old-growth pine forests in the county and spent the next seven decades cutting, processing, and shipping virgin and second-growth loblolly and slash pine saw logs to market. Armed with steam skidders, cross-cut saws, and axes, timber workers cut and ripped trees from the countryside, leaving damaged men and a denuded landscape in their wake.8

As extensive as this destruction was—it was a rare copse of mature pines that evaded the axe—conservationists and the historians who followed them have been overzealous in painting the pine belt as a wasteland of dry brush, decaying stumps, eroding soils, and raging fires.9 This description certainly fit recently cut areas, but at any given point, the county’s landscape is better understood as a patchwork of small agricultural homesteads and timber lands in various stages of growth from the open scars of recently cut acreages to the established canopies of loblolly and mixed hardwood areas uncut for decades. The forests that made up the majority of the county’s

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landscape were perpetually in transition. Loblolly saplings spring up quickly, growing two to three feet per year in their early stages, and getting to be between seventy-five to eighty feet in height within only fifty years.\textsuperscript{10} Even as large sections of the most recently cut lands resembled, as one conservationist put it in the 1930s, “wastes, thickets of scrub hardwoods, and immature second-growth shortleaf, loblolly, and slash pine,” those areas that had been cut before the turn of the twentieth century had pines ready for cutting again. Frequent fires, rooting hogs, grazing cattle, and the infiltration of hardwoods certainly made the process of reforestation frustratingly slow and inefficient in the eyes of timber company managers.\textsuperscript{11} Yet in spite of these obstacles, industry experts were complaining by the early 1960s that the forest was growing back far faster than local companies could harvest it. In 1961, on the eve of suburban expansion into the county, 584,600 acres, or 84 percent of the county’s land, was commercial forest in every stage of growth. The majority of this timber land was not intensely managed. Its owners harvested timber to pay their tax bills while waiting for development to move far enough into the county for them to realize the new value of their land. By the late 1960s, Montgomery County remained a state leader in the amount of saw timber available for harvest. These woods were now available for suburban use.\textsuperscript{12}

Postwar affluence drove an increasing demand for weekend cottages, country homesteads, small town homes, and more traditional suburban developments in Montgomery County. This demand drove up the price of timbered acreage. Between 1948 and the mid-1960s, property values across the county shot up from $50 per acre to anywhere from $300 to $1300 per


\textsuperscript{12} Dwight W. Fate, \textit{A Report on Forest Resources and Wood Industries of Montgomery County Texas} (Conroe, Tex.: Texas Forest Service, October 1961).
acre, almost completely because of Houston’s market influence.⁰¹³ Timber companies responded to these high land prices by selling off their holdings and shifting their operations to harvesting timber by contract. The new landowners could develop or continue to sell timber and hold onto the land as an investment according to the dictates of the market and their own financial needs. Grogan Cochran, the largest locally owned timber company, sold its 48,964 acres, three-quarters of which was in Montgomery County, to George Mitchell, a Houston oil man who would use some of this land to anchor The Woodlands, his visionary development. The rest he leased as hunting acreage as he developed select sections.⁰¹⁴ The Foster Company shut down its large mill in the southern part of the county in June 1957 and sold its 14,000 acres to the Friendswood Development Company (a subsidiary of Humble Oil) for $15 million, a move that local boosters praised as “the long awaited break in releasing area timberland for commercial, residential and new industrial development.” Friendswood would ultimately develop the land into Kingwood, a planned suburban development.⁰¹⁵ These two purchases were only the most prominent of the hundreds of land transactions that transformed timberland into investment properties and subdivisions between the 1950s and 1980s.

Developers from within the county and from Houston flooded the market with rural subdivisions, lake-front weekend cottages, and single-family housing developments. By summer

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1957 Conroe had eighteen new subdivisions in the works or completed. More than a dozen rural subdivisions were in various stages of planning and completion as early as 1961. The pace picked up over the next decade as Interstate 45 connected Conroe to Houston in 1962 and US-59 did the same for the eastern part of the county soon after; the city’s new jet airport broke ground seven miles south of the county line that same year; and Lake Conroe’s construction seemed to be just over the horizon. Each of these infrastructure projects tied the county into Houston’s fantastic growth machine. Between September 1963 and March 1965, to give just one example, developers filed forty-seven plats for thirty-three private subdivisions. County developers went to great lengths to promote these new developments. In one 1965 event, fifty developers organized an event that attracted a crowd of over 8,000 potential residents to tour their piney woods developments. This “open house” combined with substantial print media exposure to fuel a rapid influx of population to the county. The number of subdivisions, in turn, continued to

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16 “Conroe Building at a Rising Pace,” CDC, June 3, 1957, p. 1; The first subdivision deeded its road to the county in June, 1957. This timing supports the contention in chapter 2 that the open range was a significant barrier to suburban development. Resolution, June 10, 1957, Montgomery County Commissioners Records (hereinafter CCR), East Montgomery County Annex, Conroe, Tex..

17 Determining the actual number of subdivisions is difficult. The county did not require developers to submit subdivision plats for approval until January 1961. Even then, many developers chose not to comply with this order. The county’s later attempts to enumerate these unrecorded developments suggest that as large a proportion went unrecorded as were recorded during the early 1960s; For the 1961 ordinance, see Rules, Regulations and Requirements Relating to the Approval and Acceptance of Subdivision Plats for Recording, February 13, 1961,CCR (hereinafter Subdivision Regulations[1961]).

18 “Houston Intercontinental Airport: Giant Boon to Montgomery County,” CDC, June 9, 1965, s. 2, p. 13; Jesse L. Buffington, “A Study of the Economic Impact of Interstate Highway 45 on Conroe, Texas,” Research Report No. 4-11, Texas Transportation Institute, August 1967, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (hereinafter HMRC), Houston, Tex. Infrastructure developments were a key part suburban development across the state. Linda Scarbrough Road, River, and Ol’ Boy Politics: A Texas County’s Path from Farm to Supersuburb (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2005), 245-331 and Tom Watson McKinley, “Superhighway Deluxe: Houston’s Gulf Freeway” in Martin V. Melosi and Joseph A. Pratt, eds. Energy Metropolis: An Environmental History of Houston and the Gulf Coast (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 148-172.

19 This figure does not include subdivisions within Conroe’s city limits, unfiled subdivisions, or subdivisions whose roads would be owned by the county. The actual figure, therefore, was substantially higher. Resolution, June 4, 1965, CCR.

balloon in the following years, reaching 208 by 1967. By 1969 the figure was up to 250 developments, representing an over $200 million investment. The county’s population nearly doubled from 26,800 in 1960 to 49,500 by 1970. Continued development would push the county’s population to 128,500 by 1980.

Suburban developers who purchased the county’s well-worn woods used new criteria to judge their value. Landowners had measured the value of their wooded acres in board feet; developers now did so in terms of location, aesthetics, and amenity. A tract of Montgomery County timber, no matter its volume, that had good road access and a developer with a little imagination was worth far more as a site for recreational development than it was as timber or pulp. The woods remained a central resource, but their use now took on a new form. Where timber companies had extracted trees, developers now packaged the woods for suburban enjoyment. They now saw the forest for the trees. Because Houston and Harris County had an ever-expanding supply of traditional sprawling subdivisions to offer, Montgomery County’s real estate market depended on the articulation of a distinct set of amenities. The preferred sales pitch promised both the convenience of suburban life and the recreational options of weekend and vacation living within the county’s lofty pine forests. This image offered a dramatic contrast to the oppressive heat, the flat topography, the stifling humidity, and the sprawling developments of Houston’s coastal plain. The Montgomery County woods allowed Houstonians the opportunity to leave the city to live in nature. Developers built within the abandoned homesteads and pine land they had purchased from rural families and timber companies. They promised their customers’ life in the forest. As one Houston developer put it, their goal was to transform “a

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rugged Montgomery County Wilderness” into “a scenic subdivision.” Such wilderness claims drew on deep cultural images of the piney woods as a place of rugged backwoodsmen and thick undergrowth. Like the Indians who inhabited the nineteenth-century frontier, the East Texas backwoodsman, or “Bubba,” was assumed to have had little impact on the landscape and therefore little claim to the land. This frontier myth was a useful cultural image, as it obscured the county’s long history of destructive agriculture, exploitative timber harvests, and oil drilling. Like the Indians, Bubba was expected to fade away in the face of advancing progress once the lands were purchased.

The local chamber of commerce worked with Houston newspapers to spread this image of Montgomery County’s woods as an unpopulated, wooded, recreational paradise. As part of a series of special inserts in the Houston Chronicle in 1963 and 1964, boosters sketched the outlines of their imagined landscape of leisure. A deer with a full head of antlers prances across the southern part of the county, dodging as a hunter attempts to bring it down. Just above this, a bikini-clad water skier waves as she races across the countryside. Above this, a golfer poses after his tee shot and a fisherman in a canoe pulls a large fish into his boat. While the new suburban developments are numbered on the map, they are not the focus. This is not primarily an advertisement for modern housing, exclusive school districts, or even low taxes, although each of these was important. Nor does it claim for the county any sort of economic dynamism; quite the opposite. The only hint at the county’s industrial and extractive economy is the outline of the Conroe Oilfield, geographically confined to one small section of the map. The drawing focuses attention on the stately pines and rolling hills that made the county’s topography so distinct from Houston. This point is made all the more clear by the recording of elevations in the county and

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Houston, which sits a mere fifty feet above sea level. The map, and the dozens of pages of advertising it introduced, articulated a vision of life that combined recreation with “gracious” suburban living among “[t]he natural beauty of the pine trees, rolling hills and beautiful lakes.” This drawing imagined for Houstonians a timbered county without rural industry, agriculture, or people and therefore free to meet their needs and desires.26

Developers and speculators inherited a diversity of wooded landscapes that reflected the impact of a plethora of both ecological and historical factors including the soil profile, the history of logging and fire, and the type and intensity of management. Such signs of past use were obvious to locals. They were far less so to newcomers, who read the landscape through the advertiser’s image of primordial nature. This was not surprising, as county timberland retained the visual markers that outsiders associated with the piney woods, in spite of frequent harvests. No matter how dramatic the bulldozing, burning, chemical spraying, and girdling may have been on any given plot of timber, developers and real estate salesmen could obscure any sense that these landscapes reflected a previous history of management. An advertisement from 1964 for some of the property George Mitchell purchased from the Grogan Cochran Lumber Company is emblematic of this point.

There are tracts clear of all timber and undergrowth. These are slow movers. More in demand are the tracts studded with stately pines and cleared of all undergrowth. And there are tracts with the tall pines, all the hardwoods, and undergrowth just as in the heart of the Big Thicket. These are the choices. And with due respect to Mother Nature, she didn’t give mankind any more choices betwixt the Atlantic and the Pacific, save for the desert areas.27

In reality, each of these particular works of “Mother Nature” was in the result of the past timber management performed by Grogan Cochran, their labor force, and any backwoodsmen who had burned, poached, or run cattle on this part of the forested commons. The diversity of the forest’s

26 Virgil W. Cobb to SJRA, [Spring, 1964], Folder Houston Chronicle (Mr. V. Cobb), Box 130, San Jacinto River Authority Records, Lake Conroe, Tex.(hereinafter SJRA) (quotations). See also Montgomery County, Texas, 4.

appearance that these historical actors had created became a boon for real estate developers. The landscape’s scars became product differentiation.

Developers managed the landscape they inherited, preserving some elements and bulldozing others, in order to craft something they could sell to homebuyers. Much of the county’s cleared land went into ranch land, ranchettes, and country homes for equestrian hobbyists.\textsuperscript{28} Timbered acres usually went into recreational subdivisions and more traditional bedroom communities. Developers wielded the bulldozer with a light hand, ensuring that the resulting developments highlighted the stately pines and winding creeks that complemented the recreational lakes and the promised summer-camp lifestyle. Those appealing to a more distinguished, country-club clientele saw in the county’s dense, magnolia-filled lowlands a connection to a romanticized southern past of leisure and status.\textsuperscript{29} In either case, developers worked within a county whose land remained more than 80 percent timbered, and they used this to its full advantage.\textsuperscript{30}

Manmade lakes were an important part of the promised lifestyle. Recreational lakes had been popular, semi-public social centers among sawmill villages in the county back into the

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\item\textsuperscript{28} As described in chapters 2 and 5, the closing of the open range and the adoption of improved pastures transformed the county’s most profitable agricultural land, the bulk of which was in the northern and western part of the county, into ranches and western-themed subdivisions. These landscapes supported a growing recreational horse industry and a western cultural identity that used distinct cultural images and landscapes for a similar end: exclusive, white, suburban and exurban lifestyles.
\item\textsuperscript{29} The 1,300 acre River Plantation development took this path. The First General Reality Corporation of Houston sold the spreading oaks, ancient cypress, and giant magnolias that lined the banks of their riverfront land as a place of moonlight and magnolias where the best of southern plantation life persisted into the twentieth century. Such interpretations remained the exception rather than the rule. The piney woods, rather than moonlight and magnolias, became the cultural image most commonly linked to the landscape. “River Plantation Ready to Provide Colonial Living,” CDC, September 6, 1964, p. 19 and “River Plantation” in Montgomery County History, 55.
\item\textsuperscript{30} Here I am building on Christopher Sellers’ insights into the way developers renegotiated the pastoral image that defined the national perceptions of suburbia in order to fit it to regional climates, flora, and fauna. Sellers, Crabgrass Crucible, 154-60.
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nineteenth century. Developers added to this history, constructing hundreds of recreational lakes during the period. The county boasted 144 lakes larger than five acres as early as 1969. For the right price, homebuyers could secure for themselves and their children an idyllic summer camp experience that never had to end—year-round fishing, canoeing, swimming, hiking, and picnics. It was a rare subdivision that did not mention either lakes or forests in its name. There was Timber Lakes, Tri-Lakes Estates, Lake Forest Falls, Lake Bonanza, Lake Forest Trail, and Lake Conroe Forest, the self-described “Cadillac of the Retirement and Retreat Subdivisions.”

A development without a lake or that was dependent on the long-promised opening of Lake Conroe operated at a distinct disadvantage in this market. Developers constructed, stocked, and maintained these lakes for the sole enjoyment of their private residents. And enjoy it they did. As one new resident bragged to a reporter from the Houston Chronicle, “The lake is in your backyard. You get your fishing gear, ease into the rowboat and paddle out. A few others are fishing along the shores, and a shapely girl rides by on horseback. . . . The sky is blue, the air is cool. All is quiet, serene. . . . [m]an, you can have Houston and all the noise and haste. This is for me.” When responding to a 1969 survey, 62 percent of residents in the Lake Bonanza subdivision cited either recreational opportunities or the wooded landscape as the primary reason.

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32 The local Soil Conservation Service office had helped build 3,396 lakes in Walker and Montgomery Counties by 1981. The majority of these were small stock ponds for farmers, ranchers, and suburban country residents. Differentiating between stock ponds and recreational lakes is difficult, and the two often overlapped. As a general rule, the larger the lake, the more likely it was being used primarily for recreation. District Program and Work Plan for Montgomery and Walker County Soil and Water Conservation District No. 425 (1969), 26 and “Annual Report,” Newsletter, 1981, Folder Sample Newsletters both in Walker SWCD. See also Elmer Summers, “Land of Lakes,” HC Magazine, September 7, 1958, Folder City of Ho. From W. B. Weisinger, Box 130, SJRA.
33 A 1967 study found that of the 132 subdivisions with recorded plats in the county up to that point, 53 percent had designated park areas and/or lakes or ponds. An additional 9 percent bordered major recreational areas such as the National Forest, State Forest, or the future Lake Conroe. Watt, “Suburban Recreation Subdivisions,” 31; “Texas’ Most Beautiful City,” April 5, 1964, s. 11, p. 5, 12 (quotation); “Texas’ Most Beautiful City,” 1963, s. 4, p. 2, 4.
they had moved there. They promised not only open vistas and picturesque scenery; they also offered the dream of a permanent vacation.

The promise of life in the woods was just as important as life on the lake. Roaming the woods, shooting squirrels, and fishing all day had long been rites of passage for rural youth. Adults may have raced to their tree stands in the county during the deer season, but for the most part, the life of recreation in the woods was a nostalgic season of adolescent freedom and discovery. It was no coincidence that the county was home to five Boy and Girl Scout camps that played host to over 2,500 scouts each year. During the suburban boom, the number of county boys involved in scouting grew by 15 percent each year, reaching 1,200 by 1970. Scouting represented a formalized version of the life that suburban families brought their children to the county to experience. Area developers tapped deep veins of nostalgia by promising both man and boy the chance to return to the woods. The Lost Lake subdivision, for instance, offered its residents a chance to live like Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn. While, they admitted, Caney Creek was no Mississippi River, it still offered boys hours of enjoyment, exploration, and adventure. As with nearly all subdivisions, developers promised that lots would abide by “sensible restrictions” but assumed their clients would be more interested in “[e]xploring the heavy wooded channels of this lazy winding creek,” an activity that would

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35 Out of 310 respondents, 37 cited aesthetics and atmosphere, 128 said recreation, and 28 said seclusion or a chance to escape the city. Watt, “Suburban Recreation Subdivisions,” 65.
36 The lifestyle image surrounding these smaller lakes was distinct in both its audience and its emphasis from the later recreational development around Lake Conroe. Lake Conroe developments were more akin to oceanfront resorts that emphasized exclusivity, formal entertaining, and recreational boating. These developments had much higher price tags and were almost exclusively constructed by Houston-based and national firms. “Lake Front Bustling with Developers,” East Texas Outdoors 2, no. 11, supplement to CDC, May 1973, Folder News Clippings—Houston Post, Box 130, SJRA, 4.
37 Camp Strake’s 2,400 wooded acres was one of the largest Boy Scout camps in the country. Hunt, Ruts to the Miracle City, 24 and “George William Strake,” Folder 7, Box 1, Lewis and Catherine Cutrer Collection, HMRC.
39 This appeal was consistently gendered. Advertisers’ calls for residents to roam the woods and explore nearby creeks were both implicitly and explicitly targeted at boys.
“capture the imagination of adults and children alike.”  

When asked by a reporter why they had moved out to Tri-Lakes Estates, one Houston business man explained “I want to get my boy out of the city.” Another young couple praised the fact that they could “turn the kids loose here” to play and explore. 

These same developers also played on another popular image of rural innocence. Tri-Lakes was a place that “nestles in the rolling, wooded hill country.” Here was a wooded hollow where “Rip van Winkle could have slept longer.” Having ripped the famous country bumpkin out of his home in the New York Catskills, these advertisers dropped him into what was, they presumed, an equally picturesque setting in the piney woods. Rip van Winkle’s presence stamped the development as a place of primeval forests, a place that had been isolated from man’s intrusion for decades or centuries—a profitable fallacy.

For those with a more strenuous ideal of leisure, George Mitchell’s company offered individual lots for sale to those wishing to embellish the frontier fantasy. These advertisers challenged “city folk” to try their hand at “tam[ing] some wild wooded acres improved only by a good road, available electric power, air conditioning, and telephone.” While it is doubtful locals would have given much credence to this type of wilderness claim, Houstonians found enough untamed nature to explore and subdue. For those who equated manual labor with play, there were plenty of opportunities for land clearing and home building. Yet this frontier romance included little of the frontier attitude toward nature. The advertisement went on to point out the opportunities for hiking, bird watching, and catching butterflies during off hours. Such a “frontier” experience mixed the romance of carving a homestead out of the woods with both

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40 The developers demonstrated an understanding of local real estate demand that exceeded their understanding of American literature. They promised that residents would have “adventure rivaling that experienced by Mark Twain’s famous twins.” “Huckleberry Finn Would Envy Life on Lost Lake,” CDC, July 15, 1965, p. 9. See also “Growth in ‘72 Is Montgomery Co. Forest Hills and You,” CDC, June 30, 1972, p. 44.


opportunities to appreciate nature and the comforts of a warm shower, electric lights, and a decent road back to civilization. However strenuous a lifestyle these newcomers ultimately chose, the common denominator was the appeal of what one advertisement described as “a wooded, rolling hideaway—far from the city’s noise and confusion—where the entire family can relax and really LIVE” Thousands of families left the city for the promise of life in the woods of Montgomery County.

The Arrowhead Lakes development is emblematic of these iterations of the county’s marketing of a suburbanized nature. The brainchild of local real-estate magnate Jim Fuller, Arrowhead Lakes combined a crassly embellished Native American exoticism with timbered landscape to create a popular recreational suburb. Advertisements for the site reveled in the area’s Indian history. Chief Ec Cho Nawny of the Coushatta Indians was on hand to greet Houstonians as they visited the subdivision and imagined themselves boating on Moosejaw Lake, fishing in Medicine Hat Lake, and shopping in the replica of an Indian marketplace. The land’s historical ties to tribal hunting lands only added to its appeal as settings of “natural beauty.” Here was a landscape where residents could have the romance of digging up artifacts of Indian civilization even as they explored the primeval forests and lakes. Here, the advertisers boasted, was “one of the last locations within a 50-mile radius where Houstonians may relax in an atmosphere designed by nature to provide complete retreat from the fast pace of the workday week.” They would do so with the recreational and suburban amenities that “discriminating” Houstonians had come to expect, such as horseback riding, swimming (in a pool built in the shape of an arrowhead), boating, fishing, and 313 acres of woods.

44 “Texas’ Most Beautiful City,” 1964, p. 4 (quotation).
45 “Texas’ Most Beautiful City,” 1964, p. 2, 3; “Arrowhead Lakes,” HC, April 5, 1964, s. 11, p. 3.
Jim Fuller, like most Montgomery County developers, did not bulldoze nature and replace it with a watered-down image of pastoral landscapes. Instead he naturalized, packaged, and sold the county’s second and third growth trees as suburban forests to Houstonians escaping the climate, sprawl, and harried lifestyle of Houston for a year-round summer camp in the Montgomery County woods. Convincing families to move so far out from the city was a hard sell. The county’s forests were one of the few advantages they had in their competition with suburban developments closer to the city. Emphasizing the woods was a pragmatic move, yet it also spoke to a rising national concern with the nature-destroying aspects of suburban sprawl. County developers had few qualms about having their workers fire up the chainsaw and the bulldozer to lay waste to large tracts of timber if there was money in it. Locals viewed timber as a resource to be harvested, and few would have batted an eye at the environmental consequences of the construction of Levittown-style subdivisions in the county. In contrast with Houston’s inner suburbs, however, the county’s forests provided substantial value. Developers committed themselves to preserving the look, although certainly not the ecology, of the forest. This market-driven preservation came with few controls and, once the lots were sold, was entirely in the hands of homeowners and subdivision private governments. These developments protected some trees for residents’ enjoyment. They never attempted to preserve the forest. Nor did they take seriously the environmental limits that came with the county’s soils, climate, and topography.

For all the rhetoric of building in nature, these suburban developments remained within the political and cultural world of East Texas. The transformation from rural to suburban was rarely contested in Montgomery County, as there was a great deal of money to be made by landowners and laborers alike. The suburban landscapes that had taken root by the 1980s were the product of a continuing and often messy dialogue between the suburban ideals crafted by
developers and purchased by their customers; the county’s rural politics, governance, and culture; and the climate, soils, and hydrology that defined its landscapes. Developers incorporated the county’s wooded landscapes into their built environments to great effect. They were just as successful in using their second inheritance, the county’s weak governmental system, for their own benefit. In this second case, however, the results were far less benign, as the county’s environmental inheritance began to assert itself in the 1960s, exposing the limits of rural governance and the dangers that came from not taking seriously the landscape’s environmental limits.

The persistence of the county’s rural political system was a primary factor in the suburban turmoil that followed. Developers set up shop in a county whose conservative political culture ran deep. The fervent anticommunism of locals was overshadowed only by their shrill defense of individual liberties, their devotion to segregation, and their unflappable commitment to the prerogatives of business against the machinations of the federal government. County residents liked their taxes low, their services sparse, and their regulation minimal. Local government put these beliefs into practice, freeing citizens to largely ignore the day-to-day management of county affairs. The county earned high marks with the East Texas Chamber of Commerce year after year for its low taxes, balanced budget, and low debt load. The courthouse gang ran the local Democratic Party and the local Democratic Party ran local government. Political power was held by a mixture of cattle, timber, oil, and other business interests. The county judge and the four county commissioners, each of whom exerted independent control over the infrastructure of his precinct, formed the county’s executive leadership. The commissioners were, in effect, ward bosses. Along with the sheriff and the

46 For a sample of local political rhetoric, see “No Uncle Sam, We Don’t Want it,” CDC, September 28, 1961, p. 1.
justices of the peace, they were the central figures in a good ol’ boy political culture that
rewarded personal favors more than professionalism or administrative competence. These men
embraced the persona of the gregarious rural politician who had little use for bureaucracy and
could be relied on to act decisively and to get the job done when necessary. The good ol’ boy
system also ensured that the line between public work and personal favors would remain porous.
Poor auditing and little oversight compounded this issue. County commissioners allocated their
work crews based on the demands of patronage politics rather than any organized management
plan. They graded and repaired private roads, hauled gravel and dirt to political supporters, and,
on occasion, did work on their own personal property. Some commissioners treated their road
and bridge funds as an informal welfare fund, using it to help out constituents with pressing
needs.

County commissioners had no legal obligation to account for their spending to grand
juries into the 1960s, and they used this freedom to its fullest. Some even went so far as to use
their position to line their own pockets. In spite of its problems, this political system ensured
that roads were maintained and that landowning citizens had personal recourse if they were
unsatisfied with the county’s minimal services. Circumstances would soon demonstrate that the

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48 This persona was most clearly expressed in the clothing worn by county officials around election time. Courier consistently showed the county treasurer, attorney, and district judge dressed in suits. They were elected based on their professionalism. The sheriff, county judge, and county commissioners, in contrast, dressed in jeans, boots, and cowboy hats, embracing the ranching culture and its western image. They were men of the people and men of action. Roger Galatas and Jim Barlow, The Woodlands: The Inside Story of Creating a Better Hometown (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Land Institute, 2004), 146.


strengths of this rural commissioner system, its personalism and its flexibility, made it a poor fit in a suburbanizing county whose newcomers expected policy-driven, efficient services and clear and evenly enforced regulations.

In terms of its power to regulate development, Montgomery County was decades behind the much more established Loudoun. As chapter 1 demonstrated, preservation-minded landowners and garden club women established rural zoning, basic subdivision regulations, and a county planning office more than a decade before large-scale suburban development came to Loudoun County. Montgomery County never developed rural zoning. Virginia was by no means a national leader in the powers it granted its counties to regulate growth, but it was certainly ahead of Texas in this regard. Loudoun and neighboring Fairfax County frequently pushed the limits of these state powers in the 1970s, and certainly would have done even more to regulate growth had they been legally enabled to do so. Even with these restrictions, Loudoun County’s planning department and county supervisors exerted a level of control over the shape and quality of development that Montgomery County’s commissioners could only dream of. Of course, Loudoun County had been settled by Anglos more than 150 years before Montgomery County was, and that difference in historical development was significant.52

The limited powers of Montgomery County’s commissioners court further compounded its inability to respond to the demands of suburban development. County government was, legally speaking, an appendage of the state. The commissioners could only exercise those powers expressly granted to them by the Texas legislature. During the early 1960s those powers were limited to the power to collect taxes and maintain roads. The commissioners court faced the onrush of suburban development with a very small governmental tool box that expanded slowly

52 For examples of how Loudoun dealt with substandard development, see “Supervisors Crack Down on Sugarland Run, LTM, February 17, 1972, A1, A16 and “Subdivision Request is Deferred,” LTM, December 24, 1970, A1, A2.
over the following two decades. They had no power to zone, to enforce building codes, or to regulate sewage disposal. The dramatic increase in the number of roads first drew the commissioners’ attention. Fly-by-night developers would construct substandard roads, begin selling lots, and then donate these roads to the county, leaving the commissioners court with the financial burdens of upkeep and with irate residents if they failed to do so. Using state empowering legislation passed in 1957, the commissioners court passed an ordinance in February 1961 forcing developers to submit subdivision plats to the court for approval and to put up a performance bond to ensure their roads would meet basic county standards. The impact of this ordinance was limited. It did not apply to developments with private roads, and therefore the bulk of the county’s subdivisions went unrecorded and unregulated. Continued road problems convinced the commissioners to update their policy in July 1965, requiring developers to maintain their own roads for a year before the county would accept them. They also closed the private road loophole in August 1966 and required a preliminary plat to gain approval by the newly hired county engineer beginning in April 1967.53

That same year the county health department took steps to regulate the most basic sanitation issues. Even then, the county had little power and even fewer resources to enforce these ordinances. It was not until the late 1970s that the county was willing to invest the money to take developers to court over violations. Throughout the period, the number of unrecorded subdivisions remained high, and the regulations on those who did file plats were poorly enforced. Rural people valued a government that allowed people to use their property as they saw fit. The

53 J.C. Davis Jr., “Legal Aspects of the County Commissioners Court,” Speech before the County Judges and Commissioners Conference, College Station, Tex., February 25, 1959 in Folder Speeches by J. C. Davis Jr., Box 2004/082-1, Attorney General Records (hereinafter AGR), Texas State Library, Austin, Tex.; Chapter 436, Acts of the 55th Texas Legislature, Regular Session, 1957. Previously developers only had to submit plats in counties with populations of at least 100,000; Subdivision Regulations (1961); Resolution, July 16, 1963, CCR; Resolution, August 1, 1966, CCR; Subdivision Rules and Regulations, April 17, 1967, v. 18, p. 151-159, County Commissioner Minutes (hereinafter CCM), Montgomery County Annex, Conroe, Tex.; Developers could still avoid all of these regulations by selling their property by metes and bounds rather than subdivision.
commissioners court reflected this deep vein of rural conservatism, only moving toward regulation in specific cases where a failure to act might directly cost the county taxpayers money and, even there, only when state legislation permitted it. For more than the first decade of suburban development in Montgomery County, developers enjoyed free rein. The county did nothing to regulate where developers could build or where septic tanks could go. There was no building code and few road inspections. For developers, in other words, the county truly was a municipal frontier where the quality of developments was determined solely by what developers could get Houstonians to pay for. This upfront price was, of course, only the beginning of the cost—one residents and the county as a whole would pay over the following decades.

Even as developers made the most of their free hand in carving up the countryside, the ecological limits of the Montgomery County woods asserted themselves. Many suburban families discovered that their frontier fantasy was more realistic than they had bargained for. Houstonians had expected to move away from the city to the beauty of the woods without losing the urban services and security that they had come to expect. As suburbanites settled into their new homes, they soon realized that the county government was only able to provide a rural level of waste disposal, road repairs, and police and fire service. Even more troubling, they realized that the county had done little to protect them from the hazards of floods and inadequate septic systems, both of which developers had exposed them to. For all of their desire to be close to nature and far from the city, many suburban newcomers became deeply disillusioned when they realized they had settled within a rural world.

Solid waste was one of the first issues to attract attention. As the previous chapter explained, dumping was an especially acute problem on the metropolitan fringe where services were sparse and governments weak. Montgomery County was certainly no exception. The dearth
of landfill sites, the rising population, and the ever-expanding waste stream fomented a local garbage crisis that county government was woefully unprepared to handle. Piles of broken refrigerators, car tires, household waste, and construction materials lined the county’s wooded country roads, marring its celebrated beauty and making a mockery of the developer’s well-crafted image of the forest. Fixing the dumping problem required money (always in short supply), a willingness among the commissioners court to plan and provide services at a county level (something rural commissioners resisted), and authority from the state to purchase property for dumps (something the legislature was slow to grant).\footnote{At this point state law still prevented counties with populations under 300,000 from purchasing land for dumps. On Montgomery County’s garbage crisis, see “Wanted: More Trash Dumps in Montgomery County,” \textit{CDC}, April 21, 1965, s. 2, p. 14, Terri O’Connor, “We Must cover Garbage Before it Covers Us,” \textit{CDC}, February 25, 1970, s. 1, p. 6, and “A Ray of Hope,” Editorial, \textit{CDC}, October 3, 1976, s. 1, p. 2.}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{A Montgomery County roadside dump, c. 1975. Newsletter, April 1975, SWCD, 1.}
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Over the first two decades of suburban development this resulted in a hodge-podge program of waste disposal that left the countryside just as full of trash in 1975 as it had been in 1965. During this period precincts 3 and 4, those areas that contained most of the suburban growth, had no landfills. For these residents, the county’s small and poorly run dump in Conroe remained as much as twenty miles away—an inconvenience that exasperated roadside dumping
issues. Political fragmentation, commissioner turf wars, and persistent rural resistance to increased spending continued to stymie solutions to the problem, in spite of the county health department’s efforts. The Courier could still report in 1976, “mounds of garbage, old refrigerators, broken furniture with the stuffing hanging out and dismantled plastic toys seem to grow and multiply overnight” along the county’s roads. Local government continued to search for a more permanent solution into 1979, as the lone and near-capacity county dump outside Conroe came under pressure from state regulations for polluting groundwater. On the issue of solid waste, limited county powers, limited funds, and public resistance to spending on county services continued to impose rural government services on suburban newcomers.55

Suburban advertisements had promised residents life in nature. What residents received was life on the metropolitan fringe. On many of the backcountry and subdivision roads, drivers were too busy avoiding potholes and washed-out sections to notice discarded appliances and last-year’s issues of the Houston Chronicle tumbling in the breeze. As the clearinghouse for all road complaints, the county commissioners court faced irate homeowners at nearly every meeting. Early developers had saddled the county with dozens of poorly constructed roads that joined the ever-lengthening backlog of needed road repairs. Others had kept their roads private, leaving residents to figure out how to pay the repair bill. One of the most common complaints came from newcomers incensed at the destructive and noisy truck traffic that marred their backcountry roads. The same rural areas whose forests, low land prices, and proximity to the city were so appealing for residences had also attracted the gravel quarries and sand pits that paved the city

and its suburbs. That the surrounding landscape was being mined to develop the convenient roads that they demanded did little to assuage residents who, in one especially ironic case, called on the commissioners court to prevent fully loaded trucks from rumbling down Sleepy Hollow Road. Another resident complained that an “outlaw gravel operation” had been using roads in his subdivision and, along with its “Outlaw Bunch” of employees, had either intimidated residents or bribed them with promises of free fill dirt in order to keep them quiet. This was the nature of road construction on the metropolitan frontier—where rural people were caught up in the rush to develop the county and make a living in the process.56

The lack of police protection was especially worrisome for newcomers who had left the city out of fear. Rural law enforcement relied on social and familial constraints and a generally self-reliant citizenry to keep the peace. Rapid population growth stretched this system beyond the breaking point. Into the mid-1970s, the county had as few as four deputies patrolling at night in a county whose population was approaching 100,000. Little wonder, then, that the county sheriff’s office had no resources to devote to cracking down on dumping violations, stray dogs, or speeding. Across suburban Montgomery County, response times were high and break-ins common. In one particularly galling episode, one family living on the outskirts of Conroe waited for over three hours for a deputy to show up after someone fired a volley of bullets into their bedroom. Even worse, criminals followed newcomers to the countryside. The county’s proximity to Houston and its relatively weak enforcement made the county popular among narcotics rings and racketeering operations. In 1972 the fledgling county narcotics office averaged one and a half arrests each day. This crime wave tarnished the county’s image as a place where children were safe from urban crime. Quite the opposite was true. Montgomery County had one of the

highest juvenile crime rates in the state by 1980. The level of fire protection was even worse, forcing suburban newcomers to turn to volunteer units to protect their homes. Limited finances took their toll here as well. Barbecues and bake sales could only raise so much of the needed funds, leaving these cash-strapped volunteer units inadequate to cover the county’s ever-expanding subdivisions—a fact that a rash of fires in the southern part of the county in 1974 made clear. In both cases, local government was incapable to providing the level of services suburban newcomers demanded.57

The most dramatic suburban crises swirled around the movement of water. Here newcomers faced the perfect storm of developer opportunism, local government’s light regulatory hand, and the land’s environmental limits. Developers understood how to capitalize on the county’s natural image. They were either ignorant or negligent when it came to the dangers posed by the county’s hydrology, its soils, and its climate. Each contributed to the county’s significant flooding and septic tank hazards. The county’s soils wreaked havoc on the septic tank systems that were a vital cost-saving measure among the developers of rural subdivisions. The soils in the southern part of the county, for instance, have a thin layer of sand overlaying thick layers of clay. While much of the land appears at first to be well-drained, once the thin layer of sand is saturated, water tends to pool on the surface. In the case of septic tanks, this often meant that developers installed drainage fields in clay soils that could not keep up with

homeowner’s sewage production. As long as the county remained largely rural, septic problems were a minor inconvenience. When developers appropriated this rural technology for their suburban developments, however, major problems ensued. Septic systems were essential to making these types of developments economically viable. Yet clay soils prevented the percolation of wastes from septic tanks, causing frequent system failures and the leaching of sewage into drainage ditches and onto yards. Most developers paid little attention to such potential problems, most of which did not become apparent until months after families moved in. Nationally septic tank problems were only beginning to inspire regulation in the early 1960s. Even if developers had attempted to design with soils in mind, they would have found a pervasive lack of available information. There was no comprehensive soil survey of the county available until 1972, and it was a rare developer indeed who would be willing to fund his own soil study. Even with the survey, interpreting soil information and planning around it took time, money, and expertise—each in short supply among the economically marginal developers who tended to rely on septic systems. Into the early 1970s, the county had no regulations on where such systems could not be installed, nor did they have the power to prevent the installation of additional systems where previous ones had proved to be a health hazard. As a result, septic tank subdivisions proliferated. By 1973 the county had 31 major subdivisions on septic tanks. The failings of these systems became one more hazard faced by suburban frontier families. Those stuck with failing systems had to rely on an inefficient and overloaded local court system for any hope of getting restitution from developers.


59 “Developers Face Order to End Health Nuisance,” CDC, April 27, 1973, Folder News Clippings—Conroe Courier, Box 130, SJRA (hereinafter Courier Clippings); Tim Cumings, “Drainage is a Problem in Parts of
The county’s history of flash flooding compounded its sewage problems and created a host of problems all its own. Here, too, developer negligence and ignorance about the county’s environment placed frontier families in harm’s way. Experience had instilled in locals a respect for the limits on where one should build. Floodwaters had ripped through the county’s bottomlands long before homes and subdivisions spread up and down floodplains, and locals had learned to respect the danger flooding posed. “Old-timers” could point to old fence posts and trees that retained high water marks to support their stories of flash floods and the raging San Jacinto River. Local memory had it that the highest point in River Plantation, one of the county’s high-brow developments, had flooded as high as a horse’s flanks in the record-breaking flood of 1940. To Houstonians and transplanted northerners the saw-tooth palmettos and spider lilies that blanketed the county’s floodplains lent a subtropical ambiance to their wooded subdivisions. To those who knew the land, these plants were a warning to build elsewhere. Topography, climate, and soils combined to make southern Montgomery County a highly flood-prone area. The topography is generally flat. The same clay soils that hampered septic systems also caused water to pool in temporary wetlands and mix with septic effluent. The county’s average of 46.13 inches of rain per year tends to fall in heavy downpours in spring and fall, creating flash floods that rip through the county. Heavy rains in the spring could turn the San Jacinto River from a meandering creek into a raging torrent in a matter of hours. The hot and humid climate also encourages the rapid growth of brush that clogs up drainage ditches, causing localized flooding. Along with the rest of the watershed, and all of Houston’s metro area for that matter, seasonal

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flash floods were the rule. Although Montgomery County’s upstream location and its relative lack of impermeable surfaces ought to have saved it from some of Houston’s flooding problems, the lack of flood control planning and developer regulation ensured that some of the county’s developments would have some of the most frequent flood damage in the metro area. Weak government structures, the fragmentary nature of flood control, and the lack of knowledge about where not to build combined to make this already flood-prone area a major hazard for newcomers.61

Much of the blame rests at the feet of developers. O. J. McCullough provides a case study in the type of hydrological hubris that characterized these men. McCullough joined the wave of speculators and developers who descended on the county in the mid-1960s. He purchased a wooded tract along the San Jacinto River east of I-45 and south of Conroe. All that the site lacked was a lake. In a moment of inspiration, McCullough decided that the San Jacinto River itself could provide his lake. Beginning on September 16, 1965, his bulldozers constructed a sand dam 12 feet high, 30 feet wide, and 225 feet in length. At its base, the entire flow of the San Jacinto River, a river whose floods would later rip through subdivisions, gushed through a 10-inch pipe. Near the top of the dam, McCullough had placed ten 24-inch pipes as a spillway—a hopelessly inadequate precautionary move. When word of the dam reached the Conroe Courier and the San Jacinto River Authority (SJRA), the two groups raised hell. McCullough had dammed a state-owned river without even requesting a permit, consulting an engineer, or holding a public hearing. The SJRA dragged McCullough before the Texas Water Rights Commission

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TWRC) on October 14. His lawyers defended his right to develop the property as he saw fit, provided he did not harm downstream property owners. The TWRC accepted the logic of the argument but ruled that the dam was on state property and that it was “unstable, unsafe and dangerous to lives and property downstream.” They gave him ten days to remove it. McCullough refused, ultimately forcing the state to take him to court. In the meantime, the river did its own work. Like a child’s sandcastle at high tide, McCullough’s dream washed away as the San Jacinto carved out a channel around the dam and washed the sand into the Houston Ship Channel. McCullough’s case embodies the cavalier attitude with which many developers viewed the San Jacinto. It also suggests that these same men viewed the county as a suburban frontier where the law was weak and their freedoms expansive. Texas law was very clear about who owned the state’s rivers, and McCullough’s actions met swift and effective legal challenge.62

That same body of law had nothing to say about building on floodplains. Developers took full advantage, rushing to meet market demand for suburban lots in the woods and along streams under the legal umbrella of caveat emptor: buyer beware. Developers ignored local knowledge and sound engineering principles in their rush to turn a quick profit. Even that bastion of high-modern hydrological management, the Army Corps of Engineers, advised potential homebuyers and developers to seek out such local knowledge and heed its warnings.63 Few did so. Suburban development was predicated on dismissing the landscape’s rural history and reshaping its environment to meet suburban ideals. Only through the environmental alchemy of suburban development could a flood-prone section of the county that one county commissioner labeled a

“natural fishpond” be packaged and sold as Porter Heights. Some developers were simply ignorant of the dangers they were passing onto their customers. Others knowingly deceived and defrauded their customers or channeled their drainage problems onto other developments that had the misfortune of being downgrade. Such practices set the stage for decades of flooded homes, angry residents, and heated county commissioner sessions.

As the pace of development quickened, so too did the destructiveness of flooding. In 1964, a twelve inch rain flooded homes in subdivisions across the southern and eastern parts of the county. A flood in 1967 caused enough damage to get the county designated a disaster area. The financial benefits from this designation conveniently remained in effect when two more floods visited the area in May and June 1968. Continued development meant that the same amount of rain that came in 1964 led to the evacuation in June 1973 of 6,400 homes in the southern part of the county. The total damage for the 600 homes flooded in this case came to $3,976,760. This was for a flood where the San Jacinto River was still nine feet below its 1940 record. For some especially poorly placed subdivisions, even normal rainfall caused serious

64 “Sales Continue as Lowlands Flood,” CDC, February 18, 1973, p. 2 (quotation).
65 For examples of subdivisions dumping water on each other, see February 16, 1973, v. 21, p. 512, August 30, 1978, v. 27, p. 741, August 20, 1979, v. 29, p. 386, all in CCM, and “Sales Continue as Lowlands Flood,” 2.
66 Ike Barrett, Interview by Author, July 11, 2012, Dobbin, Tex. In at least one case, developers continued to sell off lots that had flooded even as workers were carving them out of the woods. “San Jacinto River Floods Lowlands near Highway 45 over the Weekend,” CDC, January 27, 1965, s. 1, p. 9; Montgomery County was not alone in its lack of floodplain regulations. As late as 1970, less than a sixth of local governments had adopted any such regulation. Rome, Bulldozer in the Countryside, 180.
69 Evacuation figure includes only those from the Peach and Caney Creek watersheds. The damage estimate does not include damage to agricultural and oil and gas properties, which would have more than doubled the figure. Application for Assistance in Planning and Carrying Out Works of Improvement under the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (hereinafter Application for Assistance), April 29, 1974, v. 22, p. 426-36, CCM, 431; Ed Watson and Tim Cumings, “Damages in Precinct 1 ‘Worst’,” CDC, June 20, 1973, p. 1; The June 1973 flood led to most of Metropolitan Houston being declared a national disaster area. Texas Department of Water Resources, Water for Texas: A Comprehensive Plan for the Future, vol. 2, (Austin: Texas Department of Water Resources, November 1984), III-10-5.
flooding. Some south-county homes flooded as many as six times a year.\textsuperscript{70} The seasonal flash
floods that had been merely a nuisance to rural residents now became localized, persistent
suburban disasters.

Flooding in Montgomery County was caused by nature; it continued because of
regulatory and planning failures. County officials did not pass an ordinance protecting new
homebuyers from predatory developers who sold flood-prone lots until 1973.\textsuperscript{71} This delay was in
spite of the swarms of suburban residents who flooded the commissioners court with demands
for action.\textsuperscript{72} When seven families had their homes in the bedroom community of Timber Lakes
flooded in 1968, they marched to Conroe to plead their case. Why, they asked, were developers
allowed to sell such lots when “it was common knowledge to all but the purchaser that such
areas flooded during and after heavy rains?” The developer had assured them that their homes
would never flood. Now they were stuck with lots that no one would buy and that they could not
build on (the subdivision covenant prohibited building on piers). All the commissioners had to
offer was their sympathy. They had noted flood-prone areas on county plats. It was up to
purchasers to look at them. The county had no regulations preventing flood-prone subdivisions
from being built or preventing people from buying homes in them.\textsuperscript{73}

Faced with the county government’s failure to act, inundated suburbanites next reached
out to the SJRA to save them. Unscrupulous developers and realtors had used the promise of
Lake Conroe’s construction to soothe prospective buyers’ fears about flooding along the San
Jacinto. This hope had buoyed residents’ spirits when their homes flooded. Flood control, after

\textsuperscript{70} Application for Assistance, 430. See also Petition, May 1, 1972, CCR and “Many Flee Flooded Homes.”
\textsuperscript{71} The state was one of the nine in the nation that had no laws to control such development. Lundgren, “Developer
Promotions under Investigation.”
\textsuperscript{72} Cumings, “Drainage is a Problem” and “Sales Continue as Lowlands Flood.”
\textsuperscript{73} “Disaster area Designation Urged,” 1, (quotation from Courier paraphrase).
all, was part of the SJRA’s state-mandated mission. The Lake Conroe that emerged out of the SJRA’s negotiations with Houston, however, had no provision for flood control. Once the dam’s gates closed in January 1973, complaints poured into the SJRA offices every time water lapped at the foundations of these suburban homes. Like the county commissioners, the SJRA had nothing to offer suburbanites. The SJRA’s contract with Houston prohibited them from operating the dam to prevent flooding. To drop the lake level two feet would mean the loss of nearly half of its year’s permitted supply. There was no guarantee that any water the dam released for flood control would be replenished. If a drought occurred, such a loss could seriously jeopardize both Houston’s water supply and the SJRA’s financial solvency, not to mention the lake’s recreation potential. The Authority’s commitments to downstream customers made flood prevention in Montgomery County impossible.

These trials and tribulations were the lot of those who braved the metropolitan frontier. As one Spring Forest resident complained to the commissioners court, their homes had been flooded, their roads washed out and destroyed by dump trucks, their woods buried in trash, and the local government was nowhere to be found. “We have begun to feel like a lost tribe out

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74 A major flood that ripped through the county in 1935 had been one of the primary reasons for the creation of the SJRA. The Authority’s enabling legislation had charged the SJRA to directly address flood control. The legislature reiterated this in 1967, when it called for the capture of flood waters “to prevent the devastation of lands from recurrent overflows and to protect life and property.” The SJRA master plan included flood control as one of its primary aims and anticipated including flood control in its proposed dams, with the understanding that the Army Corps of Engineers would partner with them. Burnett, *Flash Floods in Texas*, 86-93; art. F, s. 9, HB 832, 45th Texas Legislature, 1937 reprinted in *Master Plan: Report for the Full Scale Development of the San Jacinto River* (Conroe, Tex.: San Jacinto River Authority, 1951), Box 398, SJRA, 35; Chapter 546, 60th Texas Legislature, Reg. Sess., 1212-1213 (quotation); *Master Plan, 1957*, 16-17.

75 For details on the negotiations surrounding the construction of Lake Conroe, see Chapter 3. On Houston’s lack of interest in flood control, see Freese, Nichols, and Endress Engineers to E. B. Cape, September 18, 1967 in Folder Cape, E. B. (Director Public Wks.), Box 405, SJRA and Memo Re. City of Houston Letter, August 29, 1967, Folder Mayor – City of Houston 1965, Box 406, SJRA. As Ike Barrett, later manager of Lake Conroe manager later explained it: “somebody has to... pay for that flood control part of the project. And at that time there was no interest in flood control in this area.” Ike Barrett, Interview by Author, November 11, 2010, Dobbin, Tex.; Terry Wilt, “Conroe Dam Didn’t Cause Flooding, Says SJRA,” *Humble News-Messenger*, May 13, 1979, p. 7, Folder Flooding, Conroe, 1979 (April), Box 260, SJRA; Kaye Thompson, “River Plantation MUD: They Want lake Lowered,” *CDC*, May 6, 1980 Folder Flood Control 1979-1980, Box 392, SJRA.

76 April 29, 1974, v. 22, p. 348, CCM.
here,” another resident explained. A 1969 report by the Houston-Galveston Area Council (HGAC), a metropolitan planning organization, summarized the entire swath of metropolitan frontier problems:

> What may appear to be a quality sub-division at its beginning may degenerate into a marsh of septic tank effluent. Its streets may deteriorate. Garbage collection and disposal may become a severe problem. The lack of fire and police protection can become critical. . . . Water systems may become inadequate because of undersized original facilities. Properties may be depreciated because of nuisance-type and offensive activities conducted on adjoining and unrestricted areas. . . . Some developments . . . are inadequately provided with street and utility improvements . . . Often, there are no effective codes, ordinances or regulations covering sanitation, utilities and soundness and safety of structures. At initial low density, such developments in a semi-rural context appear to present no problems. But with added time, more people and higher densities, such developments will become blighted and liabilities to the region.

These were the growing pains of a county awash in suburban development. Yet taken as a whole they represent more than this. These problems expose the contradictions inherent in the suburban appeal. Newcomers expected to move close to nature while still keeping the benefits of the city. In reality they moved to rural areas that were unable to meet their expectations. Suburban frontier families moved beyond the reach of city government and thereby placed themselves at the mercy of unregulated developers. When they attempted to hide under the wings of local government, they found a rural political system with little protection to offer. These families valued the aesthetics, leisure, and freedoms of the woods. They found it difficult to cope with the weak rural governance, limited services, and sometimes hostile ecology that came with it. The local regulatory state began to catch up with development during the 1970s and 80s. The benefits of these improvements, however, largely went to new construction. Earlier subdivisions were left to organize their own state structures and infrastructures to deal with the hazards of the metropolitan fringe. In the process they completed the transformation of the county’s southern section from rural to suburban. The story of their efforts defined the 1970s.

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77 Complaint of Freeway Forest Subdivision Residents, November 8, 1971, CCR.
Transforming the county government into an entity that could meet these pressing development problems was a long and often drawn-out process that spanned more than a decade. One of the most significant barriers was economic. Developers had promised suburban residents a fiscal impossibility: urban-level services paid for by rural-level taxes. The Montgomery County commissioners finally accomplished the revaluation of rural land after a year of fierce political struggle that pitted Conroe boosters against entrenched rural interests with newcomers lining up on both sides. Revaluation nearly doubled tax assessments from $90 million to $175 million.\(^7^9\) Continued growth would push that figure to $400 million by 1976.\(^8^0\) The county’s finances got another boost when federal revenue sharing program started flowing in 1973. The nearly $1 million per year of federal largesse underwrote investments in transportation, health, law enforcement, and recreation—helping to smooth the transition to a metropolitan county.\(^8^1\) Even with these extra revenue streams, it was all the county could do to stay in the black.

Musteriing the political will to address the county’s development problems was at least as difficult. There was still no master plan in 1972, six years after the county joined the HGAC.\(^8^2\) Even when the county commissioners moved toward increased regulation, they were frequently stymied by the limits of what the state of Texas would allow them to do. A December 1, 1974, report from the Intergovernmental Affairs Committee of the Texas Legislature reveals the sorry state of land-use planning in Texas at that point. This report called on the legislature to address what they termed one of the “most serious and pervasive land resource problems in the state.” The report rehashed the cornucopia of problems faced by the state’s metropolitan counties.

\(^7^9\) “Biggest Local Tax Billing Nearly Ready for the Mail,” *CDC*, November 1, 1970, s. 1, p. 1, 4.
\(^8^0\) “County Tax Roll over $400 Million,” *CDC*, August 11, 1976, p. 1.
\(^8^2\) Resolution, May 18, 1972, CCR; Resolution, November 1966, CCR; This move was resisted by die-hard conservatives in the county. “Area Council Membership Described as Unfortunate,” *CDC*, January 19, 1969, p. 1.
Texas, they reminded lawmakers, was one of the few states in the nation that still had “no systematic governmental involvement in land use regulation beyond the corporate limits of cities.” They called on their fellow legislators to give counties the authority to enact buildings codes, to set minimum standards for septic tanks, to establish county-wide service districts, and to require all land sales to have to file plats. In short, they called for the legislature to give Texas counties the regulatory tools that counties across the nation took for granted.\footnote{Intergovernmental Affairs Committee, Texas House of Representatives, \textit{Texas Land Resources: Problems and Possibilities}, 64\textsuperscript{th} Texas Legislature in Box 19, Citizens Environmental Coalition Collection (hereinafter CECC), HMRC, 13 (first and second quotation), 57 (third quotation).}

Achieving this agenda was arduous work. The majority in the Texas legislature continued throughout the 1970s to stonewall attempts to increase the regulatory power of metropolitan counties. The Texas Association of Realtors, the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, and the Texas Farm Bureau each adamantly opposed any regulation that might decrease the value of their land and their power to do with it what they will. These groups had the weight of Texas political culture behind them. In 1973, for instance, twenty-three land use bills were active in the legislature. None made it through.\footnote{Texas Land Resources, 60, 92-93.} The results were little different when such proposals went before the people. In 1970 Texas voters considered a constitutional amendment that would have allowed counties to vote to adopt a county unit system. This restructuring of county government would allow counties to make more local administrative positions appointive, would have weakened the commissioner’s grip on their precincts, and would have made the creation of county-wide service districts and services more feasible. The amendment was soundly defeated both within Montgomery County and statewide. Rural people were unwilling to give up the commissioner system.\footnote{The local vote was 5437 to 3828. “Proposed Amendment No 7,” CDC, October 28, 1970, s. 2, p. 10 and “Summary of Candidates, Issues on Election Day,” CDC, November 1, 1970, s. 1, p. 7; For an example of rhetoric}
the 1970s and into the 1980s, ranchers and other rural conservatives joined with realtors, developers, and home builders to stymie the passage of land use control and development regulation in Texas. Metropolitan counties had to rely on their meager governmental powers and aid from the federal government to cope with the problems of population growth. 86

The one area in which the state legislature did acquiesce to increased regulation was flood control. The National Flood Insurance Act of 1968 provided subsidized flood insurance to residents of counties, towns, and cities that enacted basic land use control measures. Unwilling to leave so much federal money unclaimed, the Texas legislature passed enabling legislation to ensure Texas localities could participate the following year. Montgomery County did not follow suit until the federal government passed the Flood Disaster Protection Act of 1973 requiring all homes within the flood plain to purchase flood insurance or forfeit federal assistance in case of a disaster and prohibiting federally regulated lending institutions from loaning in areas that did not restrict home construction within the 100-year floodplain. 87 The county responded by requiring subdivision plats to demonstrate good faith efforts to limit flood damage and working with the Army Corps of Engineers to map the county’s floodplains. The county was one of 27 Texas counties with that had applied by November 1974. They further restricted construction on the 100-year floodplain in April 1978. Limited resources continued to make enforcing such restrictions difficult at both the federal and local level. 88

86 State of Texas, Summary of Land Use Legislation, 64th Legislative Session, 1975, Folder 31, Box 1, CECC.
The county took another major step in regulating development in October 1971 when the fledgling county board of health joined the national mainstream by establishing regulations and inspections related to sewage effluent and garbage as a way to protect public health. The most important of these new regulations was the requirement for a permit to install septic tanks. Yet having these regulations on the books was only part of the solution. The board of health continued to face limited funding, weak enforcement powers, and strong political pressure from rural landowners and developers to look the other way when violations were discovered. Even when the board did deny a permit, they had no power to file injunctions to prevent developers from selling lots within these non-compliant developments. Legally, home purchasers, not developers, were liable for failing septic tanks, a fact that left developers off the hook. Not unexpectedly, ill-planned septic systems continued to proliferate across the county. It was only with the development of the North Country subdivision east of Conroe in 1974 that public pressure forced the county commissioners to address the issue. The developer was in the process of installing 600 septic systems within a densely packed subdivision even though the county health department had denied him a permit. With the issue so prominently in the county spotlight, the commissioners court passed more intensive regulations and, more importantly, empowered the health department to use court injunctions against illegal septic tanks. Enforcement would remain a significant problem, but the passage marked a turning point in the county’s regulation of the worst suburban abuses of this rural waste system. The county’s regulatory system gradually extended its powers over the development of the countryside.

89 Resolution, October 1971, v. 20, p. 478-90; An outgoing commissioner would later publicly condemn the health department for bending to political pressure and failing to enforce these regulations. He called the department “Sallas Levels Blast,” CDC, January 2, 1975, p. 1.
May 1973 brought another ray of hope to Montgomery County’s suburban frontier families, as the Texas Legislature passed a strong consumer protection law that empowered the attorney general’s office to prosecute developers for false claims made about drainage and septic tanks. Before this new law, consumers had to file suit on their own and prove false representation, an intent to deceive, and injury. This new law made the attorney general’s office a strong consumer advocate and ended the principal of *caveat emptor* in Texas real estate. The impact of this new law was immediate. The attorney general’s Houston office received 1490 consumer complaints about development and land sales between October 1973 and May 1974 alone. Their prosecutions successfully collected damages from developers. This state-level legislation addressed the most flagrant developer abuses without directly engaging with the environmental issues of the metropolitan fringe.\(^9^1\)

In their path-breaking works on suburban environmentalism, Adam Rome and Christopher Sellers find in septic tank failures, flooding, and developer abuses the beginnings of the national environmental movement. These failures, they argue, fomented grass-roots activism and top-down policy changes that drove a shift from the logic of public health to wider concerns over chemical contamination and the rape of the natural world.\(^9^2\) In Montgomery County, regulation did come, at least in part, in response to grass-roots pressure. The arguments for regulation, however, rarely moved beyond the rationale and rhetoric of preserving public health and basic consumer protections. This was symptomatic of a broader failure of environmentalism regulations in May 1979. Resolution, May 21, 1979, v. 28, p. 818-864, CCM; On enforcement, see Paul McGrath, “Dogs, Guns Interrupt Septic Systems Exams,” *CDC*, May 11, 1978, p. 1; On the national move to regulate septic tanks, see Rome, *Bulldozer in the Countryside*, 87-118 and Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*, 105-136.


to take root in Montgomery County’s suburban landscapes. In Houston on Earth Day, April 22, 1970, thousands attended teach-ins, protests, public lectures, and other forms of dramatic, grassroots empowerment. The event registered barely a ripple in Montgomery County. The only local event was a group of Conroe High School students who took a field trip to Jefferson Chemical Company to be reassured that the factory was a good environmental citizen and that no new regulation was needed. County subdivisions produced a handful of garden clubs concerned with beautifying area roads and a weak and relatively unorganized ecology club. The local League of Women Voters pushed the county to set up rural trash cans to combat the litter problem, but they too balked at leading a local environmental movement. A handful of civic clubs and homeowners associations ran ad hoc local trash clean ups, but this too failed to spark any kind of organized movement. Most newcomers rarely did more than complain. When it came to opposing sprawl and development, they did not even go that far.

This is not to say that the national environmentalism had no resonance in the county. The commissioners court passed a resolution in January 1970 committing themselves to defend their “naturally beautiful land area” from the problems of “air pollution, water pollution, garbage disposal, [and] sewage disposal.” Even the local chamber of commerce got on board with this, warning in the lead up to Earth Day that the county must “control those industries and individuals which would fill our air and water with filth and create a veritable cesspool of our beautiful county.” Such noble sentiments reflected fears among local elites that the county’s

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93 For the broad outlines of the Houston Environmental movement, see CECC and Teresa Tomkins-Walsh, “‘A Concrete River had to be Wrong’: Environmental Action on Houston’s Bayous, 1935-1980,” (Ph.D. Diss, University of Houston, 2009).
94 There were no other events mentioned in the Courier. “Earth Day Trip Set,” CDC, April 22, 1970, p. 1.
95 “River Plantation Garden Club” in Montgomery County History, 151-152; February 19, 1974, v. 22, p. 88, CCM; “Dumping Violations Topic of Monday Meet,” CDC, January 24, 1975, p. 1; For an example of this type of resident complaint, see “Peach Creek Forest Residents Complain,” September 1976, CCR.
96 Resolution, January 12, 1970, CCR.
reputation as a natural haven from Houston might suffer if they did not appear to be addressing environmental problems. Their sentiments were not entirely hollow, as the county did make substantial progress in protecting consumers from substandard development and in reining in fly-by-night developers.

Taken as a whole, however, it is clear that the “environmental decade” in Montgomery County was anything but. There are a number of possible explanations for this failure. Certainly the political culture of Texas in general and Montgomery County in particular worked against the formation of a local environmental movement. The county’s rural population had some strong conservation strains, but Texas landowners remained unwilling to either seriously restrict private property rights or to make peace with an environmental movement with strong ties to the counter-cultural movement. Explaining why suburban newcomers did not mobilize for the environmental cause is a more complex question.

At least part of the answer lies in the slow process of political mobilization among the county’s southern subdivisions. The year 1970 brought voter reapportionment and therefore ought to have signaled a major political turning of the tide. Before reapportionment, the county’s second precinct, which included Conroe, had 70 percent of the population but only a quarter of the voting strength. South-county residents used their new-found political power to replace their precinct 3 commissioner and rural establishment candidate Bo Damuth with businessman George Wood in 1972. Wood ran on a platform that spoke to the concerns of south-county suburbanites. He called for modern services, good roads, effective law enforcement, local planning, accessible landfills, county parks, and improved flood control. Suburban Montgomery County did not build on this victory. Throughout the 1970s, suburban voters on the

whole continued to view local politics with a self-defeating mixture of scorn and apathy. Those newcomers who faced the worst of the suburban problems continued to look to the local government for help in a pinch. Most, though, invested their political energies into either the management of their development or the political world of the metropolis and the nation. Either way, they had little energy to spare for local politics. In a 1974 Democratic primary election, for instance, only 11 percent of registered voters in the well-established subdivision of River Plantation bothered to show up.\textsuperscript{100} In 1978 only 25 percent of registered Democrats participated in that party’s primary, which was still at least as important as the general election. The lack of participation was again concentrated in the suburban areas that now made up a majority of the population. Oak Ridge North sent only 17 percent, The Woodlands 18 percent, and River Plantation 18 percent. “What is wrong with these well-educated, supposedly in-the-know, most affluent people?,” local journalist Joyce Everhart complained, “Why don’t they care? Don’t they realize that . . . they could literally swing about any election they wanted?”\textsuperscript{101} South county voters voted in large enough numbers to control who became their commissioner. They did little, however, to extend their influence over county-wide elections. Political candidates, in turn, continued to give suburban areas short shrift in their campaigning. Suburban voters simply did not show up at election time.\textsuperscript{102}

Why such apathy when so many suburban residents were faced with such an obvious need for stronger government? Certainly part of the answer lies in the voter apathy and sense of malaise that blanketed the national political culture of the post-Watergate era. The fact that these were off-year elections certainly did not help. These factors alone, though, are not enough to explain the lack of voter involvement. Voter apathy also had its roots in the suburban dream

\textsuperscript{100} “Silent Majority,” \textit{CDC}, May 7, 1974, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{102} Mr. and Mrs. Ronald F. Bliese, Letter to the Editor, \textit{CDC}, May 5, 1972, s. 1, p. 4.
itself. Suburban residents did not move to the county to become engaged in its political and social world. They moved to enjoy its natural beauty and to free themselves from the troubles of the daily grind of the city. Everhart explained it well. “[M]ost are escapists,” she argued, “[t]hey move out to the suburbs to live among the trees and the birds. They are seeking their own islands in the sun. They want to be left alone. And so they are.” These voters were quick to complain to the commissioners court when rain washed out their roads, when their homes flooded, or when their forests filled up with trash. These complaints did not spark the kind of mobilized environmental movement that they did in Loudoun County and across the nation. Southern county residents were apparently unwilling to do the political work required to transform the county’s still largely rural political landscape to suit their needs. They would not do so until the 1980s, when The Woodlands began its rise to dominance in county politics.

For the first few decades, at least, suburbanites viewed the county government as an alien organization that was managed by rural people and that cared little for their interests. Rather than working with this entrenched government, these metropolitan frontier families carved their own local governments out of the materials at hand. The most prominent of these governments was the service district. Originally designed for use in rural areas, suburban developers and residents used drainage districts, water supply districts, and rural fire prevention districts for their own purposes. The state passed legislation in 1971 making the Municipal Utility District (MUD) the most powerful of these suburban micro-governments. MUDs could provide water, drainage, sewage treatment, and, from 1978 on, fire protection. Under Texas law these districts had the power to tax and take out bonds to meet the needs of residents. For the developer, these districts offered a great deal of control over the costs and extent of suburban services. For suburban

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103 Everhart, “South County Apathy Seen,” p. 4.
104 Virginia Marion Perrenod, Special Districts, Special Purposes: Fringe Governments and Urban Problems in the Houston Area (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 34.
residents MUD’s provided what they craved: the assurance that their tax money would go
directly to providing their services. While never as democratic as their proponents claimed, they
empowered a small group of highly engaged suburban residents to manage their own affairs. The
number of districts in the county ballooned to nearly fifty by 1973, with a combined debt of $421
million, an astronomical sum given that many were approved in elections involving fewer than a
dozen voters in total. In practice these districts often provided worse service for fewer people
at a higher cost than a county-wide system could have provided. The fragmentation of municipal
services has been one of the great failures of sprawling suburban development across the nation,
and Montgomery County was no exception. In Montgomery County, the amateur management,
limited resources, and small districts led to poor water treatment, inefficiencies, poor service, and
dangerous debt loads. This was the cost of local control and limited county services.

Incorporation was an even more extensive form of self-government that rejected county
governance in its entirety. Incorporated subdivisions took over all of the powers of county
government, including regulating development and building, providing police and trash removal,
and maintaining roads. When combined with a MUD, subdivisions could recreate a rough
approximation of city government. Incorporated subdivisions offered improved services without
the hassle of dealing with Conroe. These benefits, however, came at a cost, the most obvious
being increased taxes. Even more importantly for some suburbanites, incorporation meant

105 This figure included 36 MUDs, 6 fresh water districts, and a handful of drainage districts. “County MUDs Are
421 Million in Debt,” CDC, February 24, 1973, p. 1. The county’s second drainage district, for instance, covered
5,537 acres but was voted in by only 75 taxpayers. Resolution, January 1974, CCR. There were ten fire districts in
the county by 1980. Statistics from CCR.
106 On the history of special districts in metropolitan Houston, see Perrenod, Special Districts and Melosi,
“How Houston’s Public Sinks,” 130, 134-143; The number of these districts nationwide (excluding schools) rose from
How it is Changing our Future (New York: Times Books, 1986), 171-84 and Garreau, Edge Cities, 179-208. For
some of the problems with county MUDs, see Joyce Everhart, “Montgomery County MUDs Eye Building Lull,”
CDC, January 22, 1975, s. 1, p. 2.
recreating the very state structures that many had fled. On top of this, incorporated subdivisions faced the same perennial issues as MUDs—they were perennially underfunded, inefficient, and amateur-led. Those fortunate enough to have commercial properties within their boundaries might be able to balance their books. Those dependent entirely on residential taxes, however, became loaded down with debt.

Urban historians have portrayed incorporation as a defensive move by privileged white suburbanites who feared urban encroachment, increased taxation, and a loss of local control. This held true in Montgomery County. The city of Houston continued an aggressive program of annexation, extending its Extraterritorial Jurisdiction (ETJ) into Montgomery County in 1965. The thought of having their homes sucked back into the very city they had fled was not one most suburbanites could handle. On top of this, inclusion within either Houston’s city limits or its ETJ brought with it the city’s oversight and regulations, but not necessarily city services. Caught next to an expanding city and perennially faced with the failures and inefficiencies of county governments and service districts, close to a dozen of the county’s largest subdivisions incorporated in the late 1960s and 1970s. Urban historians, in their rush to condemn the cruel

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107 On the benefits and hazards of incorporation from the urban perspective, see Eugene Maier to Mayor Lewis Cutrer, April 27, 1961, Folder 4, Box 1, Lewis and Catherine Cutrer Collection, MSS 45, HMRC.
108 Incorporation also tended to decrease property values, as new homebuyers feared the restrictions that incorporation might place on their properties. “Porter Readies for City Incorporation Election,” CDC, June 9, 1965, p. 1.
109 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 138-156.
110 On the legal basis for incorporation in Texas, see Municipal Annexation Act, 58th Texas Legislature, Ch. 160, Art. 970a, 1963; Houston more than doubled its size through annexation in both 1948 and 1956. It continued to expand into the 1970s. McCombs, Houston: A History, 139-141 and “Houston Annexation Move Cuts into Montgomery Co.,” CDC, August 22, 1965, p. 1.
hemming in of American cities by incorporated subdivisions, have done little to explore the ways suburban residents adapted. Incorporation forced suburbanites to create towns. Examining the way they went about this offers a great deal of insight into suburban expectations of government and the continued limits these governments faced in a county that still posed significant environmental hazards for suburban developments. Incorporation gave these residents new state structures to make their suburban dreams come true. Not all would find in incorporation the salvation of their suburban dreams.

The story of Oak Ridge North (ORN), a moderate-sized development east of I-45 in the southern part of the county, highlights the ways newcomers adapted to life in Montgomery County. ORN changed hands multiple times as various developers built out its ten sections between 1964 and the early 1980s. The name Oak Ridge North encapsulated the development’s appeal to Houstonian professionals. Homes were nestled in the forest, at a higher elevation than the city, and in the less developed northern outskirts of the metropolis. The first developer sold 1/3 to 1 acre “country-sized lots” on the appeal of wooded nature and recreation, by encouraging speculation, and through the more traditional enticements of good school districts, class and racial segregation, low taxes, and privacy. A steady stream of white professionals bought into this bedroom community on the metropolitan fringe. As future town councilman John Planchard explained, only partially in jest, “there were Indians out here when I

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112 Mary Goranson Eklof, “City of Oak Ridge North” in Montgomery County History, 54 and “Historical Background & Environmental Setting, Oak Ridge North, Texas,” Folder City History, Oak Ridge North Municipal Records, Oak Ridge North, Tex. (hereinafter ORN Records).


114 The motivations that brought families to Oak Ridge North always involved a mixture of these attractions. Eklof, “City of Oak Ridge North,” 54, “James D. Peoples Family,” 427-28; Gary Louie, Interview by Author, November 9, 2012, Spring, Tex.; Jerry Bradford, Phone Interview by Author, November 5, 2012.
moved in.” These newcomers joined a handful of longtime county residents who had cashed in their land holdings and now wanted to enjoy the suburban good life for themselves. ORN was a model of the rural subdivisions that dotted Montgomery County.

As with so many other developments in the county, Oak Ridge North made residents an impossible promise. Its advertisements boasted that homebuyers would enjoy “all the benefits of city and country living and Montgomery County Government.” In other words, they would have city services, county living, segregated community, and rural taxes. It became clear within the first few years that fulfilling this promise would rest far more on the actions of the community of Oak Ridge North than on its developers. Within only a few months after opening in 1964, parts of the development flooded during a heavy rain storm. This became a recurring event for parts of the development. The development also faced damaged roads, roaming dogs, inadequate police and fire protection, and the continuing failures of the developer to provide promised amenities.

Faced with the county’s relative lack of action, ORN residents turned inward. The development’s population of engineers, businessmen, accountants, and lawyers provided a deep well of expertise, education, and commitment that would serve ORN well. These organized a local civic club, managed the two MUDs and the fresh water supply district that served the development, and performed the grass-roots community service that kept the development running. The looming threat of annexation by Houston provided the catalyst the civic club needed to call for incorporation in 1974. The political bickering that followed revealed a sharp divide between the development’s northern and southern sections. As ORN built out, new

115 John Planchard, Interview by Author, October 29, 2012, Conroe, Tex.
117 ORN Ad., CDC, February 18, 1968, s. 2, p. 5.
118 “James D. Peoples Family.”
119 Gary Louie Interview.
developers improved the building standards and increasingly transformed this rural recreational subdivision into a standard commuter suburb. The newer residents who moved into sections 4 to 10 tended to be more professional, white collar, and far more comfortable with bureaucracy and increased state powers.\textsuperscript{120} Sections 1-3 had fewer amenities. Its residents jealously defended their more rural lifestyles and were more strongly opposed to government and taxes. Northerners feared that Houston would take their power of self-determination and thereby limit their ability as a community to improve the quality of life. Southerners were unwilling to place themselves under the control of a town, even if not doing so might mean annexation by Houston. The vote pitted rural subdivision and suburb. With the help of some northern defectors, the south won 325 to 205.\textsuperscript{121}

Without the powers of a city, ORN civic leaders pressed on with the tools they had at their disposal. Flooding later that year inflamed animosity toward the developer and torpedoed developer sponsored bond issues that would have buttressed ORN’s drainage, water, and sewer systems. Residents chose instead to try to make the developer pay for his unfulfilled promises. Citizen complaints got the attention of the state attorney general’s office, and a lawsuit against ORN developer Dean Couch became the first case handled by the Houston office under the 1973 consumer protection law. A settlement in April 1974 forced Couch to admit guilt and thereby opened the door to citizen lawsuits. John Burgers, head of a south ORN group that sued Couch explained, “To be honest, we feel like a bunch of minutemen. We plan to use a lot of talent, effort and energy. We have a lot more time than money.” Ironically, the failures of suburban

\textsuperscript{120} “Recreation Center with Swimming Pool” and “James D. Peoples Family.”
development were the most important factor in fostering community spirit and civic pride among suburban residents.122

The specter of annexation loomed again in 1979, as Houston’s ETJ expanded to include sections 1-3 of ORN. The remainder of the subdivision voted 318 to 230 to incorporate on January 20, 1979.123 ORN finally had the local powers needed to address its persistent problems. After the town’s May elections, ORN civic leaders set about building a town. The first year was a bonanza of hundreds of pages of ordinances and laws. They passed an ordinance to restrict flood hazards. They called for and got voter approval for a 1 percent sales tax to raise funds. They passed a noise ordinance, an animal ordinance, and a building code that required a detailed permitting process. They hired off-duty police officers to patrol their streets.124 With the creation of a drainage district in January 1980 and the city’s takeover of the Oak Ridge North MUD and the creation of an ORN police department a few years later, civic leaders were well on their way to establishing their city as a well-run suburban enclave within a county still enmeshed in rural East Texas.125

There were limits to what incorporation and grass-roots activism could accomplish. In another case, neither one could redeem the failures of developers and homebuyers to appreciate the natural limits imposed by the piney woods. Along Montgomery County’s suburban frontier, no group of residents could tell a tale of more woe than those whose suburban dreams brought

123 Election Returns, January 20, 1979, CCR and Incorporation Map, February 6, 1979, Folder Incorporation: Town of Oak Ridge North, Box Ordinances, ORN Records; Bradford Interview.
124 Ordinance 001-79, Folder 1979; Election Return, August 11, 1979, Folder Incorporation: Town of Oak Ridge North; Ordinance 10-80, Folder Miscellaneous; and Ordinance 014-79, Folder Ordinances in Box Ordinances and City Council Minutes, October 25, 1979, Folder City Council Minutes all in ORN Records.
them to Whispering Oaks. This rural subdivision was nestled within a low-lying woodland just below a sharp turn in the San Jacinto River. Long-time county residents would not have even put a chicken coop on the land, because of its flooding dangers. Suburban buyers snatched up the wooded, waterfront lots. For those who were hesitant about the dangers of flooding, Harold Emmick, the developer, explained that the SJRA and the Army Corps of Engineers had fixed the river’s flooding problems—a blatant falsehood. With this assurance, customers signed a release form recognizing the potential flood hazards and began construction. Poor site design, a lack of drainage structures, heavy vegetation, flat topography, and the proximity of the river all made Whispering Oaks especially vulnerable to floods. Less than two years after the houses started going up in 1972, the eastern section of the development had already flooded four times. It would continue to do so with numbing regularity. Seventy percent of the homes in the development were in the path of a 25-year flood and some were even in the floodway, a fact that earned Whispering Oaks the nickname “gurgling oaks.” In spite of this, the county could do nothing to prevent Emmick from continuing to sell lots in the troubled development to unsuspecting homebuyers.  

This was only part of the problem. Frequent floods wreaked havoc on the development’s poorly designed water and septic systems, leaving algae in the streets and raw sewage in the drainage ditches. Whispering Oaks residents appealed to the county for assistance to no effect. They then decided to establish a private water district. As in ORN, they assembled a lineup of motivated professionals to pilot the development through the complex legal hurdles and

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administrative barriers that came with suburban life on the metropolitan fringe. Financing was the main obstacle. After taking their case to Austin and Washington, D.C., the Texas Water Quality Board (TWQB) became Whispering Oak’s savior. The TWQB promised the development that it would purchase their water bonds if they, in turn, incorporated to insure the development had the taxing power to pay for any improvements. Residents enthusiastically agreed, voting 106 to 5 to incorporate on September 29, 1973. Months of frustration followed as the TWQB, the county commissioners, HGAC, and the SJRA bickered about the village’s place within proposed regional sewage plans. Finally, after over a year of waiting, Whispering Oaks got a $210,000 loan from the TWQB to build a small sewage treatment plant. With the purchase a year before of a 1928 fire truck, Whispering Oaks had set off on the road to being an incorporated community. Difficulties, however, continued to mount. Seven months later the community was no closer to having its sewer issues fixed. In April 1976 the developer forfeited his road bonds, leaving the village with washed out roads and little money to fix them. The San Jacinto flooded most of the development again that June. Residents struggled on until extensive flooding hit the entire Houston area in June 1979, causing $650 million in damage. These floods finally convinced the commissioners court to invest scarce resources in cracking down on developers who ignored flood plain and septic regulations. The county still had an estimated 240 unrecorded subdivisions, however, each of which had avoided even the most basic

127 Their board consisted of a draftsman, a sales manager, a registered engineer, a certified public accountant, a businessman, a housewife, and a nurse. Jeanne Zuber to K. C. Phillips, September 5, 1972, Folder Montgomery County, Box 406, SJRA.
131 That year Houston claims to the Federal Flood Insurance Administration accounted for more than half of all claims submitted nationally. Perrenod, Special Districts, 98-102.
subdivision regulations. These continued to stymie the county’s efforts to protect homeowners and the larger county from flood hazards.\textsuperscript{132}

Incorporation had promised a solution to Whispering Oaks’s water problems. In reality, it did neither. The developer had placed these residents in an untenable environmental position. No economic investment or new state powers could allow them to deal with that fundamental fact. Whispering Oaks only hope came from a \textit{deus ex machina}. The newly formed Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) took on the development as a pilot project for its newly minted Constructive Total Loss Program. Rather than paying flood claims, FEMA instead offered to pay 51 of the 78 homeowners $1.4 million to relocate. FEMA subsidized their retreat from nature to a more tenable position. Residents deeded the now empty lots to the county and filed to have the roads closed. The county allowed the land to grow back into forest, ceding the land to nature once again. FEMA would continue this program in small developments up and down the San Jacinto River, wherever poor subdivision regulation and the dream of being close to nature had lured developers and residents to the water’s edge.\textsuperscript{133}

Inadequate planning, weak regulations, environmental hubris, deception, and grass-roots activism in response to poor development characterized Montgomery County’s suburban history. None of these things characterized The Woodlands, the “new town” that Houston oilman George Mitchell constructed on 17,000 acres of swampy forests along the county’s southwestern border. The Woodlands far surpassed earlier developments in its size, the types of amenities, and the


\textsuperscript{133} Congress created FEMA on April 1, 1979; The remaining homes were within the 100 year floodplain, which left them vulnerable, but not enough to justify the expense of a buyout. Steve Lee, “Whispering Oaks is Model Flood Project,” \textit{CDC}, [1980], Flood Control, SJRA; \textit{Report on Flood Problem at Whispering Oaks}, 2; Steve Lee, “Lots Deeded to County,” \textit{CDC}, December 21, 1979, p. 1 and December 10, 1979, v. 30, p. 114-116, CCM.
quality of housing it offered.\textsuperscript{134} It was even more significant in the way that it retained and even intensified the natural appeals used by earlier developers, while, at the same time, incorporating natural limits into the design. In this way The Woodlands represented both a national model of development and the fulfillment of the promise of suburban life in Montgomery County.

Mitchell’s intensive planning and the extensive resources his company invested in the project also freed The Woodlands from the constraints imposed by the county’s weak, rural government and its often unruly environment. The Woodlands completely refashioned the county’s rural landscape into a wooded suburban enclave.

George Mitchell developed The Woodlands in an attempt to transform the way Americans built cities. His dream of racial and class integration saw only limited success. The Woodlands’ sophisticated environmental planning and natural drainage system, in contrast, gave the new town a national reputation even before it opened on October 19, 1974.\textsuperscript{135} The Woodland’s core recreated the efficiencies and commercial and industrial tax base and employment opportunities of an urban downtown: eventually including condominiums, luxury hotels, high-rise office buildings, and a shopping mall. Its residential areas, in turn, recreated suburban life in wooded nature. The Woodlands’ planners invested millions of dollars in more fully knowing nature, but their plans reveal a continued commitment to developing the woods, fauna, and streams of the area as amenities and recreational opportunities. As George Mitchell put it, “[w]hat people really want is the rural lifestyle and to be part of the big city, and I think

\textsuperscript{134} In this The Woodlands was part of a national trend of larger corporations investing in large-scale real estate developments. Andrew Wiese, “The Giddy Rise of the Environmentalists”: Corporate Real Estate Development and Environmental Politics in San Diego, California, 1968-73,” \textit{Environmental History} 19 (January 2014): 28-54.

\textsuperscript{135} Mitchell had always emphasized The Woodland’s novel approach to planning with the environment and its natural aesthetics. This stance was part of Mitchell’s larger commitment to conservation and historical and environmental preservation. He combined this with a desire to solve the nation’s pressing urban problems. Galatas and Barlow, \textit{The Woodlands}, 33-34; George Mitchell, Interview, Kutchin, \textit{Mitchell Energy}, 207, and Juren Schmandt, \textit{George Mitchell and the Idea of Sustainability} (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010), 1-10.
The Woodlands is an answer in that direction.”\textsuperscript{136} The Woodlands offered its residents the same three-fold promise that past developments had offered: forests, lakes, and recreation, but it did so within the rhetorical framework of a now-dominant environmentalism. Where other developments had offered residents a chance to enjoy nature, The Woodlands offered something more: a guilt-free opportunity to live in harmony with nature. Here newcomers could “find a home in a rolling forestland without destroying the forest” and without having their homes destroyed by that forest.\textsuperscript{137} Mitchell’s planners freed residents from environmental guilt and allowed them to fully enjoy the benefits and amenities of a thoroughly planned, extensively organized suburban life in the woods of Montgomery County, Texas.\textsuperscript{138}

Creating this environmentally harmonious natural town required intensive study and management of what was a deeply historically contingent landscape that bore the marks of use by timber companies, cotton sharecroppers, oil producers, and hunters. The land that George Mitchell pieced together to make up The Woodlands offered a microcosm of the county’s historical land uses and abuses. The core of The Woodlands was built on two tracts Mitchell acquired from timber companies—a 2,800-acre tract he received when he purchased the defunct Grogan Cochran Lumber Company and the 4,300 acres he acquired from the Champion Paper Company.\textsuperscript{139} The rest of the 17,000 acres, he assembled from over three hundred smaller tracts, many of which had been worn-out homesteads or cutover timberland that unscrupulous

\textsuperscript{139} Kutchin, Mitchell Energy 28; George P. Mitchell, Interview, Kutchin, Mitchell Energy, 204-206; Jim McAlister, Interview, Kutchin, Mitchell Energy, 172.
speculators in the 1920s had sold sight-unseen to eastern investors. More modern land uses also crisscrossed The Woodlands. Oil company pipelines, pumps, and storage tanks broke the silence of the woods. Logging roads led visitors past areas of recent harvest, where the forest had begun the perennial process of reclaiming the cutover. These more recent uses sat side-by-side with clearings and ruins from late-nineteenth-century cotton plantations and early-twentieth-century timber camps. Range cattle continued to graze throughout the clearings on grasses that had themselves been brought to the area by settlers. These cattle competed for browse with an only recently resurgent deer population that in turn drew hunters to leases and hunting cabins in the area year after year. These deer hunters themselves had only recently displaced the wide-ranging fox and coon hunters who had dominated the area up until the closing of the range and increased fencing made their roaming nighttime hunts untenable. As late as 1951, The Woodland’s forests had been the site of a field trial by the Montgomery County Coon Hunters Association, a meeting with a high enough profile to draw dozens of hunters and their dogs, many from outside the state, including a dog owned by actor Roy Rogers. When The Woodlands started to take shape on this land, it was already well-worn territory.

The woods themselves represented anything but the climax forest that ecologists of the day praised so highly or the even-aged management that timber companies and the National

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Forest Service embraced. The area had been relatively untouched by fire for decades, making for a densely packed understory. Mitchell added to this history when he contracted with Georgia Pacific to cut all trees over 12 inches in diameter on his Grogan Cochran land in order to raise money.¹⁴² The localized history, soils, and elevation combined to determine the possibilities of each small plot of land. Nearly one-third of the land in The Woodlands lay within the hundred-year floodplains of Panther, Bear, and Spring Creeks, a fact that made these areas as flood prone as Whispering Oaks. These areas were full of palmetto trees, swamp oaks, water oaks, and magnolias. Locals who heard of Mitchell’s plans shook their heads and wondered when developers would learn that some places were too flood-prone to be worth building on.¹⁴³ Out of this hodge-podge of typical East Texas landscapes, The Woodlands’ alchemists went to work. They used bulldozers, cement trucks, and ad copy to transform third-growth timber, worn-out cotton fields, hunting lodges, and oil pipelines into a pristine wooded nature worth preserving.¹⁴⁴

In order to make sense of the multiplicity of forest types and environmental limits of the site, Mitchell hired nationally known landscape architect, urban planner, and iconoclast Ian McHarg of the firm Wallace, McHarg, Roberts and Todd (WMRT). McHarg’s 1969 magnum opus Design with Nature called for suburban development that protected environmentally sensitive wetlands, aquifer recharge zones, and farmland by pushing development onto less sensitive land.¹⁴⁵ With Mitchell’s extensive resources at their command, McHarg and his team

¹⁴² Developers referred to this type of harvest as a real estate cut. It kept the timbered landscape intact while raising liquid capital to help a developer keep his fiscal head above water. Mitchell got $5 million for this harvest. Mitchell Interview, Kutchin, Mitchell Energy, 10 and Jim McAlister, Interview, Kutchin, Mitchell Energy, 171.
¹⁴³ Morris Straughn, Interview by Author, July 31, 2012, Conroe, Tex.
¹⁴⁴ WMRT provided an extensive commentary on the forest types and their characteristics within The Woodlands site. WMRT, Ecological Inventory, 1973, 38-48. For an aerial image of The Woodlands pre-development, see Morgan and King, The Woodlands, 54.
¹⁴⁵ These ideas came out of McHarg’s broader goal of reimagining man’s place in nature and fundamentally reshaping western environmental values. Harmony rather than domination, according to McHarg, should characterize man’s relationship to nature in general and suburban development in particular. McHarg, Design With Nature (Garden City, NY: Natural History Press, 1969, reprint New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1992), McHarg and
set about analyzing and mapping every facet of the site’s ecology from soil and hydrology to vegetation and topography. They then overlaid all of this data onto a master map that was to guide development. His planning method sought nothing less than to scientifically understand the total environment of the site. In the process, McHarg made The Woodlands the most intensely studied suburban landscape on the continent.146

The most important part of McHarg’s plan was its treatment of the site’s drainage problems. He claimed that incorporating natural elements into the design would save $68 million on drainage while preserving and enhancing the wooded landscape and its non-human inhabitants as a valuable suburban amenity. Mitchell enthusiastically approved the proposal. The Woodlands maintained the existing contours of the landscape, leaving the floodplains and lowlands with permeable soils undeveloped, and shifting development to higher ground and soils that were relatively impermeable already. Flood control and forest preservation went hand in hand, for by leaving the site undrained, The Woodlands preserved the high water table that so many of the site’s large trees depended on. McHarg’s plan adroitly joined a commitment to protecting large areas of woodland from development with a developer’s commitment to shaping the woods into an amenity to be sold to prospective homebuyers. As McHarg would later put it, “nothing beats the combination of righteousness and profit.”147

McHarg and his team worked within the assumption common to all development in Montgomery County, that “[t]he residential and recreational value inherent in the forested environment” was “its prime resource.”148 Where earlier generations profited from the forest by

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146 Woodlands New Community, especially 29-30. WMRT, Ecological Inventory.
148 WMRT, Ecological Plan, 27.
cutting it down, The Woodlands joined other developments in making money off the preservation of trees. In one encounter George Mitchell made this logic very explicit. While touring the property in a jeep, Max Newlin, a Montgomery County native and Mitchell’s chief forester, was trying to convince Mitchell to allow him to cut down some of the larger trees on the land as a way to raise capital for the project. Seeing a large pine, Newlin stopped the jeep and pointed to the tree and told Mitchell that that tree alone would be worth $50 as timber. Mitchell stepped out of the car, looked at Newlin, and informed him that such a tree would add over $1000 to the value of a housing lot. Mitchell refused to allow any unnecessary timber harvests on the site.149 As The Woodlands continued to grow, residents came to value the way the woods restricted line of sight and protected homes from casual glances. The Woodlands’ forested landscape played a dominant role in establishing its exclusivity. As a former member of The Woodlands’ staff put it, The Woodlands is the kind of place where “If you don’t know where you are, you shouldn’t be here.”150

In this The Woodlands represented the county’s promise of wooded recreation reskinned for an increasingly environmentally conscious urban middle class. The core dream, though, was still the same. As one journalist put it, “The Woodlands has forever put the lie to any contention that work and living, work and play, work and relaxation must be separate spheres of a person’s, of a company’s life.”151 The Woodlands offered elite-level golf courses and recreation, including lakes, boating, hiking, tennis, biking, swimming.152 In a period of national concern over the unrelenting bulldozing of forests and farmland, The Woodlands promised “a forest that is going

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149 David Hendricks, Email Correspondence with Author, November 21, 2012.
152 Kutchin, Mitchell Energy, 17.
to remain that way forever. . . . [where] [n]o building will ever intrude. . . .” The Woodlands was unpolluted, quiet, and preserved. It embodied the three core values of post-World War II environmentalism: beauty, health, and permanence. The Woodlands was a place to relax and enjoy nature to its fullest without the guilt that came with traditional suburban development.\(^{153}\)

Skip Christie, a Woodlands employee, best summed up the genius of The Woodland’s planning when he recalled that they had “landscaped a forest and irrigated a swamp.”\(^{154}\) While Mitchell Development advertised The Woodlands to the public as a new town built within woods designed by nature, they embarked on a management scheme designed to enhance the woods to transform it into an aesthetically pleasing and effective drainage system. Not only did The Woodlands do a better job of preserving the forests than had other developments, they did it while constructing a planned drainage system that successfully accounted for the forest’s environmental limits. Where other developers had made a mess when they had adopted suburban development to the East Texas piney woods, Mitchell’s team had the resources, the patience, and the knowledge to develop this flood-prone area into an elite suburban enclave.

At the same time Mitchell’s planners served as a powerful intermediary between the county and the development’s residents. The quality of development in The Woodlands went so far above the county’s development standards that county leaders came to look to The Woodlands for models on what type of development they should encourage. Planners divided The Woodlands into a series of well-funded MUDs, subsidized a branch of the county’s sheriff department within the development, and generally pursued a program of total control in their

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development. As part of this Mitchell convinced Houston to extend its ETJ to cover The Woodlands to prevent residents from incorporating to seize any power for themselves. This approach had many benefits. Residents in The Woodlands did not spend their time pleading for the county commissioners to fix their roads or for help in dealing with the latest flooding episode. Mitchell’s representatives were the ones who met with the commissioners court. When they came to Conroe they did far more dictating than pleading. The Woodlands had a privileged upbringing and its early years were a dramatic success. There was nothing rural about life in this new town.

Many have criticized The Woodlands for the limits of its environmental planning. By not seriously examining the new town within the larger context of suburban growth in Montgomery County, though, such criticisms fail to appreciate just how successful The Woodlands was in comparison with its neighbors. Yet when one compares The Woodlands to developments like Oak Ridge North and Whispering Oaks, something was lost in all of this planning. The Woodlands never developed the level of civic participation that emerged from the tenuous suburban experiences of residents in smaller developments. Where the county’s lesser developments had to negotiate their place within the metropolitan frontier, The Woodlands replaced that frontier with its own idealized vision of urban life within nature.

The Woodlands rested on the promise of suburban life in nature, in harmony with nature, and with the planning, infrastructure, and leadership required to make the construction of such a grand development on a flood-prone swath of East Texas piney woods and bottomland a success.

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155 Perrenod, Special Districts, 35-38.
156 The Woodlands’ status as a viable alternative to suburban sprawl has faced criticism for the limits of its ecological approach since it opened. Russell Clive Claus, “The Woodlands, Texas: A Retrospective Critique of the Principles and Implementation of an Ecologically Planned Development” (Masters in City Planning: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994) and Forsyth, Reforming Suburbia.
157 Gary Louie Interview.
Where other developments faced significant, occasionally dramatic, setbacks when they attempted to refashion these rural landscapes into rural suburbs, The Woodlands fulfilled the promises of environmentalism. It fulfilled them without the grass-roots struggle and popular mobilization that so often characterized the movement. For a premium home price, new residents could rest assured that the developer had made peace with nature for them. A resident living in The Woodlands and working in Houston could spend their entire life without ever journeying into the more rural areas of the county or to Conroe, which, for all its growth, still retained the character of a small Texas county seat. Many in the Woodlands could even imagine that their homes really had been carved out of primeval nature that had never been farmed, cut, or developed.

Every once in a while, however, something would come along to shake up this collective environmental fantasy. Workers cutting a new drainage ditch east of The Woodlands in Oak Ridge North in 1980 uncovered such a reminder when they noticed tarry industrial waste leaking into their newly cut channel. Research in the county records revealed no information on where it might be coming from. Only when county officials began interviewing nearby residents did they learn that the site had been used by a contract waste hauler who had disposed of thousands of barrels of corrosive waste from local chemical companies at the site. The county health department had forced him to shut down and cover the site in 1967, but kept no record of it. These now suburban landscapes had a rural history that could have profound effects on the lives of the county’s new residents. Even though the visual markers of rural life were gone, the county’s history, environment, and social and political world persisted even as suburban developments came to dominate the built and imagined landscape.¹⁵⁸

EPILOGUE

Montgomery County, Texas, hosted the first annual Robbie Williams Golf Tournament in 1968. The tournament’s defining moment came while a competitor was setting up a crucial tee shot. After a few practice swings, the man stepped back from his ball with a scowl. He turned to see a pack of dogs racing past him and across the course, yelping and barking as they ran. Event organizers were eventually able to chase the dogs off, but the damage to the event’s prestige was done. Despite developers’ attempts to erase the county’s rural past and replace it with the refashioned, postcard-perfect landscape of a golf course, rural life persisted. The rural past would not stay in the past. It ran out of the woods to frustrate and complicate attempts to package and sell this landscape of leisure, safety, and beauty to nature-starved Houstonians.¹

Yet the interactions between city and country, between newcomer and longtime residents within the metropolitan fringe were not always oppositional. It would be too easy to see this episode as one in which rural dogs, a relic of the days of open-range herding and backwoods homesteads, wreaked havoc on the intensely managed environments of the new metropolitan fringe. In reality, urban, rural, and suburban landscapes each likely played a role in creating this problem. First, the city. Montgomery County, and dozens of counties like it, served as dumping grounds for urban trash of all kinds. When people from the city and inner suburbs no longer wanted or could no longer keep their dogs, they looked northward. If they could not find Ginger an idyllic home in the country, then they would drop her on the side of the road and let her to find it herself. If not, she could “return to nature” within the Montgomery County woods. Suburban fringe residents who had moved “to the country,” for their part, were notorious among wildlife conservationists for allowing their dogs to roam free. It was cruel, these people thought, to keep dogs penned up. They too needed space to roam. As a result, suburban and urban dogs

joined rural strays and free-roaming country dogs to form metropolitan fringe “wolf packs.” These groups of dogs caused major headaches to county officials whose strained budgets limited their ability to deal with the problem.

These packs of dogs, feral and domesticated, collared and uncollared, reflect the shape of the social world of the metropolitan fringe. Just like these dogs, many people from city, suburb, and country joined together in the celebration of a lifestyle based on access to countryside and forest. As with the dogs, people found on the fringe an increased freedom from urban and suburban constraints. The metropolitan fringe was a battleground, but it was also a melting pot. Metropolitan expansion refashioned the landscapes and social worlds of both counties. It created even as it destroyed. Rising property values, generational turnover in rural land, shifting agricultural economics and consumer demand, the cultural celebration of historical homes and rural landscapes, and favorable tax policies formed the metropolitan fringe as a distinct social and cultural world. This world continues to be characterized by relatively dense rural settlement, whiteness, rural recreation, cultural refinement, private spaces, and wealth.

Within Montgomery County, this rural world took hold even as larger agricultural operations began a period of decline. The percentage of land in farms within the county fell from its high of over 50 percent in 1959 to 27 percent in 1978. The average farm size leveled off in the 1970s and then declined from 327 acres in 1978 to 207 acres in 1982 as the cost-price squeeze drove producers out of business. The number of cattle in the county dropped by almost half in the 1970s. At the same time, however, the number of farms in the county increased from 532 in 1974 to 797 by 1982 and 952 by 1987. The number of farms with cattle also increased over the same period. Both trends reflected hobby farmers continuing to move out to the county.² Over the following decades, cattle ranching became the part-time hobby of those who made their

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² Statistics from Agricultural Census, Texas, County Data.
money elsewhere. This was farming as a lifestyle choice.³ At the same time horse riding became an ever more popular pastime for those who moved to the country. Equestrian sports, and the landscapes that went with them, became the face of rural Montgomery County.⁴

Loudoun’s countryside surpassed that of Montgomery County in both its wealth and reputation. The county’s historic villages attracted artists, authors, philanthropists, and the politically and economically powerful.⁵ Preservation efforts and county policy had some success in slowing the development of the Western Loudoun countryside. As late as 2002, nearly half the land in Loudoun was still agricultural, with 1,500 farms in operation.⁶ Hay, cattle, and alternate crops made up much of this. Here too, however, it was horses that were the most prominent. A survey conducted by the state in 2001 revealed just how important the horse was to Loudoun’s rural economy. Loudoun led the state in the average value of its horses: $18,659 per horse. Only four other counties had averages above $10,000. Loudoun also led the state in the number of horses, with 15,800. Neighboring Fauquier County was second with 13,700. Albemarle came in third with 7,000. No other county had more than 5,000. All told, Loudoun and Fauquier Counties combined to make up close to two-thirds of the state’s total value of horses. Virginia, for its part, was fifth in the nation in terms of the number of horses.⁷

Middleburg remains the center of this horse scene and of the county’s emulation of the English country lifestyle. The wealth of Hunt Country allows its residents to define their region in opposition to boorish suburbia. One pamphlet, published by locals during the development

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³ Stuart Traylor, Interview by Author, November 11, 2010, Montgomery, Tx.
⁴ Michael Heimer, Telephone Interview by Author, June 18, 2013.
⁵ Loudoun’s cultural notables include Henry Taylor, who was raised in the county and who won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1986 and Russell Baker, a journalist who won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1982. Sarah Huntington and Gale Waldron, eds., In Their Own Words: Recollections of an Earlier Loudoun (Lincoln, Va.: Meeting House Press, 2002), Foreword.
⁶ James Goode and Peter Penczer, “The History of Loudoun County, Virginia: A Permanent Exhibition,” 2007, NSLM, 21
battles of the mid-1990s captured this stance: “This is a wonderful place to live. The heavenly views of distant fields and hills, the winding dirt roads, the traditional stone walls, the scale of the houses and farm buildings are a glorious mixture of God’s creation and the order that Man has imposed on nature. . . . This is the hunt country, not suburbia. . . . That’s why we are all here. . . . We have found a corner of heaven.” Middleburg, and Western Loudoun in general, is a world of rural landscapes and historic homes, both nurtured and developed by the cultured and wealthy. It is a region where people defend their dirt roads with the same fervor that urbanites opposed urban renewal. It is a landscape transformed by newcomers in order to serve as a historical, architectural, and cultural condemnation of suburbia.8

Even as they defended their countryside, Western Loudoun and northwestern Montgomery County continued to develop their tourist appeal to underwrite farmland preservation. Tourism became an especially important industry for Loudoun, where historic homes, vineyards, Quaker villages, bed-and-breakfasts, and horse shows generated upwards of $260 million per year by the late 1990s. Montgomery County also began developing its own historic festivals and vineyards in the past decade. Both regions continued to develop in this direction even as suburban growth filled in Eastern Loudoun and southern Montgomery County.9 The metropolitan fringe that developed during the first three decades of suburban development in these counties faced ever-mounting population and development pressures over the next three decades.


9 Julie Johnson, Loudoun County: Blending Tradition with Innovation (Montgomery, Al.: Community Communications, 2000), 44 and Loudoun County Tourism Advisory Committee and the Office of Tourism, “Virginia’s Hunt Country: Loudoun County,” Ephemera 57, TBL; Larry Jacobs, Interview by Author, August 17, 2012, Montgomery, Tex.
The Loudoun supervisors approved a half-dozen large-scale housing developments in Eastern Loudoun during the late 1980s and into the 1990s, including Ashburn, Countryside, Cascades, and Lansdowne. At the same time development continued in the area surrounding Leesburg and into Western Loudoun. As a result, Loudoun’s population mushroomed from 57,427 in 1980 to 86,129 in 1990 and then to 169,599 in 2000 and 312,311 by 2010—decennial growth of 50 percent, 97 percent, and 84 percent, respectively.\(^\text{10}\) At the same time, the county developed a better track record of attracting high-tech industry. As early as the mid 1980s, developers were planning half a dozen major office and industrial parks. The Xerox center alone promised to bring 30,000 jobs to the area.\(^\text{11}\) The number of jobs within the county doubled from 20,000 to just over 40,000 between 1980 and 1990. The gentrification of the countryside combined with this influx of professionals to drive the median household income from $24,434 to $54,119 over the same period.\(^\text{12}\) New infrastructure also accelerated this growth in Eastern Loudoun, tying the region more tightly into the expanding Dulles Corridor of internet technology and government contractors. The Dulles Greenway, a privately owned toll road that extended from the Dulles Toll Road westward to Leesburg, opened in September 1995. The $300 million road significantly decreased the driving time from Western Loudoun to jobs in Fairfax County and therefore set off a building boom in Leesburg and Western Loudoun.\(^\text{13}\) By the end of the century, Loudoun County had the highest median household income in the nation.\(^\text{14}\) The county was home to major offices of MCI WorldCom, United Airlines, Telos Corporation, and Xerox in


\(^{14}\) Neighboring Fairfax was a close second. Only counties with at least 250,000 were considered. Bruce H. Webster Jr. and Alemayehu Bishaw, \textit{Income, Earnings, and Poverty Data from the 2005 American Community Survey} (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2006), Table 2, p. 6.
addition to the America Online Headquarters, the Lansdowne resort, and a regional shopping mall. The county’s politics continued to swing between pro-growth Republicans and preservationist, slow-growth Democrats as traffic, development, crowded schools, and rising taxes continued to fuel fierce debate over land-use controls.

In 2014 Loudoun sits on the precipice of another surge of growth. After years of delays, jurisdictional bickering, and funding issues, the Silver Line metro rail is slated to arrive at Dulles Airport in 2018 at a total cost of $5.6 billion. This line will restore what was lost with the closing of the W&OD, a rail line connecting Loudoun to Washington, D.C. The first segment of the project, an 11-mile branch from East Falls Church through Tyson’s Corner, the iconic edge city, to Reston, the planned community close to the Fairfax-Loudoun line is slated to open in late 2014. The second 12-mile section extends to Dulles Airport. It is expected to bring higher-density development and corporate offices to Eastern Loudoun. At the same time, Eastern Loudoun has also seen a boom in the construction of data centers in the wake of the 2008 recession. Some 5.2 million square feet of data storage has been set up in the Ashburn area. These centers handle 70 percent of all the world’s internet traffic. They also contributed $60 million to the county’s tax rolls and 1,300 jobs. Loudoun is a vital part of the infrastructure of the information age.

At the same time, Eastern Loudoun developers are adapting their products in an attempt to capture the growing market for walkable, mixed-use development. Loudoun One, a

development being constructed on 358 acres east of Leesburg, offers residents retail, dining, entertainment, green space, wine tastings, a farmers market, offices, and even a minor-league baseball park all within walking distance of townhomes. These people will continue to commute into Fairfax on weekdays, but can now enjoy urban culture within suburban Loudoun. Whether this type of development will become the rule in Eastern Loudoun remains to be seen.19

Montgomery County has registered its own record of rapid population growth over the same period. The county’s population grew from 128,487 in 1980 to 182,201 in 1990, 293,768 in 2000, and 455,000 by 2010—decennial growth of 42 percent, 61 percent, and 54 percent, respectively.20 Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, Lake Conroe’s lakefront and The Woodlands continued to build out, expanding the county’s suburban population. By the mid-1990s The Woodlands had become an economic engine for the county. The new town made up 19 percent of the county population, but accounted for 27 percent of its property values, 27 percent of its retail sales, and 30 percent of all private sector employment. The Woodlands also accounted for 114 percent of the gains in the county tax base between 1980 and 1994. Without The Woodlands, in other words, declining oil valuations and an economic downturn would have shrunk the county’s tax base. The reasons for this rapid growth across the county were the same as they had been during the 1960s and 1970s. Metropolitan-wide polls continued to show that fear of urban crime remained a dominant concern among Houstonians. Southern Montgomery County, as one report explained it, remained “one of the most desirable ‘safe havens’ in the region.” Safety, nature, newness, and good schools continued to lure newcomers. At the same

time northern and western Montgomery County continued to experience a more exurban brand of growth built around horses, recreation, and western country life.²¹

As with Loudoun, Montgomery County is also facing a new period of rapid growth. ExxonMobil recently acquired 385 acres just south of The Woodlands. In 2013 the company began constructing a 4-million-square-foot campus that will consolidate 10,000 employees from across the country into 20 buildings set in the piney woods. There employees will enjoy a 10,000 square foot wellness center, on-site child care, extensive space for collaboration, as well as more traditional office space. The campus will be a model of sustainable construction, using the latest in water recycling and energy efficiency techniques. Following in the footsteps of The Woodlands, the company plans to improve the site’s natural setting by retaining 80 percent of the land in green space and replanting native species that earlier agricultural land uses removed. As the site’s centerpiece, the company transplanted a 200-year-old Shumard Oak to the central commons to symbolize its commitment to sustainability. The campus promises both a return to unspoiled nature and the further economic development of the region. The effect on Montgomery County has already been transformational. The Woodlands had already reached a population of 100,000 and hosted 1,755 businesses. The proximity of the Exxon campus has set off a new building spree of offices around Lake Woodlands. It has also driven up property values. The median home price in The Woodlands jumped from $260,000 in 2010 to $355,000 in 2013. Even the Boy Scout’s 2,000 acre Camp Strake has finally caved to development pressure, as the organization’s regional leadership agreed to sell the site after 70 years as the centerpiece of Houston’s scouting programs. Southern Montgomery County is no longer a place for urban

youth to experience nature. It is a booming edge city creating jobs, generating taxes, and raising property values for the entire county.  

While the exact shape of the continued development of Loudoun and Montgomery Counties remains to be seen. The broad outlines, however, are clear. The metropolitan fringe within these counties may have a shelf life of only a few decades. Within both counties, population growth has made these areas politically marginal since at least the 1990s. Whether open space, agriculture, and exurban lifestyles can survive within these counties remains to be seen. For it to do so it will need patrons with deep pockets and favorable county policies. Both have been generally forthcoming within Loudoun. They have been less so in Montgomery County. The most pressing question, however, is not whether farmland or open space will survive. The question is whether these counties will be able to adapt to the growing demands of what is essentially urban growth within their boundaries and what exactly the future will be for aging suburbs in a new global and environmental dispensation. It is within these counties that the battles over sustainable development are currently being waged. Where rural landscapes and rural life will fit into these new visions of the metropolitan fringe is an open question.

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