An 'Answer to Hopes and Dreams': Utopianism, Progressivism, and the American Spatial Tradition in the New Deal Resettlement Community of Greenhills, Ohio

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An ‘Answer to Hopes and Dreams’:
Utopianism, Progressivism, and the American Spatial Tradition in the New Deal
Resettlement Community of Greenhills, Ohio

by

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of Senior Independent Study

Supervised by

Jeff Roche

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Spring 2017
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to explain what historical forces led to the construction of Greenhills, Ohio. The goal is to show that Greenhills is one example in a very long line of planned residential communities in American history which have been designed in order to solve contemporary societal issues. This has been done by examining how Americans have constructed space in preceding planned communities. Upon examining these examples, it is clear that Greenhills is very much part of what I identify as an American spatial tradition, a community which especially borrows from the utopian and progressive elements of this tradition. Through a spatial analysis of Greenhills, this research highlights how New Deal reformers sought to implement their vision for a collective and cooperative society through their spatial construction of this suburban community.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .......................................................... i
List of Figures .............................................................. iii
Introduction ................................................................... 1

Chapter One: The Utopian Spatial Tradition ..................... 8

Chapter Two: The Progressive Spatial Tradition ................ 22

Chapter Three: Collectivism and Cooperation: The Resettlement Administration and the Greenbelt Plan ............... 37

Chapter Four: A Spatial Analysis of Greenhills ................... 55

Conclusion ..................................................................... 78

Annotated Bibliography .................................................... 81
I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to my advisor Dr. Jeff Roche for his guidance over the course of this project. When I started this thesis, I had no clear inclination of what topic I would wish to explore over the course of my last year as an undergraduate. Professor Roche provided me with a topic that has challenged and enthralled me in equal measure. Since then, he has read countless drafts, guided me toward interesting scholarship, and helped me develop fuzzy suppositions into polished hypotheses. Thank you for aiding me in writing a story worth telling.

To the Greenhills Historical Society and its committed group of volunteers who do a tremendous job preserving the history of a truly unique American community. Particular gratitude goes to Jackie Seymour and Paul Richardson, who were great hosts for my research visit and helped me find the last sources I was desperately searching for.

Thanks to additional faculty at the College of Wooster go to Dr. Madonna Hettinger, for her unparalleled professional and personal guidance over my years at the College. My gratitude also goes to Lynette Mattson ’08 of the Writing Center, whose assistance in the writing and editing of this project has been indispensable, and who helped me to finally learn the rule for using commas before quotations.

To all friends and peers at the College of Wooster, who have helped contribute to a truly rewarding, enriching, and memorable four years, thank you.

Thanks go to my parents, Laura Morris-Berg and Michael Berg ’84, who have provided me with tremendous educational opportunities throughout my life, as well as all other family members who have contributed to my education. Whether it’s for reading to me
while I was younger or making sacrifices to pay next month’s tuition, I will always be grateful. Thank you.
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Illustration of Oglethorpe Plan
Figure 2: Riverside, Illinois
Figure 3: The Garden City
Figure 4: Aerial View of Greenhills
Figure 5: Old Covered Bridge Near Greenhills
Figure 6: Streets and Homes in Greenhills
Figure 7: At Home in Greenhills
Figure 8: Sketch of Town Center
Figure 9: Community Building
Figure 10: Shopping Center
Figure 11: Greenhills Cooperative Store
INTRODUCTION

Working and living we found a balance. The town was us and we were part of it. We never let our cities grow too big for us to manage. We never pushed the open land too far away. We youngsters took it in, the haying field, the mill, the daily chores were teachers. We old ones had good years of family life, our own, our children’s, mellow years before the ripe fruit fell as fruit will drop on windless autumn days, and that was peace. The seed was ready for the earth again, ready to die, ready once more to grow. 

(The City, 1939).  

At first glance, the village of Greenhills, Ohio resembles any other modern suburban community. Located roughly five miles north of downtown Cincinnati, the village is quaint, housing roughly three and a half thousand residents, yet charming, complete with winding streets, a town common, a community pool and golf course, and a convenient shopping center. If one shifts their focus, and looks at Greenhills from above, they would find an intricate web of streets and drives, winding and leading to Winton Road, the village’s arterial road. From this vantage point, one is struck by the sizable public park surrounding the village, a ring of woodland named Winton Woods Park. Although charming and aesthetically pleasing, Greenhills does not strike anybody as an atypical suburban community. However, if the viewer places this idyllic yet seemingly commonplace community within a historical context, they find that the streets, common, pool, golf course, shopping center, and parks are not the products of typical suburban development, but rather the result of one of the most fascinating yet unheralded episodes in the history of American city planning.

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1 Pare Lorentz and Lewis Mumford, The City (Documentary. Directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke. Greenbelt, Maryland: American Documentary Films Incorporated, 1939. DVD).
On December 16th, 1935, the Resettlement Administration broke ground on this unique federal housing project in rural Hamilton County, Ohio. The project that would become the village of Greenhills welcomed its first tenants in January of 1938. These tenants came to Greenhills in the midst of a housing crisis, with the United States firmly embroiled in the Great Depression. In 1935, 36 percent of homes in the United States were deemed unfit for living by the federal government. In the views of the Resettlement Administration, one of the New Deal’s newly-created federal agencies, this profusion of unsuitable homes was the result of a systematic and societal disregard for “wise planning” that turned American cities into an “ugly hodge-podge of towering offices, mansions, slums, warehouses, hot-dog stands, and decaying residential districts.” In order to remedy this issue, the Resettlement Administration engineered one of the most daring, visionary, and unprecedented enterprises in the history of the federal government: the planning and construction of the greenbelt towns.

When Franklin Roosevelt appointed economist Rexford Tugwell as head of the newly created Resettlement Administration in 1935, Tugwell’s task was to transplant struggling Americans to different environments in order to ensure their wellbeing. While the Resettlement Administration accomplished this goal through a variety of methods, none attracted more attention than the greenbelt towns, a trio of articulately envisioned and constructed planned communities in the suburbs. Tugwell’s idealistic vision compelled him

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3 Steven Conn, Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the 20th Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105; hereafter cited as Americans Against the City.
4 Resettlement Administration, “Greenbelt Towns: A Demonstration in Suburban Planning” (Washington, D.C., September 1936), 7; hereafter cited as “Greenbelt Towns.”
5 Resettlement Administration, “Greenbelt Towns” 7.
to think that “there ought to be three thousand such projects rather than three.” Nevertheless, due to political pressures, only three of Tugwell’s thousands of communities were constructed. Greenhills was the third of these greenbelt towns, built after Greenbelt, Maryland, and Greendale, Wisconsin. A fourth project, to be named Greenbrook, was supposed to be built in Brook Bank, New Jersey, but construction was halted due to local opposition. As a result, Tugwell’s grand vision for thousands of planned communities merely yielded these three.

The development of Greenhills and the other greenbelt towns raises a perplexing question: Why did the federal government seek to build complete, self-sufficient suburbs when faced with the task of housing the nation’s neediest? In concerns articulated by prominent conservative opposition of the time, the Resettlement Administration could have resettled these same people in a much easier and a far more economical manner. Nevertheless, to Tugwell and Roosevelt, the greenbelt towns were the ideal solution to a nationwide crisis in housing.

Fourteen years after its founding, when the federal government sold the project to its tenants, much of the initial optimism surrounding the project had been left unrealized. Tugwell’s dream of building thousands of greenbelt towns across the nation never came to fruition, nor did the three greenbelt towns live up to their intended existence as cooperative, utopian communities. The Resettlement Administration, on account of relentless political pressures, had been disbanded, and its duties haphazardly incorporated into the Farm Security Administration. By all measures, the greenbelt idea had never truly taken hold, its

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8 Sowards, “An Historical Overview of the Village of Greenhills,” 44.
implementation too sparse to significantly influence the future development of American communities. Regardless of this lack of lasting success, at least as defined by its visionary founder, Greenhills presents a compelling case study in the American spatial tradition.

I define a spatial tradition as the way in which a culture constructs space over a period of time. For example, American history is rife with spatial traditions of near-religious significance, traditions that have fundamentally shaped how Americans comprehend and construct their environment. John Winthrop’s vision of “a city on a hill” shaped how early New Englanders built their towns. Jefferson’s dream of a democratic republic of yeoman farmers is reflected in how Americans have sought to build spaces that connect to agricultural life. Ultimately the solutions proposed by Tugwell and his contemporaries to the issue of resettlement were shaped and confined by spatial traditions such as these. Greenhills could not and would not have been envisioned without a number of particular elements in the American spatial tradition, which I discuss in the following chapters.

In chapter one I place Greenhills within the context of a five hundred year-long American infatuation with the notion of utopia, and how utopianism has been reflected in how Americans have understood space. When utopian thinkers build utopian communities, they design these spaces in a way that is intended to alleviate contemporary social issues and promote a certain ideology. I argue that utopianism, as a distinct and pervasive theme within the American spatial tradition, directly influenced how and why Greenhills was envisioned and constructed in the manner that it was.

In chapter two I argue that the progressive spatial tradition also shaped the construction of Greenhills. This progressive spatial tradition, borne out of an era when Americans sought to change the construction of space in order to correct societal problems, is
evidenced by the work of progressives such as Frederick Law Olmsted. Similar to utopianists, progressives designed spaces as a response to contemporary issues. One particularly significant example of this progressive tradition is the Garden City, a model in town planning created by British architect Ebenezer Howard, which is the clearest precedent to the Resettlement Administration’s greenbelt town program.

In chapter three I contextualize the greenbelt towns within the New Deal and Depression America. I argue that central to the construction of the greenbelt towns was a belief, held by Tugwell and his contemporaries, that capitalism had failed Americans and that, as a result, society needed a vast and indelible change in the social order in the form of alternative, cooperative societies. The Resettlement Administration was the federal agency most involved in this question of reshaping society. The Resettlement Administration pioneered a number of projects, but the project that implemented this ideology most comprehensively was the greenbelt towns. This chapter addresses this driving ideology and illustrates why rural Hamilton County, Ohio was chosen as one of the greenbelt towns sites.

Chapter four analyzes the spatial construction of Greenhills and utilizes the works of geographers such as J.B. Jackson in order to make sense of Greenhills’ geography. This chapter provides details and analysis on Greenhills’ most essential spatial elements, such as the greenbelt, streets, homes, the town center, the community building, and the shopping center. I argue that, through the construction of Greenhills, Tugwell and his fellow New Dealers sought to promote their ideal of a cooperative society as a response to contemporary socioeconomic issues. Furthermore, the manner in which Tugwell promoted this ideology was shaped by utopian and progressive spatial traditions.
Overall, this project chronicles how evolutions in the ways Americans have thought about and sought to construct the space around them led to the construction of a particularly interesting community. Utopianism and progressivism, as elements in the American spatial tradition, fundamentally shaped, constrained, and inspired Tugwell’s vision of an America where hundreds of thousands of Americans would live in thousands of greenbelt towns. In these communities, Americans would be free from the ills and downfalls of the modern city, where, “people are always getting ready to live, some other time, some other place, always getting ready, but never getting there,” and once more indelibly connected with rural life, which was, in Tugwell’s words, the “parent and protector of American individualism.”

For Rexford Tugwell and his fellow luminaries, the greenbelt towns were not just a niche housing project, but a dramatic revision of how American society should look and operate. The task was monumental and, ultimately, untenable. Political pressures and logistical complications would always preclude the building of thousands of greenbelt towns. Nevertheless, Tugwell’s vision survives today in these three communities. This vision, utopian in theory and progressive in method, illustrates how Americans have thought about space, not just as something that people occupy, but as something that fundamentally shapes and determines the human experience of people who occupy it. Ultimately, Greenhills was constructed for the purposes of human experience, in order to provide a better life in a time when so many craved it. Its spatial elements are interesting but forgettable without understanding how and why they were designed to influence lived experiences. Greenhills

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9 Pare Lorentz and Lewis Mumford, *The City.*
10 Conn, *Americans Against the City,* 100.
resident Jackie Nahle echoed these sentiments decades later when she wrote, “Greenhills was the answer to many families’ hopes and dreams, and for many of us, it still is.”11

11 Jackie Nahle in unidentified clipping from Greenhills Historical Society.
CHAPTER ONE: THE UTOPIAN SPATIAL TRADITION

The longstanding American tradition of utopianism is crucial to understanding why the greenbelts were envisioned as the New Deal’s response to the need for suburban housing. The prevailing trends of suburbanization and progressivism, the destitution of the Depression, and the newly expanded power of the federal government help explain why the federal government identified a societal need for suburban housing in the mid-1930s, however, these forces do not completely explain why these communities would be greenbelt towns. The federal government could have easily built a couple hundred rows of homes in the suburbs of Washington, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati and housed more of the nation’s needy at a cheaper cost. But, as Rexford Tugwell argued, greenbelt towns were not public housing but, “operable units for community living, not just rows of self-canceling houses,” communities that demonstrated, “the better living to be had by protection from crowding within and encroachment from without.” In other words, the federal government forwent the cheaper alternative in order to build cities with “all the appurtenances of a modern municipality.”¹ This decision to seek to build hundreds of carefully planned communities outside of major metropolitan areas suggests there was obviously more at play than a simple desire to resettle the disaffected rural and urban poor in suburban areas.

American utopian thinking and the deliberate creation of perfect communities is as old and central to American thought as democracy and freedom. Throughout the history of American utopias, visionaries have attempted to construct human society in a particular

manner in order to promote a particular ideology or a particular way of living. One of the primary ways in which utopianists have attempted to design these communities is the construction of space. Whether in the New England church towns or Salt Lake City, utopianists have constructed space in American utopian communities in order to solve or alleviate contemporary societal issues.

Notions of utopia illustrate why, even amongst the earliest European Americans, America was seen as more than just a new place to live, and instead as a place for their salvation. In the early 16th century, as the question of permanent European settlement into the ‘New World’ was coming to a front in Europe, Reformation thinkers subverted the traditional dialogue regarding utopia, in turn inextricably tying the concept to the American continent for the next four hundred years. By the conventional Augustinian wisdom, ‘utopia’ was a state of living reserved for the afterlife. However, to Thomas More and other Reformation philosophers, this state of civilization can and should be achieved in humanity’s immediate reality. In his dialogue *Utopia*, More envisioned the island of ‘Nowhere,’ an idyllic location of an alternative style of living, far removed from the social ills of modern society.

Europeans turned to the New World in both their dreams and their movements. This emphasis on the Americas granted the land an overtly religious significance; it was a place that many believed “would become some sort of an “Earthly Paradise” free from the corruption of the Old World.”

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2 There is a litany of books on the subject of utopianism in American history. For the purposes of this project I found the following particularly helpful in illustrating the evolution of American utopianism. Brian J.L. Berry, *America’s Utopian Experiments: Communal Havens from Long-Wave Crises* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), 1; hereafter cited as *America’s Utopian Experiments*. See also: Vernon Louis Parrington, *American Dreams: A Study of American Utopias* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964); hereafter cited as *American Dreams*.


through the purposeful application of utopian thought. By this logic, the American continent existed as a *tabula rasa*, a place where humanity could engineer a more perfect society free from preset customs and systems.\(^5\) Further contributing to these utopian aspirations were a host of travel accounts from visitors to the New World. These accounts, all of which are chockful of vivid descriptions, inspired a sense of wonder, amazement, and ‘romantic allure’ on the behalf of European would-be colonists.\(^6\) For example, in his manuscript entitled, *A Brief Description of New York* Daniel Denton wrote:

> In May you shall see the Woods and Fields so curiously bedecke with Roses, and an innumerable multitude of delightful Flowers, not only pleasiing the eye, but smell, that you may behold Nature contending with Art, and striving to equal, if not excel many Gardens in England: nay, did we know the virtue of all those Plants and Herbs growing there (which time may more discover) many are of opinion, and the Natives do affirm, that there is no disease common to the Countrey, but may be cured without Materials from other Nations.\(^7\)

Denton’s description of New York echoes religious notions of paradise and utopia. Appropriately, most of the early utopias in the colonies were religious in nature. One example of this phenomenon was the foundation of Massachusetts.

The foundation of Massachusetts was a fundamentally utopian event. In the year 1630, John Winthrop stood onboard the *Arbella*, just off the shores of Plymouth Colony. While still onboard the *Arbella*, Winthrop delivered one of the most notable sermons in American history. In this sermon, named “A Model of Christian Charity,” Winthrop implored his Puritan brethren that their new colony would be a “city upon a hill,” with, “the

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\(^7\) Quoted in Parrington, *American Dreams*, 5.
eyes of all people [upon] us.”

Winthrop envisioned the Puritan colony in Massachusetts as a shining example of society, the apotheosis of Christian civilization, which would model to the world the ‘truth’ of proper living. Utopian fervor was ubiquitous in the colony, with other preachers claiming not only that America would be the site of a New Jerusalem or the location of a millennial paradise, but that it was the land’s inescapable destiny to become so.

Winthrop’s vision of a “city on a hill” was more than a call for a religiously-centered community, it was a model for how religious utopias should construct space. Nearly all manifestations of the New England village were nucleated communities, meaning they were constructed around a central area. This central area often encompassed buildings such as a church and a meeting house, which might be one in the same. The meeting house was the dominant spatial feature of these villages, a place that historian Joseph Wood called, “a tangible manifestation of the intangible political and religious life of the community.” In this manner, the spatial construction of the city reflected Winthrop’s wish for New England to be a model Christian civilization. While the spatial construction of these communities emphasized religiosity, other utopian communities were constructed for different purposes.

Georgia, for example, was a community constructed for the purpose of being the ideal city. Another example of an early American utopian community, Georgia was more than a religious haven, it was also a pioneer in the ways utopianists constructed space within their communities. James Oglethorpe, Georgia’s founder, was especially concerned with creating a “utopian agrarian society that would preserve and nourish fundamental principles … [that]

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9 Berry, America’s Utopian Experiments, 2.
were being eroded by urbanization and social disintegration.” Oglethorpe sought to create this society through the construction of space in his colony, namely in the city of Savannah.

Savannah was built according to a highly-geometric layout, with individual wards centered around a public square. This gridded structure, which allowed for a repeated pattern of connected wards, enabled Savannah to have a significant amount of green space, a feature that ostensibly improved the aesthetic value of the city.13

![Figure 1: Illustration of Oglethorpe Plan](http://tclf.org/sites/default/files/thumbnails/image/SavannahGAPlan_JamesOglethorpe_feature.jpg)

As one can see here, Savannah’s spatial construction emphasized common spaces, which would later be planted in order to become parks and green space. This emphasis on social spaces was part of Oglethorpe’s antidote for ‘urbanization and social disintegration.’ If Oglethorpe’s concern was that the growth of cities caused some sense of social disunion

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amongst city residents, then the construction of common spaces where residents could socialize and reconnect was a logical component of his vision for the ideal city.

The beauty of Savannah still resonates today; as contemporary urban planner Allan Jacobs says, it is like, “no other we all know in its fineness. . . once seen it is unforgettable, and it carries over into real-life experience.”\(^\text{15}\) Although Oglethorpe himself was dismayed by the shortcomings of Georgia in realizing its utopian vision, he nevertheless was a prominent example of a utopian who implemented a practical plan to construct space in a particular manner in order to reach an idealistic future.\(^\text{16}\) This blueprint has been repeated consistently throughout the course of American utopianism.

The romance, allure, and openness of the frontier attracted and promoted utopian ways of thinking. Between the end of the Revolution in 1783 and 1840, religious havens continued to be a primary motive for the establishment of idealistic communities in this century of utopian-building fervor. Although the United States Constitution emblazoned religious freedom as a central tenet of American society, many religious sects resorted to establishing these types of communities in order to practice religion in relative isolation, free from a larger society that was oftentimes viewed with disdain. This notion is emphasized by the fact that before 1840, newly established utopian communities were nearly always built in close proximity to the frontier line.\(^\text{17}\) Whereas early Americans saw the New World as a slate upon which they could etch their utopian dreams, this generation saw the American frontier in the same light. This westward trajectory was symptomatic of a brand of utopianism that

\(^\text{17}\) Berry, *America’s Utopian Experiments*, 6.
sought to establish communities as far removed from conventional civilization as possible, and therefore, as far from the temptations that these communities sought to avoid.\textsuperscript{18}

After the establishment of the early religious havens, utopian community building remained relatively sporadic in the early years of European settlement in North America. However, in the mid-19th century utopianists began to build their communities at a strikingly more prolific rate. Whereas an average of slightly more than one utopian community per year was established in the half-century stretching from 1789 to 1839, the following sixty years would see such communities built at a rate of more than three per year.\textsuperscript{19} Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing to Thomas Carlyle in 1840, at the height of this new wave of utopian community building, illustrated this utopian fervor: “We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform … not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat’s pocket.”\textsuperscript{20} Here, Emerson not only reacted to the utopian interest of his time, but also unknowingly described the half-century of utopian thinking that would follow, an era where ‘drafts of new communities’ would reach even greater popularity.

Coincidentally, this point in American utopianism coincided with the rise of transcendentalism in American society. Transcendentalism played a key role in shaping utopian ideology in the middle of the 19th century. A philosophical movement that emphasized the innate goodness of the individual, transcendentalism argued that modern society compromised the individual’s morality. Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo

\textsuperscript{18} Berry, America’s Utopian Experiments, 6.
\textsuperscript{19} Berry, America’s Utopian Experiments, 17.
Emerson in his essay, “Self-Reliance,” argued against mainstream religion and philosophy, and called for a return to natural values.

One of the primary ways in which transcendentalists attempted to make this return was through a purposeful emphasis on experiencing nature. Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, in which Thoreau isolates himself in the woods for the purpose of self-betterment, is the prototypical example of how transcendentalists considered nature to be an important spatial experience. This emphasis on the importance of nature is found throughout transcendentalist literature, which illustrates nature as an efficacious and wholesome influence. Transcendentalists explored the moral and spiritual meanings inherently found in nature, calling it a place where the soul and mind were equally stimulated.21 This transcendentalist perspective on nature fundamentally shifted the way Americans viewed the outdoors. Whereas it had once been the home of the Devil, to transcendentalists it was quite the opposite, the home of the ‘Universal Spirit.’22 This new perspective on nature made it the ideal landscape for the individual to reside within. As Transcendentalist minister Theodore Parker said, “The fullness of the divine energy flows inexhaustibly into the crystal of the rock, the juices of the plant, the splendor of the stars, the life of the Bee and Behemoth.”23 Fellow Transcendentalist figure Christopher Cranch called nature, “but just a scroll- God’s handwriting thereon.”24 While transcendentalists failed to establish long-lasting utopian communities, their commitment to nature fundamentally influenced utopian thinking. Since

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23 Quoted in Boller, Paul F. *American Transcendentalism*, 67.
24 Quoted in Boller, Paul F. *American Transcendentalism*, 68.
the Transcendentalist wave in the mid-19th century, all notions of utopia have emphasized nature as an essential element in the formulation of the perfect community.

One of the most visible examples of planned utopian communities during this era of significant utopian sentiment is Salt Lake City, Utah. The result of an exodus of the Mormon people across the American continent, Salt Lake City was established by the Church of Latter Day Saints in 1847. Prior to their arrival in Utah, the Mormons had established a number of communities across the country, such as Kirtland, Ohio and Nauvoo, Illinois.25 At each step, the Mormons were expelled, often through violent means, but not before they established practices such as communal ownership and agricultural cooperatives.26 By the time they arrived in Utah, the Mormons had perfected their vision of a utopian community and applied it fully in the construction of Salt Lake City. Similar to the utopia at Savannah, Salt Lake City had a geometric plan for the town’s construction. Joseph Smith’s plan, “Plat of the City of Zion,” envisioned a community of village plots consisting of north-south and east-west streets and houses that came with sizable gardens, lawns, or orchards.27 This town plan was supplemented by policies that made all water, timber, and mineral resources communal property.28 Most critical, however, was the practice of dividing land into equal units and then assigning them to newcomers regardless of their economic circumstances.29 Brigham Young eloquently described the physical features of Salt Lake City when he said:

Let the people build good houses, plant good vineyards and orchards, make good roads, build beautiful cities in which may be found magnificent edifices for the convenience of the public, handsome streets skirted with shade trees,

25 Berry, America’s Utopian Experiments, 70.
26 Berry, America’s Utopian Experiments, 71.
27 Berry, America’s Utopian Experiments. 71.
28 Hayden, Seven American Utopias, 142.
29 Hayden, Seven American Utopias, 142.
fountains of water, crystal streams, and every tree, shrub or flower that will flourish and grow in this climate, to make our mountain home a paradise.\textsuperscript{30}

The purpose of this plan and these policies was to design Salt Lake City as a manifestation of heaven-on-earth, a “garden city of single-family dwellings.”\textsuperscript{31} The physical aspects of the city, such as vineyards and orchards, fountains, streams, and trees harken back to a biblical notion of paradise, one cannot help but notice the parallels between Brigham Young’s description of the city and the Old Testament’s description of Eden.

As the country reached the latter decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, utopian community building slowed, but utopianism remained a hallmark ideology. While the Gilded Age of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century was a time of unprecedented wealth for many, including industrialists such as John Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, it was also a period when rapid urbanization and industrialization brought issues regarding the urban poor to the fore. The Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian republic was overtaken by the indomitable might of the country’s burgeoning industrial cities. The consequences of this transformation were immediate and long-lasting; they encouraged reformers of the time to consider how society might be altered or bettered in order to combat previously unfathomable levels of poverty and destitution in the United States.

For many Americans, utopian literature provided the blueprint for rectifying the ills of Gilded Age-society. As a result, the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century was a golden age for utopian literature, a time when the genre came to dominate the literary landscape in terms of its unparalleled popularity and influence. The most notable example of late 19\textsuperscript{th} century utopian literature is Edward Bellamy’s novel \textit{Looking Backward}. One of the best-selling books of its

\textsuperscript{30} Hayden, \textit{Seven American Utopias}, 142.
\textsuperscript{31} Berry, \textit{America’s Utopian Experiments}, 71.
Looking Backward tells the story of a 19th century doctor who is transported 114 years into the future where he finds that society has become a socialist paradise. Noted historian Robert Wiebe describes Looking Backward as, “a simple, logical essay combining so much that the discontented already accepted as gospel.” The gospel, according to Bellamy, was that the Gilded Age led, “Riches [to] debauch one class with idleness of mind and body, while poverty sapped the vitality of the masses by overwork, bad food, and pestilent homes.” Bellamy’s vision prescribed a rational rethinking of society fit for modern times, free from the “oppressive” old order, one where individuals and communities would be freed from the yoke of an oppressive hyper-industrialist state.

This radical rethinking involved shifting the way human beings construct space. When Bellamy’s main character is transported into the utopian future, he sees before him a reimagined version of Boston that has solved the issues of the nineteenth-century city he just left behind. Bellamy describes this Boston as:

A great city. Miles of broad streets, shaded trees and lined with fine buildings, for the most part not in continuous blocks but set in larger or smaller enclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, along which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late-afternoon sun. Public buildings of a colossal size and architectural grandeur unparalleled in my day raised their stately piles on every side.

This ideal Boston harkens back to Oglethorpe’s Savannah and Brigham Young’s Salt Lake City as another utopian community with a distinct architectural blueprint that emphasized

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34 Quoted in Wiebe, The Search for Order, 69.
35 Wiebe, The Search for Order, 69.
36 Quoted in Miles Orvell, The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 151.
broad streets, a multitude of squares, and plenty of trees. Bellamy’s Boston is unique however, because it engendered a generation of reformers with an endearing and lasting conception of what the ideal city should look like, whereas Savannah and Salt Lake City, although impressive in their meticulousness, seemingly failed to hold similar influence over their contemporaries.

Bellamy’s ideas were broadcast widely as his novel became a bestseller and an influential work in elucidating utopian ideals. In Paul Bellamy’s 1945 introduction to his father’s work he explains why the novel persisted in its popularity well into the 20th century: “All the major and the minor prophets are being scanned for hints of the future and every statesman is drawing up blue prints, if not of Utopia, at least of something different and better than the economic order that we have.”37 This very American quest to strive for utopia endured into the 20th century, emboldened by Bellamy’s template of rational, scientific progress.

The utopian sentiments espoused by authors such as Bellamy encouraged intellectuals of the time to reconsider how society was organized in order to correct its ills and promote a new social order. Like many of his fellow New Deal visionaries, Rexford Tugwell, chief architect behind the greenbelt town projects, was fundamentally shaped by this age of utopian literature. Tugwell’s biographer, Michael Namorato, goes as far as to posit that Tugwell’s enthusiasm for worker’s rights and social welfare was a result of reading Bellamy, Upton Sinclair, and James Bryce, among other social commenters.38 While scholars debate whether or not the New Deal was explicitly ‘utopian’ in nature, undoubtedly this political philosophy had at the very least prominent utopian undertones, ideas possibly engendered by

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37 Bellamy, Looking Backward, 7.
the utopian literature of this era. Tugwell’s utopian leanings are most obvious in a poem he wrote while in his first year at the University of Pennsylvania. The poem in full states:

I am strong,
I am big and well made,
I am muscled and lean and nervous,
I am frank and sure and incisive.

I bend the forces untamable;
I harness the powers irresistible-
All this I do; but I shall do more.

I am sick of a nation’s stenches,
I am sick of propertied czars.
I have dreamed my great dream of their passing,
I have gathered my tools and my charts;
My plans are fashioned and practical;
I shall roll up my sleeves- make America over!39

Tugwell’s ‘great dream’ was one engendered by centuries of American utopianism. Like Oglethorpe at Savannah or Young at Salt Lake City, this dream was not merely an ethereal wish, but rather one supplemented by ‘fashioned’ and ‘practical’ plans to construct space in order to solve contemporary issues.

While utopianism has been a constant theme in the course of American history from its settlement to the 20th century, its realization was restrained to the works of utopian literature and the relatively small communities of like-minded isolationists. Nevertheless, these communities provide concrete examples of how utopianists constructed space in a particular manner, designed to promote an ideology and counteract contemporary issues.

With the coming of the Progressive Era in the late 19th century, ventures in managing space on a wider scale became more feasible. The rise of space management and public bureaucracy in this period made such ventures not only possible, but achievable for dreamy

planners seeking to create a more perfect community in order to fulfill the utopian promise of America.
In the Progressive Era of the late 19th and early 20th century, the longstanding American tradition of utopianism collided with a newfound age of bureaucracy and public management. Perfect communities that were once only envisioned in the minds of thinkers such as Edward Bellamy were made possible, or at least feasible, by not only the technological advances of the day, but by a cultural milieu that concerned itself with solving societal issues. Due to industrial capitalism’s tremendous growth in the latter half of the 19th century, progressives were faced with a litany of issues to address, whether they be urban poverty, overcrowding in cities, or the destitution of rural communities. However, progressives found that the old political, economic, social, and cultural answers were inadequate, and new actors stepped in to offer freshly engineered solutions. One of the most pertinent questions of the era was the matter of how Americans should organize space. Progressives thought at great length about how and where people should live, how cities should look, and who should be responsible for bringing these visions to realization. Ultimately, progressives saw space as a practical solution to real problems, but they were susceptible to utopian thinking and trapped by certain American mythologies about the importance of regular contact with nature and an agricultural life.

The Progressive Era, roughly defined as the period stretching from Reconstruction to the First World War, was a period of widespread social and political reform. Noted historian Richard Hofstadter described the period best when he called it an “age of reform,” the time of a “rather widespread and remarkably good-natured effort of the greater part of society to
achieve some not very clearly specified self-reformation.”1 While progressives championed a variety of causes: namely women’s suffrage, prohibition, labor laws, banking reforms, and stamping out political corruption, one of the most pertinent of the progressive issues was the question of space.

In some ways, one could consider the Progressive Era a response to the closing of the frontier. Since the arrival of European civilization on the continent, the history of America had been a history of conquest and settlement across an open land. In the mid 19th century, Americans considered their country synonymous with expansion. The narrative of Manifest Destiny, present throughout the 1800s, illustrated American attitudes toward expansion. Frederick Jackson Turner famously encapsulated the significance of westward expansion in his essay, “The Importance of the Frontier in American History.” Turner’s thesis posits that the process of Americans conquering, settling, and colonizing successive frontiers was the critical factor that developed American democracy and culture.2 This claim countered opposing perspectives that held Eastern cities as the places that engendered Americanism:

This perennial rebirth [frontiering], this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the great West.3

This Turnerian method of viewing American history was at the fore of intellectual thought throughout the Progressive Era. However, in 1890, the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau

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3 Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”
claimed that the frontier era was over, due to census data that showed no discernable unbroken line beyond which population density was less than two people per square mile. With no more endless frontier to absorb Americans, progressive thinkers began to sketch out plans for the best use of space. While the progressives created national parks and forests and reformed agriculture, no spaces in American society received more attention than the country’s suddenly sprawling urban centers. In the fifty years between 1860 and 1910, America went from a country where only two cities had half a million citizens to a country where New York was nearly the largest city in the world and half the population now lived in urban areas. Chicago, perhaps the quintessential Progressive Era city, went from nonexistent in 1800 to the fifth-largest city in the world by 1900. Chicago’s rise was emblematic of cities’ growth overall in the 19th century, as once modest urban areas burgeoned into colossal metropolises.

The tremendous growth in Chicago or New York City, whose population passed one million by 1860, fundamentally shifted the socioeconomic composition of these urban areas. Genteel populations, which had always resided in the city center, moved to the periphery, to the suburbs, while poorer populations remained in the city center. The suburbs, which had been perpetual slums, offered the wealthy individuals that could access them “hilltops, shore lands, and farms on which to build substantial estates.” This change was enabled by the steam ferry, the omnibus, the commuter railroad, the horsecar, and the cable car, which allowed these populations to live further away from their place of employment. This shift is

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4 United States Census Bureau, “Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890,” United States Census Bureau.  
6 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 21.  
7 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 25.
reflected by the dramatic increase in the duration of the average journey to work during this period.\(^8\) Simply put, more affluent populations could now afford to segregate themselves from both commercial areas and disadvantaged populations.\(^9\) According to historian Kenneth Jackson, “This phenomenon was one of the most important in the history of society, for it represented the most fundamental realignment of urban structure in the 4,500-year past of cities on this planet.”\(^10\) As a result, the Progressive Era not only saw tremendous growth in cities, but a tremendous shift in how Americans of different social classes occupied, lived in, and experienced these environments.

Like this fundamental change in the structure of urban areas, the latter half of the 19\(^{th}\) century exacerbated the gulf, both spatially and economically, between the rich and poor in American society and confronted Americans with a litany of newfound societal issues to address. In 1890, the wealthiest 1 percent of all families owned more than half of the property in the United States while the bottom 44 percent of families owned barely more than 1 percent of property.\(^11\) The upper class received incomes in excess of $3,500 ($78,000 when accounting for inflation) without earning most of this amount in wages or salaries.\(^12\) Owing to their disproportionate ownership of property, the upper class could rent their property to the lower classes and, when taking into account profits from their investments, had no need to work.\(^13\) Even the most prolific industrialists found themselves taking frequent holidays or, in the case of Andrew Carnegie, simply did not need to work for the majority of their adult

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\(^8\) Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 20.
\(^9\) Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 20.
\(^10\) Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 20.
\(^12\) Painter, Nell Irvin, *Standing at Armageddon*, Xxvii.
\(^13\) Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, Xx.
lives. Conversely, most members of the working classes earned less than $800 per year. With rising costs of living and relatively stagnant wages, many primary breadwinners earned less than what was needed to keep their families out of poverty. Unemployment, a regular threat, kept wages uncertain. Additionally, working-class people were faced with a multitude of workplace hazards, leading to a drastically lower life expectancy than their richer counterparts. The lower class attitude toward their wealthy counterparts was a complex mixture of disdain for their good fortunes and fascination for their masterful manipulation of capital. No matter their perspective or opinions of their financial betters, lower-class Americans found themselves significantly worse off than their predecessors.

Nothing demonstrated the sudden and massive disparities of wealth better than the living conditions of the very wealthy and the very poor. The upper class took advantage of their property ownership to live a life of leisure and pleasure, chockful of vacations, mansions, yachts, balls, and art collections. ‘New money’ Americans built mansions in the neo-Gothic and neo-Renaissance traditions in order to display wealth. In areas such as the north shore of Long Island, wealthy Americans took up country residences, oftentimes only for the summer, albeit always within commuting distance of a major urban center. The residences of men such as John S. Phipps, the inheritor of the United States Steel

15 Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, Xx.
17 In some cases, life expectancy for unskilled workers was as low as forty-one. Meanwhile, an individual in the upper class could expect to live into their sixties. For more on how this division altered the individual’s sense of self, see McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 17.
Corporation, came with hundreds of acres dedicated to lawns, gardens, and polo fields. Inside, spacious rooms bedecked with fine art and other luxuries signified the opulence and leisure of the genteel lifestyle. While the wealthy gallivanted to and fro between their many residences, the urban poor toiled in destitute neighborhoods, crammed into tenement apartments or small houses. In these living spaces, situated near the grime and smoke of factories, workers lived without indoor plumbing, electricity, and in some cases, running water. In response to these spatial concerns of the later 19th century, progressive actors sought to reconsider how Americans constructed and managed space.

No one person was more responsible for the way that progressives understood the relationship between the individual and the community, as expressed spatially, than Frederick Law Olmsted. The designer of many parks and communities, Olmsted was notable for his incorporation of nature into his planning. Olmsted’s renown led him to design Central Park as well as private gardens for wealthy individuals such as the Vanderbilt family. Biltmore, the residence of the youngest Vanderbilt brother, George, stood on 146,000 acres in the Blue Ridge Mountain region of North Carolina, complete with reservoirs, tree nurseries, and a model village. This residence is emblematic of Olmsted’s planning philosophy of blurring the lines between natural and human elements. It is evident that Olmsted considered this combination to be the antidote for the issues inherent with the modern urban life.

Olmsted expressed dismay for the modern urban life when he said, “Every day of [city people’s] life they have seen thousands of their fellow-men, have met them face to face,

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22 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 88.
have brushed against them, and yet have had not experience of anything in common with
them.”25 Here, Olmsted decried the class segregation of American cities, a deepening issue in
the latter half of the 19th century.26 Whereas cities had once had a mix of social groups
throughout their neighborhoods, advancements such as the subway enabled richer individuals
to live where they pleased, while their poorer counterparts were left where housing was
cheap.27 This transformation, another example of the deepening divide between rich and poor
in the Progressive Era, compelled planners such as Olmsted to reemphasize public spaces
that provided a shared experience away from the hustle and bustle of the city street.

Olmsted was also a pioneer in the way progressives thought about the suburbs. In
Olmsted’s opinion, suburbs presented a unique opportunity to combine the best aspects of the
city and the country.28 For example, the suburbs could provide a natural antidote to unhealthy
crowding in cities by generously separating homes. Furthermore, suburbs could bring
typically urban amenities, such as sewage and a reliable water supply, to spaces and
populations that otherwise be without such resources.29 Proximity to the city, supplemented
by public transportation, would keep the urban centers accessible.30

25 McGerr, _A Fierce Discontent_, 209.
26 McGerr, _A Fierce Discontent_, 209.
28 Albert Fein, _Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition_, (New York: George
   Braziller, 1972), 33.
29 Fein, _Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition_, 33.
30 Fein, _Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition_, 33.
Olmsted applied his thoughts regarding the proper construction of suburban communities in one of his most significant works of spatial planning, Riverside, Illinois. Olmsted developed Riverside after he was approached by a Chicago businessman to survey a tract of 1600 acres outside Chicago. Riverside is significant within Olmsted’s portfolio of planning and design because it was a complete community, not just a park (Central) or a country residence (Biltmore). Considering the image above, Olmsted’s emphasis on shared spaces and nature in Riverside is apparent. Such spaces are not only present in the plan, but pervasive throughout the entirety of the community, indicating that they were readily available to all residents. This common area, comprised of general commons, playgrounds, and public walks, served to emphasize communal activities. In the words of Olmsted, “Families dwelling within a suburb enjoy much in common, and all the more enjoy it because

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31 “Village of Riverside Landscape Map,” Village of Riverside.
32 Fein, Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition, 33-34.
it is common.” In other words, suburbs such as Riverside would provide families with a different type of living that was efficacious and enjoyable in equal measure, owing to creation of a more communally-minded society.

Riverside was merely one of the first manifestations of progressive attempts to build the ideal suburban community. Olmsted’s philosophy of blending natural and human elements, as well as emphasizing common spaces, was reiterated in 1898 by a British planner named Ebenezer Howard, whose book *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* presented the ‘Garden City’ as the ideal, progressive, community.

Howard’s Garden City had its roots in the utopian literature of the late 19th century. If this literature gave luminaries like Tugwell their passion for crafting the consummate urban community, Howard’s Garden City model gave them their vision, a practical blueprint that they could draw upon in order to put utopianism into practice in modern industrial society. The popularity of *Looking Backward* brought the notion of the ideal city to Britain, where it likely played a pivotal role in inspiring Howard’s vision of the Garden City.

Howard outlined his Garden Cities in his 1898 book *To-Morrow: Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, arguably one of the most crucial works in the history of town planning. By 1930, the first Garden City was constructed in Letchworth, England. Fifty years later, an Act of Parliament in the United Kingdom funded the building of thirty-two Garden Cities throughout Britain. Howard’s Garden Cities were influenced by Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s idea of ‘home colonies’ for the unemployed, a mixture of town and country that would

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34 Miles Orvell, *The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 151; hereafter cited as *The Death and Life of Main Street*.

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provide society’s neediest with proper housing in a proper environment.\textsuperscript{36} To Howard, the mixture of town and country was the crux of the issue: “Town and country must be married, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilization.”\textsuperscript{37} This marriage was to be made through a completely new town in the middle of the country, removed from the reach of the city, and purchased by taking advantage of low prices on agricultural land.\textsuperscript{38} Additionally, the Garden City was to be a beacon of cooperation and egalitarianism, a space that, although incorporated into the consumerist machine, allowed its residents to achieve the highest levels of personal and communal wellbeing that modern society allowed.\textsuperscript{39}

The dimensions and features of this new town were highly specific and critical to achieving Howard’s intended vision. The Garden City was to house 32,000 people living on 1,000 acres of land, surrounded by a permanent greenbelt of roughly 5,000 acres for farms and woodland.\textsuperscript{40} The city proper radiated circularly from a central park and the town’s center outward to where residences lay on a carefully designed series of streets and avenues.\textsuperscript{41} The centrality of the park in this model of town planning was one example of the Garden City’s emphasis on nature. Howard stated that the proper Garden City must include, “ample recreation grounds within easy access of all the people.”\textsuperscript{42} Schools, libraries, museums, parks, and utilities were essential elements in Howard’s design, all of which were to be administered and controlled by the local authority. In this respect, the garden city’s design was intended to promote individual wellbeing in a communal environment. As one group of

\textsuperscript{36} Howard, \textit{To-Morrow}, 3.
\textsuperscript{37} Howard, \textit{To-Morrow}, 28.
\textsuperscript{38} Howard, \textit{To-Morrow}, 7.
\textsuperscript{39} Orvell, \textit{The Death and Life of Main Street}, 152.
\textsuperscript{40} Howard, \textit{To-Morrow}, 7.
\textsuperscript{41} Howard, \textit{To-Morrow}, 34.
\textsuperscript{42} Howard, \textit{To-Morrow}, 34.
historians wrote in their commentary to *To-Morrow*, “For Howard, Garden City was far more than just a town: it was a third socio-economic system, superior both to Victorian capitalism and to bureaucratic centralized socialism … Each Garden City would be an exercise in local self-government, a vision of anarchist co-operation.”

Howard’s Garden City became an exceedingly popular model in American town planning. After the First World War, Stein, a self-described disciple of Howard, returned to the United States from England, where he had gone to observe a number of ‘New Towns’ under construction. As head of the Commission of Housing and Regional Planning, an organization created by New York Governor Al Smith, Stein sought to apply Howard’s planning theories in an American context. Sunnyside was Stein’s first experiment in instilling the Garden City ideal in America. A community built on a previously undeveloped tract of land in Queens from 1924 to 1928, Sunnyside sought to emulate many aspects of the

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44 Howard, *To-Morrow*, 34.
Garden City.\textsuperscript{47} However, Sunnyside was situated in restricted space in the middle of a gargantuan city, precluding Stein from realizing some of Howard’s more audacious ideals, namely the presence of a surrounding greenbelt.\textsuperscript{48} In order to fully recognize Howard’s ideal, Stein conceived a suburban Garden City in suburban New Jersey that allowed him to include all intended amenities, namely the greenbelt.\textsuperscript{49} In particular, Stein designed this community, named Radburn, to be a town in which, “people could live peacefully with the automobile — or rather in spite of it.”\textsuperscript{50} Stein’s architectural plans took heed of resident automobile use by separating pedestrian paths from roads and constructing houses with the rear of the house facing the road.\textsuperscript{51} As a result, Radburn was not a clear-cut Garden City, but rather a new town, built with Howard’s ideals, but designed for an age of widespread automobile use.

The Garden City when realized fully at places such as Radburn, incorporated elements of both rural and urban society. Howard’s characterization of his model as a ‘marriage’ between town and country, which echoed the spatial construction of planned suburban communities such as Olmsted’s Riverside, proved to be well-suited for a corps of progressive planners owing to the rise of the Country Life movement near the turn of the century. These planners sought to reconcile this burgeoning social campaign, which romanticized the bucolic nature of rural life, with the seemingly unrestrainable rise of the cities.

The Country Life movement was the response of progressive reformers to the decline of rural America, a decline marked by phenomena such as the increase of farm tenancy and

\textsuperscript{47} The City Housing Corporation, which was organized in 1924 with the express intent of constructing an American Garden City, oversaw the construction. For more information on the construction of Sunnyside, see Stein 21-37.
\textsuperscript{48} Stein, \textit{Toward New Towns for America}, 37.
\textsuperscript{49} Stein, \textit{Toward New Towns for America}, 37.
\textsuperscript{50} Stein, \textit{Toward New Towns for America}, 37.
\textsuperscript{51} Stein, \textit{Toward New Towns for America}, 44.
the flight of rural communities to urban centers.\textsuperscript{52} To many people, the apparent decline of agrarian fundamentalism marked the decline of all that made America just and true.\textsuperscript{53} Jefferson, who is attributed as the articulator of agrarian fundamentalism, lauded farmers as the “chosen people of God,” as he decried the “mobs of great cities … which add just so much support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body.”\textsuperscript{54} As a result of this moral significance, to reformers such as Jacob Riis, the decline of rural America was more than a demographic shift in American society, it was a moral crisis. Agrarian fundamentalism, still central to the American myth, was threatened by the plight of rural communities. Riis extolled the virtues of rural living when he said, “The ideal, always in my mind, is that of a man with his feet upon the soil and his children growing up there.”\textsuperscript{55} In order to combat this catastrophe, Country Lifers proposed a set of solutions aimed at improving conditions in the country. These reformers, such as Kenyon Butterfield and Liberty Hyde Bailey, convened at conferences where they sought to build consensus regarding solutions, such as improved farming methods, education, roads, and health care, once again exhibiting the problem-solving milieu of the Progressive Era.\textsuperscript{56} Central to the Country Life doctrine was the proposal of an educational curriculum that would encourage youth to stay on the land rather than migrate to the cities.\textsuperscript{57}

The Country Life movement and its surrounding mythology, a mythology that adulated the importance of regular contact with agricultural life, fundamentally shaped how progressives sought to reform space. The most recognizable example of this influence was

\textsuperscript{52} McGerr, A Fierce Discontent, 104-105.
\textsuperscript{54} Lears, Rebirth of a Nation, 136-137; hereafter cited as The Country Life Movement in America.
\textsuperscript{55} McGerr, A Fierce Discontent, 104.
\textsuperscript{56} McGerr, A Fierce Discontent, 105-106.
\textsuperscript{57} McGerr, A Fierce Discontent, 106.
the “back-to-the-land” movement, an element of the Country Life movement that sought to relocate city dwellers to rural areas.\textsuperscript{58} To its proponents, this migration was the solution for the city problem that had plagued America throughout the latter half the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. According to Country Life movement historian William Bowers, this solution was proposed because city residents: feared a declining agricultural population resulting in food shortages; sought to prevent overpopulation in the cities and its inherent issues; and yearned for a preindustrial society that emphasized nature and simplicity above modernity and capital.\textsuperscript{59} Although efforts to colonize rural America with individuals from urban areas failed, the Country Life movement indicated a deep and visceral yearning within American society for some solution to the problem of urban sprawl, congestion, and overcrowding.\textsuperscript{60} This affinity for nature and regular contact with agricultural life resurfaced as a guiding principle during the New Deal, when a new generation of reformers once again sought to tackle the issue of space in order to create a more efficacious society.

The Garden City and its American counterparts represent the clearest precedent to Tugwell’s greenbelt towns. Tugwell, a product of progressivism’s infatuation with problem solving, drew on the planned communities of this era in order to solve the issue of space when it resurfaced once again during the Depression. The greenbelt idea, instilled by the tradition of utopianism and polished by the problem-solving era of the progressives, required the bureaucratic might of the federal government in order to be fully realized. When it would be realized in the construction of the Resettlement Administration’s greenbelt towns, it

\textsuperscript{58} Bowers, \textit{The Country Life Movement in America}, 67.
\textsuperscript{59} Bowers, \textit{The Country Life Movement in America}, 67
\textsuperscript{60} Bowers, \textit{The Country Life Movement in America}, 68.
would remain consistent with a progressive legacy of constructing space that emphasized the importance of nature and contact with agricultural life.
CHAPTER THREE

COLLECTIVISM AND COOPERATION:

THE RESETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION AND THE GREENBELT PLAN

While utopianists and progressives paved the way for a project of planned suburbs such as Greenhills, New Deal visionaries were the individuals who ultimately formulated the greenbelt town program. The visionaries were born into the Progressive Era, molded by the spirit of reformers and utopianists, only to see this era give way to the business-minded 1920s. The subsequent crisis of the Depression once more shifted Americans attitudes towards business, and, more fundamentally, in regards to capitalism itself. Ultimately, on account of the Depression, these visionaries, chief amongst whom was the Resettlement Administration director Rexford Tugwell, deeply and fundamentally believed that capitalism had failed America, thereby necessitating a new social order, one that would place the wellbeing and welfare of the people first and foremost. Drawing on the legacy of progressivism and utopianism, Tugwell and other visionaries utilized the newfound degree of federal power created by the New Deal and went about shaping American society into one more conscious of the plight of its impoverished citizens. While the Resettlement Administration oversaw a multitude of projects, it is the greenbelt town program that was Tugwell’s greatest passion and the Administration’s most radical proposition. Greenhills’ federally-managed streets, homes, parks schools, and stores are a testament to the new social order that Tugwell and his contemporaries sought to create, a cooperative and conscientious community where the government would supposedly ensure that the societal ills that brought about the Depression would be stamped out.
Throughout the 1920s, the American economy was in a veritably unparalleled boom. Business and trade expanded rapidly, and the average American enjoyed a level of prosperity heretofore unparalleled in the nation’s history.¹ American incomes increased and they bought luxury goods such as radio sets, phonographs, and cars. From 1920 to 1929, American ownership of automobiles tripled.² This proliferation of luxury goods to a wider public and this concurrent unilateral increase in income led to an age of optimism. As a result of this optimism, many Americans felt compelled to accept offers of credit to buy what they could otherwise not afford.³ However, these lines of credit gradually increased the indebtedness of American households. Whereas the average American household before World War I took on roughly $4 of debt each year, by the late 1920s, the average household took on about $14 annually.⁴ While this may not sound like much in contemporary terms, this is an increase of over 300 percent in annual household debt. Warning signs such as these served as notices that the prosperity of the ‘Roaring Twenties’ was unsustainable, the product of faulty pretenses.

This new era of prosperity led Americans to change the way they viewed business and businessmen. Although some Americans were concerned regarding the sustainability of the unparalleled level of growth business and trade underwent throughout the 1920s, the zeitgeist of time was one that did not question the wealth Americans had achieved. Instead, they lauded the ingenuity and industry that had led Americans to this more bountiful life.⁵ Whereas there had once existed a, “old distrust of business,” the byproduct of the era of anti-

³ ibid.
⁴ ibid.
⁵ Schlesinger, The Crisis of the Old Order, 155
trust politicians such as Williams Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt, there was now a, “national acceptance of business leadership.” President Herbert Hoover of Iowa was the clearest example of this new era of American leadership. Hoover was not merely a governmental figure, but rather a new type of president, the apotheosis of this newly accepted business leader. Noted economists of the time, William Foster and Waddill Catchings, encapsulated this sentiment by praising Hoover for his, “technical training, engineering achievement, cabinet experience, and grasp of economic fundamentals.” Echoing Coolidge’s statement earlier in the decade, the business of America had well and truly become business. Even the president was considered a businessman. This mentality represented a fundamental shift in the character of American democracy, the Jeffersonian vision of America was fading; what was once a rural, agrarian-based society had become the greatest center of industry in the world, led by self-professed businessmen rather than the yeoman farmer of republican ideals.

Further contributing to this age of business was a sentiment, unlike those during the Gilded Age of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that did not consider business antithetical to American wellbeing, an entity that must be fought by government, such as trust-busting Teddy Roosevelt, or by worker’s unions, in order to ensure the safety and livelihood of the common American. Rather, an, “amazing transformation in the soul of business,” stemming from the prosperity of the average American, meant that this once-maligned enterprise was now considered a positive endeavor. Business interests and the public interests were no longer opposed to each other. However, as the events of 1929 and the early 30s would prove,

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7 Schlesinger, *Crisis of the Old Order*, 155.
8 Schlesinger, *Crisis of the Old Order*, 61.
this was a false notion. Unbeknownst to Hoover and the rest of America, the pillars that held aloft these paragons of capitalism were precarious, and ready to crumble.

Although the stock market crash of October 1929 is often thought of an unforeseeable disaster, in truth the warning signs of an economic downturn had been clear throughout 1929. In the beginning of the year, the Federal Reserve formally warned its member banks of speculative loaning.  

Despite indexes that clearly suggested a forthcoming blip in economic production, by September the stock market reached its highest price averages ever. However, merely a month later, the bottom dropped out. As stock brokers crossed their fingers for the futures to take their expected climb, anxiety became the market’s primary mood. When prices plummeted on October 23rd, this anxiety only further metastasized amongst American consumers and investors. Despite Hoover’s assurances that, “the fundamental business of the country, that is the production and distribution of commodities, is on a sound and prosperous basis,” the market was in shambles. Although the stock exchange closed for a week as an emergency measure, over the course of seven weeks that market had lost over 40 percent of its value, roughly $26 billion dollars. Americans entered the new decade with a basket-case economy and no sign of respite in sight.

To lead them through the early years of the Depression, Americans had a President out of his element. While his business acumen shone throughout the 1920s, Hoover’s strong convictions in the virtues of individualism and personal responsibility were out of time and

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10 Schlesinger, The Crisis of the Old Order, 156.
12 ibid.
13 Schlesinger, The Crisis of the Old Order, 158.
15 Schlesinger, The Crisis of the Old Order, 159.
place in an era where neither could do Americans any good. Nevertheless, it was Hoover, the
president that only a year earlier had declared that America was nearing the, “final triumph
over poverty,” who was now forced to wrestle with that formidable foe. Hoover’s Depression
policy can be summed up simply: that the federal government should provide relief where
necessary, but this relief should not be drastic, lest it lead the American economic system to
depend on the whims of the government. Ultimately, Hoover believed that the market would
correct itself and American prosperity would return. Of course, we know Hoover’s position
to have been a foolhardy one. Nevertheless, Hoover waged his feeble war on the Depression
by primarily, “organizing conferences of businessmen, local government officials, and
private charity representatives to persuade them to maintain wages, to speed up public works
and investment, and to coordinate local efforts at unemployment.” Hoover’s efforts never
strayed too far outside the sphere of private and local community effort, a script that he had
employed to help the Harding administration avoid economic recession in 1921. As a
result, Hoover’s policies proved to be ineffectual, and the Depression worsened throughout
the remainder of his nightmarish term.

The conventional narrative of the Great Depression is oftentimes centered on this
New York Stock Exchange drama, the story of a market game played out by financial
bigwigs. However, one must look far beyond Wall Street to grasp the full magnitude of the
Depression in everyday America. By 1932, unemployment stood at twenty-five percent, tens
of millions of workers left without work. In the country, where the prosperity of the 1920s

18 Badger, The New Deal: The Depression Years, 46.
19 Rauchway, The Great Depression and the New Deal, 1.
had done little to improve the day-to-day life of farmers and other rural workers, the Depression hit particularly hard.20 The farming workforce, who overproduced throughout the 1920s in part due to the expansion of agricultural production during World War I, was by no means ready for the plummet in demand coming from the East after the Crash. While the stock market itself was out of the purview of the American farming force, the effects of this Eastern institution could have not been more apparent, or devastating.21

In cities and towns, Depression ravaged industry. Iron and steel production fell by more than fifty percent in three years. Coal and textiles, already suffering industries, completely collapsed. In Michigan, where the automobile industry was the state’s economic keystone, unemployment quadrupled in a mere four months due to layoffs from automobile plants. The electrical industry, which had doubled in value in the previous decade, saw that same value drop by seventy percent in the first four years of the Depression. While these economic losses are staggering, it is important to remember that the downturn of these industries left its mark in human hardship, for it was not the collapsing values or falling productions that ravaged American households but rather the effects of these realities on employment, income, and the lived experiences of everyday Americans. Tragically, the most apt example of the Depression’s impact on Americans was a devastating increase in the national suicide rate, from 14 per 100,000 in 1929 to 17.4 per 100,000 in 1932. Twenty percent more people were killing themselves in America than there had been a mere three

20 The affluence associated with this decade was primarily an urban phenomenon. Per capita farm income was only a third of the national average throughout the 1920s. Badger, The New Deal: The Depression Years, 14.
21 For more information regarding farmers, their difficulty during the 1920s, and the Depression, see Donald Worster’s Dust Bowl.
years prior. Perhaps no statistic symbolizes the shift in American attitude more appropriately than this one.\textsuperscript{22}

It is difficult to say very much about the Great Depression without falling into the trap of recounting every index of misery. While the statistics of unemployment, production, and values are significant, it is challenging to fully grasp the severity of the economic downturn on the basis of these numbers alone. Furthermore, while contemporary readers of the Great Depression inevitably project their knowledge and understanding of a 20\textsuperscript{th} century America that recovered and remained a hyper-capitalist society, it is crucial to understand that this fate was very much in question at the time. As historian Kenneth Davis illustrates, during the Depression, “Everywhere one looked . . . was apparent confirmation that capitalism had so totally failed it could never be revived.”\textsuperscript{23} Americans were in a trying time, their resolve and industry pushed to the limits by destitution and hunger. A system that had led more Americans than ever to the point of affluence now subjected the same people to an impoverished fate. To navigate the country through this most uncertain ordeal they turned to the Governor of New York, a Democratic politician with an unwavering sense of optimism and a platform designed to right the alleged wrongs of the Hoover administration.

Although he took the oath of office on March 4\textsuperscript{th}, 1933, in truth Franklin Delano Roosevelt had held the keys to the Oval Office for much longer. The attacks against Hoover from within the Republican Party itself, such as those from “Dump Hoover” movement leader Harold Ickles, signify just how unpopular the President was, even amongst his own party.\textsuperscript{24} While the “Dump Hoover” movement failed to produce an alternative candidate, and

\textsuperscript{22} Badger, \textit{The New Deal: The Depression Years}, 11-22.
Hoover remained on the Republican ticket, his missteps were too many and the economy simply too hellish for a Republican to be elected again. The inevitability of a Democratic victory led historian Michael Hiltzik to describe the 1932 campaign as a, “sporting contest between adversaries playing toward a preordained conclusion.”25 Roosevelt was the heir apparent to the party that would benefit from American misfortune. To many Americans, such as Joseph Kennedy, the outcome of the upcoming election was so clear that in 1930, a full two years before Americans would go to the poll on election day, one could, “jot down the name of the next president…its Franklin Roosevelt.”26

Voted into office on the back of a stunningly clear mandate, carrying forty-two of forty-eight states and 472 of 531 electoral votes, Roosevelt took charge of a country desperate for relief. To Roosevelt, it was clear that something, and more accurately, a great many things, needed fixing. Throughout his campaign, Roosevelt called for a series of wide-spaying social programs to spark reform, relief, and recovery. Upon accepting the Democratic nomination for president, Roosevelt delivered the line most famously associated with this domestic policy when he stated, “Throughout the nation men and women, forgotten in the political philosophy of the government, look to us here for guidance and for more equitable opportunity to share in the distribution of national wealth…I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people. This is more than a political campaign, this is a call to arms.”27 Needless to say, the American people needed this ‘new deal,’ and sooner rather than later.

If the Great Depression was a war on the home front, the New Deal was Roosevelt’s weapons arsenal. A vast, sprawling, bureaucracy-rich series of federal programs aimed at drastically improving the welfare of millions of Americans, the New Deal sought to provide Americans with relief, recovery, and reform. Roosevelt’s banking measures are part of what historians distinguish as the ‘First’ New Deal, the portion of the New Deal instituted in 1933 and 1934. Roosevelt’s willingness to collaborate with business and financial institutions, rather than nationalize them, is illustrative of the reconciliatory tone of the First New Deal, as Roosevelt gave priority to emergency measures designed to unify and prevent further crisis. Outside of banking, Roosevelt’s foremost concern at the onset of his presidency was agriculture (in fact, the specially-assembled Congress’ first order of business after reopening the banks was to find a legislative solution for the agricultural crisis), and the first New Deal included its fair share of farm-related measures, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act.²⁸

The Second New Deal was a distinctly more radical, liberal, and expansive evolution of its predecessor. The reasons for this are complex and multifaceted, but can mostly be observed through the political pressures facing Roosevelt as he sought reelection in 1936. By 1935, political realities encouraged Roosevelt to no longer play friends with the business community. The economy had recovered, if only from crisis to a stable depression, and the Treasury was demanding a greater source of revenue.²⁹ Furthermore, Roosevelt faced insurgent threats from within his own party, threats that considered his policies to have fallen short of their initial promise. Huey Long, the former Governor and then-Senator of

²⁸ Roosevelt’s prioritization of farms was little more than a combination of basic utilitarianism and political loyalty. In 1933, thirty percent of the workforce were farmers. Furthermore, farm politicians in the South and West, heavily agricultural regions, were Roosevelt’s earliest supporters. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years*, 152.

²⁹ Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years*, 103.
Louisiana, clamored ever louder for his Share the Wealth plan, a platform which called for a far more radical redistribution of national wealth.\textsuperscript{30} Desperate to avoid third-party opposition and to reunify the Democratic Party behind the New Deal’s reformatory platform in time for the election in 1936, Roosevelt introduced the 1935 Revenue Act as the first measure of this new manifestation of New Deal policy.

In more ways than one, the New Deal was the pinnacle of progressivism and the progressive movement in American politics. Perhaps most significantly, the New Deal signaled a tremendous political achievement for left-leaning politics in the United States, as evidenced by Roosevelt’s unprecedented four-term presidency and the emergence of Democrats as the party of the majority of Americans.\textsuperscript{31} While the New Deal’s success in achieving industrial recovery can best be described as limited, the structural changes made by this series of programs are inextricably woven into the political fabric of contemporary American society.\textsuperscript{32} Whether through long-lasting legacies such as Social Security or short-lived emergency measures such as the Works Progress Administration, the New Deal established agencies designed to give Americans relief, generate recovery, and create reform amidst the turbulence of economic depression. One of the agencies designed to accomplish all three of these goals was the Resettlement Administration.

Established in 1935, the Resettlement Administration (RA) was one of many agencies created by Roosevelt’s Second New Deal. Although it folded and was absorbed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) a mere year later, the Resettlement Administration managed to be incredibly prolific in its short existence. In order to understand the Resettlement

\textsuperscript{30} Badger, \textit{The New Deal: The Depression Years}, 103.
\textsuperscript{31} Badger, \textit{The New Deal: The Depression Years}, 245.
\textsuperscript{32} Badger, \textit{The New Deal: The Depression Years}, 66.
Administration, its aims, and its works during its lifetime, one must understand its enigmatic leader, Rexford Tugwell.

Rexford Tugwell’s political leanings can be seen throughout his childhood and education at university. Unlike how the stereotype peddled by his political opponents advocated, Tugwell was not a city slicker but rather a rural son. Born and raised in western New York, Tugwell was the offspring of Charles Tugwell, a farmer, and Dessie Tugwell.33 Throughout his childhood, Tugwell expressed a particular passion for social issues, a mindfulness that reportedly evaded the understanding of his business-like father.34 After completing work for his degree, Tugwell took on a job for the Governors’ Tri-State Milk Commission in 1917, an experience that biographer Bernard Sternsher credits for Tugwell’s interest in public regulation and regulatory policy.35 At the same time, Tugwell rose rapidly through the ranks of academia from his position teaching economics at the University of Pennsylvania.36 In 1922, he was promoted to assistant professor, in 1926 to associate professor, and in 1931 to a full professorship.37 Tugwell’s work did not remain strictly in the classroom, however. For example, in 1928, he accepted a role as a contributing editor for the *New Republic*.38

Few members of Roosevelt’s “Brain Trust,” a group of experts recruited by Roosevelt to run the New Deal’s many agencies, inspired as much ire from conservative opposition as Rexford Tugwell. Disdain of Rexford Tugwell went far beyond the right-leaning press to conservatives in general. Given the level of vitriol aimed at him, it is fair to say that few

37 ibid.
politicians in the course of America history have been as widely and strongly despised as Rexford Tugwell. The *Saturday Evening Post*, albeit a conservative publication, went as far as to broadcast one popular conspiracy theory which claimed that Tugwell was to be the Lenin of a Red dictatorship overthrow of the Roosevelt regime.\textsuperscript{39} The same publication, which was in full revolt against the Roosevelt administration by the mid-30s, also directly attributed the radicalization in Roosevelt’s policies expressed in the Second New Deal as a result of Roosevelt’s increasingly-close relationship to Tugwell.\textsuperscript{40}

Part of the reason behind conservative opposition to Tugwell was that he headed what may be considered the New Deal’s most radical agency. The Resettlement Administration was predicated on the notion that America’s rural poor needed drastic government assistance. Executive Order 7027 charged the newly-created Resettlement Administration to “administer approved projects involving resettlement of destitute or low-income families from rural and urban areas, including the establishment, maintenance, and operation, in such connection, of communities in rural and suburban areas.”\textsuperscript{41} The purpose of this mission was threefold: to provide aid for small farms, reform land policy to empower rural families to move off unproductive land, and to counteract the trend which saw thousands of families driven out of agricultural life each year and into city slums.\textsuperscript{42} While the Resettlement Administration was involved in a variety of projects that were designed to accomplish this mission, Tugwell’s true passion was the greenbelt town program, a plan to settle poor Americans into meticulously constructed suburban utopias.

\textsuperscript{39} Alva Johnston, “Tugwell, the President’s Idea Man” *Saturday Evening Post* (August 1, 1936), 8.
\textsuperscript{40} Johnston, “Tugwell, the President’s Idea Man” *Saturday Evening Post*, 8.
\textsuperscript{42} Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, 25.
The greenbelt town program was a unique answer to the question of where Americans should live in order to ensure their wellbeing. Earlier efforts at answering this question, such as the Subsistence Homesteads of 1933, were predicated on the notion of resettling urban dwellers in communities that ran on subsistence agriculture. The greenbelt towns accepted the fact that Americans needed to or wanted to work in cities. Like Roosevelt, Tugwell knew that the country would never be industrialized and that further plans to resettle urban slum dwellers to rural communities was illogical and would sentence already struggling Americans to further hardship. Undoubtedly, the struggle of agriculture in the 1920s prompted Tugwell to reject this ideology in favor of a more pragmatic one. Tugwell knew that the future of America’s workers could no longer be as self-sufficient and responsible farmers. Not only was the land destroyed as a result of so-called “riotous farming,” as Tugwell called the agricultural practices that led to events such as the Dust Bowl in the early 1930s, but the jobs were increasingly focused in urban rather than rural areas. In order to ensure their wellbeing, the American workforce had to follow them there. As a result, Tugwell sought to resettle the country’s rural and urban poor into suburban areas where they could live comfortably while still benefitting from the industries of large cities which provided employment. Furthermore, these suburban areas provided exceedingly inexpensive land that could be easily bought and used to construct homes and a community that included all the appurtenances of urban neighborhoods.

To New Deal historian Paul Conkin, the conception of the greenbelt towns represented the most comprehensive example of what he called the New Deal’s community

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program. According to Conkin, New Deal communities, such as the greenbelt towns, were idealistic efforts by the government at producing a new society with new collectivist values. Tugwell, the main ideologue of the Resettlement Administration, desired a society with a cooperative, controlled economy, with larger degrees of regimentation and smaller degrees of individualism. The greenbelt towns were Tugwell’s most complete efforts at producing this type of society. As planned communities, they reflected the lofty idealism and optimism that was so characteristic of many New Deal efforts.

In the spring of 1935, Rexford Tugwell convinced Roosevelt to pay for the construction of the greenbelt towns as part of a unemployment appropriation that was being considered by Congress. That same spring, Tugwell met with fellow R.A. administrators John Lansill and Wallace Richards in order to ascertain what complete suburbs would look like. While the features that would later designate these towns as garden cities, such as parks and a greenbelt, were not necessarily clear in the early stages of planning, what was agreed amongst the R.A.’s management was that these communities would serve to “combine work relief for the unemployed, low-cost housing for the slum dweller, long-term community planning, and subsistence farming.” While Tugwell and his contemporaries continued to develop what the greenbelt towns would exactly consist of, they began surveying the country for sites that were conducive to their goals for the communities.

46 Conkin, Tomorrow a New World, 6.
47 Conkin, Tomorrow a New World, 150.
48 Conkin, Tomorrow a New World, 7.
50 Arnold, The New Deal in the Suburbs, 36.
51 Arnold, The New Deal in the Suburbs, 37.
The Resettlement Administration surveyed more than 100 municipal districts as potential sites of greenbelt towns.\textsuperscript{52} After studying the economic background of these 100 cities, Tugwell submitted plans for greenbelt towns to be built at twenty-five cities that were deemed suitable for the project.\textsuperscript{53} Although Tugwell submitted plans for twenty-five towns, his agency never received the financial appropriations necessary to build this number of communities.\textsuperscript{54} In the end, three cities: Milwaukee; Washington, D.C., and Cincinnati, were chosen to be the location of greenbelt town development.\textsuperscript{55} A fourth greenbelt town, to be built in Brook Bank, New Jersey, was halted due to local opposition and legal issues.

The Resettlement Administration report on Cincinnati helps to illustrate why the Administration chose the sites that it did for the greenbelt towns, and how these sites were intended to ensure the success of the communities that would be built there.\textsuperscript{56} Part of the Resettlement Administration’s process of selecting cities for the construction of greenbelt towns was the publication of extensive reports on the cities in question. These reports detail the rationale behind the selection of said cities and projections for the success of greenbelt towns at these locations. According to the Cincinnati report, Cincinnati was chosen as the site for a greenbelt town namely due to: the diversification of its manufacturing industry, the high rate of employment in said industries, the efficiency of its municipal government, the especially high need for housing for families of “modest income,” and the availability of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Debbie Mills and Margo Warminski with the Greenhills Historical Society, \textit{Greenhills} (Charleston: Arcadia, 2013), 7.
\item Conkin, \textit{Tomorrow a New World}, 307.
\item Conkin, \textit{Tomorrow a New World}, 307.
\item Mills and Warminski, \textit{Greenhills}, 7.
\item This report illustrates the incredibly scientific manner in which the Resettlement Administration operated. The tabulated economic data included in this report is informative, but simply too extensive to include in this project to any greater extent. For specifics regarding the manufacturing profile of 1930s Cincinnati, see: Resettlement Administration, Research Section of the Division of Suburban Resettlement, “Report on Cincinnati, Ohio and the Selection of a Site for Suburban Resettlement,” by Warren Jay Vinton (May 24th, 1936), accessed at the Greenhills Historical Society, Greenhills, Ohio.
\end{itemize}
open land on the city’s outskirts. The extensiveness of this report, which includes complex tabulations on the economic background of Cincinnati and its residents, demonstrates the degree to which the Resettlement Administration scientifically analyzed possible sites for construction in order to ensure success for the greenbelt towns. For example, this report claimed that Cincinnati “[stood] at the cross-roads of a great expanding industrial region.” By making predictions regarding the economic future of this particular region, the Resettlement Administration made the claim that Cincinnati would be a suitable site for construction because employment would always be readily available to the residents of Greenhills. As the report elaborated, “there is no reason to expect any migration of industry from the Cincinnati area.” After deeming Cincinnati an appropriate location for the development of a suburban resettlement project, the Resettlement Administration proceeded to address the question of who would live in this community.

The Resettlement Administration went to great lengths to vet potential tenants. The families that would come to live in Greenhills and the other greenbelt towns completed a regimented process, including a seventeen-page application that required information on family income, size, and health. The R.A. also required references as well as employment history. Finally, prospective families were visited by R.A. officials at their current home in order to “make sure good housekeeping standards were in practice and that all family members were enthusiastic about the chance to help create a new community.” Additionally, the officials “checked the family’s attitude toward each other, friction, harmony, or

57 ibid.
58 ibid.
59 ibid.
60 Mills and Warminski, Greenhills, 64.
dominance of one member over another.” 61 The extensiveness of the application process for tenants was indicative of the Resettlement Administration’s goals for Greenhills to be a collectivist and cooperative community. While the surveying of prospective families’ economic background suggests the Resettlement Administration sought a particular class of people to reside in Greenhills, namely middle and lower-middle class, the home visit and reference checks completed by Resettlement Administration officials demonstrates that the federal government was seeking to do more than provide housing. It was looking to create an ideal community. To do so required residents who would invest in the mission and contribute to the community. Ultimately, the Resettlement Administration went to great lengths to insure that Greenhills’ homes were occupied by such individuals. 62

Located ten miles north of Cincinnati, Greenhills was the third of the completed greenbelt towns. The entire site stretched across 5,930 acres, acquired from 100 individual farms, divided between the greenbelt, used for tenant farmsteads, and the village proper, an area of roughly 1.2 square. 63 Three years after relief roll workers started construction, Greenhills opened to its first residents, ready to bring the community ideal to thousands of Americans in the form of a self-operating and meticulously designed suburban utopia. The spatial construction of this community and the experience of the people who lived there would come to reflect the Resettlement Administration’s ideals and New Deal community program’s mission to provide alternative societies. As is evidenced by the idealism of Tugwell and his fellow planners, this mission was part in parcel with New Deal ideology that

61 Mills and Warmins, Greenhills, 64.
62 Ostensibly, no complete record of this application form exists. There are a few low-quality reproductions of it at the Greenhills Historical Society, although these copies are blurry and incomplete. For information regarding the application process I relied on Mills and Warminski.
63 Mills and Warminski, Greenhills, 31.
the country required radical and drastic reform in order to solve the societal issues of Depression America.
CHAPTER FOUR:

A SPATIAL ANALYSIS OF GREENHILLS

Fifty years after she moved into Greenhills, original resident Peg Yost Wheeler said that the community was so beautiful that when she first set eyes upon it she cried.\(^1\) Another early resident said that Greenhills was simply, “like a new country.”\(^2\) Tom Haverland remembered that upon arriving in his new home he “felt like he had gone to heaven.”\(^3\) These reactions in particular exemplify the fact that to most of its first residents, Greenhills was a drastically different community than the ones they were previously accustomed to. Tugwell’s vision of building ‘self-operable’ towns meant that Greenhills residents were greeted upon their arrival with a greenbelt of parks and farmland, winding lanes, playgrounds, a shopping center, a swimming pool, and a variety of other components that made these communities unique. Each aspect of Greenhills was specifically conceived and constructed in order to reach this ideal of a self-operating town. In order to do so, Greenhills’ architects and planners borrowed from utopian and progressive spatial traditions in order to fix contemporary issues through the implementation of a communalistic society.

At first glance, one might not associate planned communities such as Greenhills with the greater concept of utopia. However, planned communities such as Howard’s Garden City are inherently utopian, designed a particular way in order to provide a more efficacious experience for its residents. As scholar of American studies Miles Orvell said, “The effort to

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\(^2\) Steven Conn, *Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105; hereafter cited as *Americans Against the City*.
\(^3\) Debbie Mills and Margo Warminski with the Greenhills Historical Society, *Greenhills* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2013), 68.
create the ideal community as planned space has a [long] tradition in North America, going back to the seventeenth century when settlements were established not only as material constructions but as social worlds.” Undoubtedly, the engineering of ‘material construction’ to produce certain ‘social worlds’ is an overtly utopian overture. Howard’s Garden City model is the foremost example of the conflation between planned community and utopia, and an appropriate predecessor both in intention and design for Tugwell’s greenbelt towns of the New Deal. A careful study of greenbelt town’s spatial engineering reveals that Howard’s vision was alive and well in Depression America.

The greenbelt town program was not merely a utopian experiment; it was also a distinctly 20th century manifestation of this ideal, a venture that drew upon the legacy of progressivism in order to make its utopian core realizable. Unlike the majority of utopian communities in the history of early American utopianism, Greenhills, Greenbelt, and Greendale were not intended to isolate their inhabitants from larger society. Rather, greenbelt towns were intended to provide these inhabitants with the best environment possible within society, a community that would nurture the personal and communal well-being of its residents, an antidote for the demands of modern society. The greenbelt towns drew from the ‘company town’ model of Robert Owen in order to situate themselves in the industrial labor market. They drew from the garden city of Ebenezer Howard in order to envision how architects and planners could design a satellite city that created harmony between humanity and nature in order to ensure mutual benefit for both. Finally, they drew from the model of

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4 Miles Orvell, *The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 150; hereafter cited as *The Death and Life of Main Street*. 

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communities such as Radburn, New Jersey, a 20th century planned suburb, to make these towns fit for the ‘motor age.’

Like earlier utopias and progressive efforts at constructing space, Greenhills was designed in a way that its proponents believed would alleviate or solve the issues of the time. Rexford Tugwell believed that the solution to the Depression’s destitution was a transformation in society from competitive and individualistic to cooperative and collective. The greenbelt towns were an experiment in implementing this philosophy in a particular community. While Greenhills borrows from a variety of traditions in the way Americans have thought about space, this philosophy was the primary consideration in its construction.

In order to establish the greenbelt town as a chapter in the centuries-long story of American utopianism and the role of progressivism in advancing this story, one must examine all aspects of the greenbelt town and explicate how the town’s spatial constructions intended to create an idealized community for its residents. The essential question here is How does the spatial construction of Greenhills reflect its purpose? For the purposes of this exercise, Greenhills, Ohio is the primary community analyzed. However, Greenhills sometimes falls short of the greenbelt ideology, whether by missing an aspect of greenbelt town geography or simply because another community exhibits it more effectively or eloquently. In these cases, Greenbelt and Greendale are examined in order to more fully illustrate how the greenbelt visionaries constructed space in order to reach a distinctly ‘progressive’ utopian ideal designed to solve the issues of the Depression.

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The Greenbelt

In the 1939 documentary *The City*, the narrator celebrates the rise of a “new kind of city, close to the soil once more.” Out of the 5,930 acres of farmland purchased by the federal government just north of Cincinnati for the community that would become Greenhills, 4,000 acres were left for the eponymous ‘greenbelt,’ “a landscape of gently rolling hills, crisscrossed by a number of streams and creeks all making their way southward to the Ohio River . . . cleared in the 19th century and [still] farmed by the descendants of [the original] settlers.” This befittingly romantic description introduces us to the greenbelt and its purposes in the greenbelt town ideology.

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8 Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 313.
9 Quoted in Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 104.
The greenbelt at Greenhills consisted of two aspects: farm and woodland.\textsuperscript{10} The farm portion of this greenbelt comprised of thirty large farms and thirty subsistence farms, all repaired by the RA and leased to tenants on five-year leases.\textsuperscript{11} These farms were for full-time tenants and families who wished to supplement their income by growing some produce in gardening plots and then selling their produce at a farmers’ market in town, accessible, “simply by crossing their own fields.”\textsuperscript{12} Early families such as the Zieverinks recalled how the farmland provided fresh food that was brought daily to farmer’s markets in the center of town.\textsuperscript{13} Emma Scheve recalled waking up at five o’clock in order to pick blackberries and blueberries that were found in the woods.\textsuperscript{14} Residents also grew food in gardens throughout the village itself. With this surrounding farm land, Greenhills was to be a self-feeding community, sustainable and not reliant on imports from the neighboring metropolitan area.

These agricultural components of Greenhills suggest that Tugwell and his fellow planners saw agriculture as an essential component of any self-operating community. In Tugwell’s words, President Roosevelt, “Saw no reason why millions of urban families might not have subsistence farms.”\textsuperscript{15} This solution illustrates Roosevelt’s particular brand of progressivism, which Tugwell himself said was, “rooted in the soil.”\textsuperscript{16} If one of the central goals of the Resettlement Administration was to rehabilitate rural America, the inclusion of these farms in the greenbelt suggests some desire on the part of the New Dealers to reconnect

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] Conn, \textit{Americans Against the City}, 105.
\item[15] Conn, \textit{Americans Against the City}, 99.
\item[16] Conn, \textit{Americans Against the City}, 94.
\end{footnotes}
Americans with the land through the practice of agriculture. This desire was reflected in agencies such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, which subscribed to a notion that the country had restorative effects, that working in the soil would in some way alleviate the hardship of the Depression. The greenbelt towns were consistent with this ideology as they provided their residents with the capability of practicing agriculture themselves.

From a geographical perspective, agricultural elements, such as gardens, in residential areas, cause the area to take on a particular meaning. According to geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson when gardens are in close proximity to homes, the practice of gardening takes on an ethical quality “because tradition tells us that [one] ought to provide for the family.” In Jackson’s discussion on vernacular gardens, he notes that the gardens of early American colonialists were eventually made obsolete by the developments in commercial farming in the 19th century. The inclusion of gardens in Greenhills can be interpreted as a conscious effort to reintroduce vernacular gardens to the American people, to democratize the garden so that it was readily available to individuals once more.

17 Conn, Americans Against the City, 95.
18 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 121.
The greenbelt of Greenhills also comprised of unfarmed, undeveloped land loosely categorized as ‘woodland.’ Most of this woodland was actually created by the RA, planners estimated planting 1.5 million trees in the greenbelt where years of destructive agricultural practices had diminished the tree population. This section of the greenbelt was designed to provide recreation for the town’s inhabitants, and part of the area was reserved for parks and playgrounds, with the wooded creek being a wonderful place for hiking. When recounting their experience in early Greenhills, Clarence and Edith Kron recalled how this woodland buttressed the back of their house, causing deer and other animals to frequently visit the Krons on their back porch. The woods also included ‘scout acres,’ an area reserved for the

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20 Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 105.
21 Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 314.
local Boy and Girl Scout troops to use for camping and nature exploration. many families used the woods for picnics, and the readily available blackberries served to enrich these experiences.  

social geographers have written at length regarding the spatial connotations of woods and nature. j.b. jackson went as far to say that trees give people a sense of awareness of, responsibility for, and pride in their natural environment. jackson also claimed that the tree-planting programs of the new deal, such as the 1.5 million trees planted at greenhills, marked a, “worldwide shift in attitude toward the natural environment … the landscape was being deliberately altered not to serve human needs but to preserve natural order.” many residents of greenhills recognized the human value of preserving this natural order in the greenbelt. in 1968, hamilton county judge b. schwartz spoke to the influence of greenhills’ incorporation of nature in its design on the population when he said, “i believe the interior parks [in greenhills] have helped every child grow emotionally in every possible way. i am impressed with the overall stability and the very many great achievements of those now adult and known to me. at least i feel there is enough in evidence to warrant a thorough study. no doubt another very significant factor is the close contact every youngster has with nature and its animal life, to some extent in the parks but especially in the greenbelt.” as echoed by schwartz’s claim that the parks provided “overall stability,” this woodland was consistent with a utopian and progressive tradition that emphasized the importance of nature.

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24 “interviews of original residents.” conducted by greenhills middle school, 1988. greenhills historical society.
25 jackson, a sense of place, a sense of time, 95.
26 jackson, a sense of place, a sense of time, 101.
Transcendentalists called it the home of the “Universal Spirit,” and Ebenezer Howard formulated an entire model of city based on the presence of green space and trees. While the contemporary reader might interpret these considerations as ethereal and insignificant, to Tugwell and his planners, a proper ‘self-operating’ city had to include this woodland, not as a luxury, but as a necessity.

The greenbelt also served a practical purpose: to act as a buffer between Greenhills and the sprawl of surrounding, unplanned communities. As the Resettlement Administration’s 1936 brochure on the project stated, “This girdle of permanent open space is intended to protect the town forever from overcrowding and undesirable building on neighboring land.”

Tugwell himself said that “Greenbelt refers to the fixing of plan, the better living to be had by protection from crowding within and encroachment without.” Additionally, this greenbelt was also intended to act as a reserve of additional land, which would perhaps be made necessary due to future expansion or growth of the greenbelt town itself. The greenbelt, in addition to its purposes as an agricultural and recreational area, was constructed as a measure of insurance for Greenhills spatial plan.

In the utopian and progressive aspects of the American spatial tradition, such as the Garden City and Olmsted’s Central Park, nature was essential to reaching an ideal state of living. The greenbelt towns remained consistent with this tradition by emphasizing the importance of green space in the form of gardens, parks, and a surrounding greenbelt. As many opponents of Tugwell’s towns at the time pointed out, a planned community without

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these features would have housed far more residents. Nevertheless, Tugwell and the RA architects saw them as essential factors in producing an efficacious experience for the residents of their greenbelt towns.

Today, Winton Woods Park in neighboring Forest Park is a testament to the greenbelt and its design as a place where families could escape the throes of modern society and reconnect with nature in order to reach some semblance of harmony and balance in their daily lives. This park has preserved much of the original greenbelt, providing modern day Greenhills and its surrounding communities with a lingering taste of Tugwell’s vision.

*Streets and Homes*

![Figure 6: Streets and Homes in Greenhills](image)

The pattern of streets at Greenhills is one of its most distinctive features. Greenhills was and is comprised of a very particular street layout, comprised of superblocks, circular roads, and culs-de-sac, as well as a number of pedestrian paths. Winton Road, which bisects the village, is the only road that runs through Greenhills. Footpaths were used to separate pedestrian traffic from automobiles. These footpaths connected private gardens on the rear of homes to the common. This street design had very functional intentions, such as managing traffic and ensuring safety for village residents. For example, Winton Road was designed with only three access points, a design that caused traffic to flow along the road with minimal obstacles or merging traffic. This feature had the effect of minimizing automobile traffic, making the community safe for bicycle use.

As *The City* states, “Safe streets … are not just matters of good luck, they’re built into the pattern and built to stay there.” At Greenhills, the spatial pattern had the purpose of creating the Resettlement Administration’s ideal community. In other words, the unique layout of streets and roads at Greenhills promoted the type of insular and intimate community Tugwell intended for the greenbelt towns. In his discussion of the greenbelt towns, historian Steven Conn interpreted Greenhills’ cozy streets as a promoter of neighborliness. The utilization of streets to create a certain type of experience is prevalent throughout modern planned communities. For example, as Miles Orvell said in his study of a similar planned community, inner streets, feeder streets, curving streets, and culs-de-sacs had the effect of producing intimacy. The experiences of Greenhills residents further exemplify that the

32 Orvell, *The Life and Death of Main Street*, 177.
33 Mayer, “‘Greenbelt Towns Revisited’ Report.”
34 Mayer, “‘Greenbelt Towns Revisited’ Report.”
36 Lorentz and Mumford, *The City*.
37 Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 104-120.
38 Orvell, *The Life and Death of Main Street*, 188.
design of streets in this community was a purposeful aspect of creating the ideal community. For example, the fact that these streets were walkable and free from drive-through automobile usage promoted residents to enjoy walking in their community. The Kron family later recalled that, “even a walk around the block was entertaining to the kids.” To Greenhills’ residents, a class of Americans who were largely recruited from urban slums and tenements, the reality of having an intrinsically-enjoyable and walkable community was a luxury few had the pleasure of experiencing before.

This intricate pattern of roads, streets, and lanes connected Greenhills’ many residences. When construction was completed, Greenhills contained 676 family units. Out of these units, 24 were detached single-family dwellings, 152 were apartments, and 500 were units in row or group houses. This distribution allowed for tenants to be placed in the residences that best suited their size and preference. In terms of architectural style, Greenhills had, “carefully integrated styles … creating both visual interest and a sense of timelessness.” Built more closely together than typical suburban communities in order to maximize space for the greenbelt and interior parks, Greenhills’ homes were very much part of the Resettlement Administration’s ideology for creating an ideal suburban community.

40 Conkin, Tomorrow a New World, 314.
41 Conkin, Tomorrow a New World, 314.
42 Mills and Warminski, Greenhills, 48-49.
Greenhills’ residential units were unique compared to the residences most of the early tenants were moving from. For example, the houses had a variety of modern features, such as central heating.\(^{44}\) Coal for the boilers was even delivered at each family’s doorstep for their convenience. Inside the homes, tenants found rooms already furnished with specifically scaled furniture. Bedrooms came complete with full closets, which were uncommon for homes at the time.\(^{45}\) These features certainly indicated that the homes were intended to be functional, convenient, and modern, but it was a more architectural aspect that signified these homes as truly part of the Resettlement Administration’s vision for an ideal community.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Greenhills’ homes were that they were backward-facing. Rather than facing the street, the front of the homes faced the backyard. As a result, the houses had a “working” side and a “recreational” side. The working side was

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\(^{44}\) Mills and Warminski, *Greenhills*, 69.

\(^{45}\) Mills and Warminski, *Greenhills*, 70.
intended for functions such as unloading deliveries and entering and exiting automobiles. By grouping these functions on one side, Greenhills’ architects built homes that isolated the recreational aspect of the home. The acting ‘front’ of the homes faced a backyard where children played. Windows looked upon where the children would be playing. Given that the backyard was oftentimes part of a larger common space, this design had the effect of centralizing the common area. This bit of spatial engineering was the most distinctive way in which the Resettlement Administration sought to make Greenhills’ homes fit for an ideal community.

When Greenhills’ first families arrived at their new homes, they were greeted by the “Greenhills Manual,” a handbook that outlined rules, regulations, and expectations for the community. In the foreword to this manual, C.F. Sharpe, community manager of the Greenhills project, wrote:

> This pamphlet is issued as a guide to pleasant relations and satisfactory living in Greenhills. It is not designed to be a code of restrictions. On the contrary it seeks to clarify privileges and responsibilities and give helpful information to residents of the community … Greenhills was built with the hope that it would be a community providing families with opportunity for happy, healthful, and economical living. Realization of that hope can be achieved only by the families themselves.

This manual ‘guided’ families to ‘pleasant relations and satisfactory living’ by illustrating regulations, such as when clotheslines should be taken down (by Saturday at 3:00 p.m.) to where bicycles should be written. Perhaps more importantly, it also included information on the many privileges Greenhills residents could expect in their new community. For example, the manual introduced residents to the *Greenhills News-Bulletin*,

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the village’s very own newspaper, the community council, the credit union, adult education activities, and social organizations such as the American Legion and Democratic and Republican clubs. By branding these aspects of Greenhills as “opportunities for full community life,” Sharpe and the other Resettlement Administration planners emphasized to residents that these features were part and parcel with the notion of an ideal community they had applied to live in. In order for their vision of a collectivist and cooperative society to flourish in Greenhills, Greenhills’ residents would have to take advantage of these features.

This manual provides further evidence of how the Resettlement Administration sought to manage the community of Greenhills and for what purpose. As historian Paul Conkin explained, “Tugwell’s desire for a collectivized, cooperative society was almost a religion.” In order to create his vision of such a society, Tugwell stressed the importance of, “voluntary, democratic cooperation,” rather than, “the economic insecurity and chaos of an individualistic, capitalistic past.” The ‘democratic cooperation’ that was required was outlined most clearly in this manual. Whether such cooperation, at least as implemented by a veritable code of conduct, was successful is less clear. What can be ascertained is that although the rules were bothersome to many residents, they were grudgingly tolerated. One resident summarized the general attitude toward these restrictions when they said, “Residents had to accept the government’s rules. No one could drive nails into the walls, shake mops or rugs out the doors, or plant flowers in the front yard. Only a government work crew could

49 Resettlement Administration, “Greenhills Manual.”
50 I accessed a copy of the “Greenhills Manual” at the Greenhills Historical Society. As far as my research suggests, this is the only copy preserved in a library, archive, or similar institution.
51 Conkin, Tomorrow a New World, 202.
paint the house, and then only with certain standard colors. It was always kind of a standard joke that you could only have a blue door.”

The Town Center

The center of Greenhills housed the majority of its appurtenances. Situated on a village common, the town center included a shopping center, community building, and swimming pool. While the image above is merely a sketch, it accurately captures the aura of this area of Greenhills, aesthetically pleasing and intended to draw residents to it so that they can participate in a variety of community functions. Here residents could come to lounge on the common, shop in one of the many stores, lounge at the swimming pool, or attend a

Figure 8: Sketch of Town Center

Theodorus Jung and Brice Martin, Sketch of Greenhills, Ohio. 1936. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C.

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52 Clipping at the Greenhills Historical Society.
53 Theodorus Jung and Brice Martin, Sketch of Greenhills, Ohio. 1936. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C.
religious service. These residents could easily do so because the center was readily accessible, only a walk away from every corner of the village. In this respect, the town center promoted the ideal of a walking city, where residents could reach everything they could want or need without the assistance of an automobile.

Greenhills’ town center was the apotheosis of the town’s guiding philosophy to engender civic life and a sense of community. In order to accomplish these goals, the Resettlement Administration designed the greenbelt towns with a variety of amenities that emphasized communalism and cooperation.54 A plurality of these amenities were focused at the town center. Whether it was the cooperative store in the shopping center of the community and civic organizations housed in the community building, the town center is indicative of how Greenhills’ planners sought to develop an alternative society in order to solve contemporary issues.55

54 Conn, Americans Against the City, 102.
55 This commitment to promoting a communal life was a source of controversy within the Resettlement Administration itself, as some detractors believed, “it would be intolerable and un-American for the government to foist the more abundant life upon people seeking only cheap living quarters.” Jonathan Mitchell, “Low-Cost Paradise” New Republic 84 (September 1935), 152-155.
No one space in Greenhills summates the guiding philosophy of the greenbelt towns better than the community building. Overlooking the village’s central common and the shopping center, the community building has served a litany of purposes, housing a variety of the community functions that Tugwell and his supporters were so adamant on including in the greenbelt towns. In its early years, the building acted as a veritable cornucopia of civic organizations. The most significant function the building served was as the main school building of the Greenhills Rural School District. The community building acted as an educational space for adults as well, with everything from typing classes to art classes offered to adults in the evenings, allowing working adults to benefit from the opportunity as well. The community building also held larger civic events, made possible by the large

Figure 9: Community Building

John Vachon, Community Building. 1938. Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.
Mills and Warminski, Greenhills, 81.
Mills and Warminski, Greenhills, 84.
The auditorium even held religious services, open to all denominations, until church buildings were individually constructed.59

The functions of the community building take on even more meaning when one considers its placement and architecture. When looking at the community building, one cannot help but be struck by its nearly overwhelming presence. Compared to the other structures in the town center, the community building is a prodigious edifice, looming over the village center. The white color, consistent with International architectural style, has been interpreted as a spatial feature that “further [strengthened] the building’s visual presence as the dominant and sacred community center.”60 Historian Steven Conn echoed this sentiment when he called the community building an, “imposing testament to the larger social ambitions of the New Deal towns.”61 The community building’s placement, at the center of the village center, is also significant. Utopias have always centralized structures that their planners deem critical to the ideology of the entire community. For example, the early American communities in New England situated the village common around a church in order to emphasize religiosity and a brand of social life that blended religion and civic engagement (i.e. the meeting hall). When taking into account the sheer volume of functions the Greenhills Community Building served, it is clear that the spatial placement of the community building at the village’s center in effect centralized civic and community organizations, illustrating their importance in the Resettlement Administration’s philosophy for an ideal community.

59 Mills and Warminski, *Greenhills*, 86.
60 Mills and Warminski, *Greenhills*, 53.
61 Conn, *Americans Against the City*, 102-110.
Across the village common from the community building sits the shopping center, one of Greenhills’ most unique aspects. Located immediately next to Winton Road in order to attract passing customers, the shopping center included a variety of stores, as well as the town’s post office, police department, and fire department. Architecturally, the shopping center was ahead of its time. One of Ohio’s earliest examples of strip mall design, the shopping center included storefront parking. Aesthetically, the redbrick support columns “created a rhythmic pattern across the front of the buildings.” This design also had functional purposes, as it allowed for the ventilation of stores in the summer and protected

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63 Mills and Warminski, *Greenhills*, 57.
64 Mills and Warminski, *Greenhills*, 56.
shoppers from rain and snow. The farmer’s market, designed for the greenbelt’s tenant farmers to sell their goods to residents, was located behind the shopping center.

Located in Greenhills’ shopping center was the most obvious example of the Resettlement Administration’s attempt to create a cooperative community, the Greenhills cooperative stores. During the New Deal, the government established a Division of Self-Help Cooperatives, in order to encourage the cooperative movement through grants and technical assistance. This governmental emphasis on promoting cooperatives came to a head in the greenbelt towns, where residents established cooperative ventures of their own. Boston-based philanthropist Edward Filene even donated $1,000,000 to the Resettlement Administration to support the establishment of cooperatives. In 1938, residents of Greenhills organized Greenhills Consumer Services, Inc. and procured leases at the shopping center. The cooperative stores stocked all necessities for living in Greenhills with food store, barber shop, valet shop, beauty shop, drug store, and general merchandise store all run by Greenhills Consumer Services, Inc. Ultimately, the cooperatives at Greenhills ran into financial issues during the course of the Second World War. Nevertheless, they provided residents with the opportunity to invest in and have a say in the running of their community’s stores. In effect, the cooperative at Greenhills to some degree established a society that wasn’t entirely competitive or capitalistic. As Tugwell hoped for an organic, communal, and collectivist society, Greenhills’ residents participated in a democratically owned and operated business.

68 Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 317.
This was the clearest example of the Resettlement Administration’s vision for an ideal community materialized.

Figure 11: Greenhills Cooperative Store

When Rexford Tugwell and his fellow planners envisioned the greenbelt towns, they did so keeping in mind the problems of their time. Greenhills was designed to alleviate contemporary issues and provide its residents with a new type of community, one that would reform the way in which Americans lived. After considering the spatial engineering of Greenhills, it is clear that the Resettlement Administration’s vision for an ideal community was predicated on communalism and collectivism. All spatial aspects of Greenhills, from the greenbelt, to the cooperatives in the shopping center, and the civic organizations housed in the community building served to advance this vision. According to the accounts of Greenhills’ pioneer families, it appears that Tugwell’s vision of a cooperative and collectivist

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community did take hold, even if the government was forced to sell the project by 1949. The Kron family, which initially hoped to stay for only three months, remembered fifty years later that “the friendly people and the strong willpower of the community made us want to stay.” Mary Zieverink illustrated this ‘strong willpower’ best when she stated, “People were anxious to help each other, and whenever there was a need in any way, shape, or form, someone was there to help. So it wasn’t I, but it was everybody. We just played our part.”

CONCLUSION

On the back of lavish construction costs, and subsequent attacks from conservative opposition regarding the prudence of the Greenbelt Town Program, Congress disbanded the Resettlement Administration in 1938, its most essential operations absorbed by the Farm Security Administration.¹ Not long after, a House subcommittee opened a congressional investigation over the operation of cooperatives in the greenbelt towns amidst allegations that they constituted a monopoly.² Although the towns themselves were found innocent of any wrongdoing, political pressure remained against the greenbelt towns until their sale in the late 1940s. With the dawn of the Cold War and the decline of New Dealism, self-operating, cooperative communities were perceived as simply too communistic, and therefore, too Soviet.³ Ultimately, Tugwell’s vision for thousands of these communities, each providing a social alternative of cooperative and communal living for thousands of Americans, never came to fruition. Regardless, nearly three-fourths of a century after the founding of Greenhills, planned residential communities have remained a common feature in the spatial landscape of the United States.

Given the anti-communist hysteria surrounding the greenbelt towns, a political zeitgeist that ultimately prevented their success, it is fitting that William Levitt, the most visible developer of planned communities in the postwar era said that, “No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do.”⁴ The designer of seven

² Debbie Mills and Margo Warminske with the Greenhills Historical Society, Greenhills (Charleston: Arcadia, 2013), 96.
⁴ Quoted in Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 231.
large-scale suburban communities called Levittowns, William Levitt’s communities typified the norms of postwar suburban growth. Similar to the greenbelt towns, the Levittowns were marketed as providing residents with a different manner of living. For example, when *Time* published a cover story on Levitt they did so with the subtitle, “For sale: a new way of life.”

Levitt’s planning theories, such as the utilization of mass-production techniques, continued to affect postwar development when they were adopted by a number of high-profile planners from major American cities in the latter half of the 20th century.

New Urbanism has become the prevailing planning theory in recent decades and has spawned its fair share of planned residential communities while also affecting how developers treat urban spaces. As it concerns suburban spaces, the Congress for the New Urbanism states that it supports the, “reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts.” This call to reconfigure suburban spaces is a fundamentally postwar idea, a response to the massive suburbanization of this period that left suburban communities soulless and lifeless in the eyes of many, their residents forced to use their automobile to get to anywhere of real importance or function. Planned suburban communities that have utilized New Urbanist ideals, such as the Walt Disney Company-developed town of Celebration, Florida, have been designed as to promote the ideal of a neighborly suburb. As early citizens such as Pam Shaw remembered in a January 2007 *New York Times* article, features such as this made the community “[sound] like paradise.”

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5 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 238.
6 *Time* (July 3rd, 1950).
7 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 238.
Whether in the Levittowns of the 1950s or more recent planned communities such as Celebration, the utopian and progressive spatial traditions continue to affect how designers approach the task of building residential communities: to be ideal and in response to contemporary societal issues. In fact, many of the characteristics of Rexford Tugwell’s greenbelt towns are present in planned communities today, such as curvilinear streets, parklike common spaces, or mixed-used centers that provide residents with appurtenances otherwise not found in typical suburbs. Like Tugwell, modern developers continue to wrestle with the question of how to best design residential space as to ensure maximum livelihood for its residents. As evidenced by the saga of Greenhills, Ohio and the other Greenbelt Towns, this question is as old as America itself; its answers rooted in the unique ways in which Americans have thought about and constructed space.
Primary Sources


Edward Bellamy, the noted utopian author of the late 19th century, set forth his utopian vision in his most famous novel. This novel tells the story of Julian West as he transported nearly a hundred years into the future where he observes a perfected society and is informed how society solved the ills of West’s time. This novel is the most seminal example of utopian literature in the late 19th century, a time when the genre enjoyed an unparalleled level of popularity. For my research, this work is essential in illustrating the course of utopianism in American history and explicating the resurgence of interest in utopian thought during the Progressive Era. Furthermore, Bellamy’s influence on the visionaries of planned communities in the Progressive Era requires a careful examination of his utopian vision and how this vision impacted utopian thought into the next century.


This article discusses the selling of Celebration, Florida by the Walt Disney Company. I utilized this article for my brief mentioning of Celebration as an example of modern planned suburban communities that are consistent with New Urbanist principles.


In this work, British planner Ebenezer Howard presented the specifics for his Garden City model. This work was used to illustrate the Garden City as a manifestation of the progressive spatial tradition. Additionally, this work was useful for its illustration that I included in Chapter Two of this project for the purposes of establishing the Garden City as a spatial predecessor to Greenhills.


I used this image to illustrate the Oglethorpe Plan and the spatial construction of Savannah. This particular illustration was useful because it clearly shows the geometric layout of the city as well as the existence of common areas.

This collection of interviews, compiled in 1988, document a number of Greenhills’ first residents. This collection was one of the most critical sources for my project. In particular, I utilized these interviews to add commentary to my chapter on the spatial construction of Greenhills. Through this collection, I was able to judge how different aspects of this spatial constructed affected the day-to-day life of residents.

Johnston, Alva. “Tugwell, the President’s Idea Man.” Saturday Evening Post, August 1, 1936.

This article was used to contextualize conservative backlash against New Deal agencies and Rexford Tugwell in particular. In part, this information was used to establish the political pitfalls that precluded the Resettlement Administration from building more than three greenbelt towns.

Lorentz, Pare, and Lewis Mumford. The City. Documentary. Directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke. Greenbelt, Maryland: American Documentary Films Incorporated, 1939. DVD.

This documentary, released in 1939, is one of the many New Deal documentaries contributed to by Pare Lorentz. This film advocates for the better living available to people in modern, garden cities. This documentary was useful in my research for enriching my understanding of New Deal ideology as well as its criticism of the modern city, two critical concepts in explicating the construction of the greenbelt towns. Its footage from Greenbelt, Maryland was also beneficial.


This article from New Republic was utilized in this project to provide information regarding the controversy surrounding the Resettlement Administration’s insistence on emphasizing cooperative ventures within the greenbelt towns. This article highlights how this decision was a source of controversy and what detractors of the plan took issue with.


This work was briefly used to illustrate the history of utopianism in America. When I set about establishing utopianism as a concrete strand of spatial understanding, I wanted to start with the question of why the American continent was regarded as a place for utopia at the onset of European discovery and colonization. Therefore, I used Utopia to explain European utopianism at the time.
Nahle, Jackie in unidentified clipping from Greenhills Historical Society.

This clipping is a note from Jackie Nahle found in one of the folders at the Greenhills Historical Society. I utilized it for its quote about Greenhills being an “answer to hopes and dreams.”


This pamphlet, a publication of the Resettlement Administration itself, includes information on the greenbelt towns and the rationale the Administration presented for conceiving these towns in the first place. This source was crucial in my research, providing information on how the government presented these towns and how the government claimed to come to the decision to build self-operable suburbs to solve the housing crisis in the middle of the 1930s.


I utilized this book by Clarence Stein as a critical primary source in my research. Although written after the time period I discuss, this work was written by a critical actor in this history and functions as what I would classify as an intellectual autobiography. This work provides information for how Stein brought the Garden City idea to America, planned communities such as Radburn, and revitalized town planning.


This article, an excerpt from a radio show, was used for its direct quotation of Roosevelt proposing a “new deal for the American people.”


I utilized this issue of *Time* briefly for its quotation on the front cover about William Levitt selling “a new way of life” with his planned residential communities.

In this work, economist and New Deal visionary Rexford Tugwell illustrated the significance of his greenbelt town projects, a pivotal program in his Resettlement Administration. Tugwell argues that the criticism aimed at the greenbelt towns due to their high cost fails to account for the amenities and living situation that these towns provide for their residents. It is important to note that this article is from a publication that Tugwell contributed to throughout his career. This work is essential to my study of the greenbelt town program because it provides an account from the program’s visionary and designer.


This essay was used in my work to illustrate a particularly pervasive understanding of space from American history. In this essay, historian Frederick Jackson Turner posed the thesis that the American frontier was the crucial factor in the process of developing American democracy and culture.


These seven photographs, taken from the Library of Congress’ Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection, were used at great length throughout my project to conceptualize the spatial concepts I discussed. It is important to note that these photographs are government-produced images of a government project. Regardless, they are the best collection of images from the early community that exist.


This image was used in my chapter regarding the progressive spatial tradition in order to illustrate how Frederick Law Olmsted, an incredibly significant progressive thinker, envisioned the ideal suburban community and how he constructed this ideal community at Riverside, Illinois. This map, which shows Riverside from an aerial view, provides a particularly advantageous view of the community’s common spaces and green spaces.


This article was briefly used to quote Herbert Hoover’s initial response to the financial crisis in the fall of 1929. The financial crisis is a short but significant section of my thesis, as I argue that it is essential to understanding New Deal ideology that advocated for a revision of society.


Glenn W. LaFantasie, professor of history at Western Kentucky University, compiles the correspondence of Roger Williams in this collection. Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island Colony, is an essential figure in the story of early American utopianism. This collection provides insight into Williams’ founding of Rhode Island as a haven for religion dissenters. For the purposes of my research, this source is useful in providing evidence for a prominent example of utopia-as-religious-haven, a prominent manifestation of utopianism in early American history.


I used this transcript as my source for John Winthrop’s famous sermon delivered onboard the *Arabella*. In this sermon, John Winthrop, a leading figure in the foundation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, illustrates a vision for the colony as a ‘city upon a hill,’ a shining example for the rest of the world to emulate. This sermon is essential in illuminating utopian notions in colonial America. In my research, I
utilized this sermon in order to provide further evidence for utopianism as a fundamental principle in American history, in this case as a notion that shaped the vision of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Secondary Sources


This book, one of the few monographs on the greenbelt town program, was used to aid my understanding of the greenbelt towns writ large. In particular, Arnold’s inclusion of the political and legal aspects of their construction was helpful for my research.


Anthony Badger’s work on the New Deal was my principal source for understanding New Deal ideology and politics. This understanding was essential to my argument that the spatial construction of the greenbelt towns reflected New Deal thinking.


British-American human geographer Brian Berry, now Regental Professor in the School of Economic, Political, and Policy Sciences at The University of Texas at Dallas, illustrates the development of American utopias. In this work, Berry argues that utopian surges in American history have been triggered by long-wave crises that have affected American economic development. For the purposes of my research, this work was helpful in putting utopianism in context of the entirety of American history, as my first chapter aims to illustrate a utopian precedent for Greenhills.


Paul F. Boller was the Chair in American History at Texas Christian University where he primarily studied the history of early America. This work is a survey of American Transcendentalism from a theoretical and practical standpoint. For the purposes of my research, I utilized this resource in order to familiarize myself with Transcendentalism writ large. Most specifically, I used this work in order to illustrate Transcendentalist views on nature, a crucial aspect of American utopianism.

I utilized this work on the Country Life movement to deepen my understanding of this particular social movement. I argue that the Country Life movement fundamentally shaped progressive understandings of space. Bowers’ book provided crucial information regarding the Country Life movement, its ideology, its adherents, and its goals.


Paul Conkin’s work on the Resettlement Administration was one of the critical readings in my preliminary research. I found this work particularly helpful in contextualizing the greenbelt towns within other R.A. efforts to solve poverty and destitution through the relocation of struggling Americans.


Steven Conn is a professor of history at Miami University. His work on anti-urbanism in the 20th century is one of the most recent additions to the literature included in my research. In this book, Conn places the greenbelt towns in the context of an anti-urban New Deal ideology. Furthermore, Conn’s bibliographical entries led me to sources I would not have found otherwise, namely those housed at the Greenhills Historical Society.


This substantial work on the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt centers the New Deal and New Deal legislation. It was useful to my research in providing further information on Roosevelt’s ideology and the political forces that led to the creation of the Resettlement Administration.


The late Romanian historian of religion, former Professor at the University of Chicago, encapsulates the religious connotations of the concept of ‘utopia.’ The most useful element of this work in regards to my own is Eliade’s illustration of how early Americans thought that the New World would become an ‘earthly paradise.’ This description is essential in understanding the mentality and motivations of early European settlers and the religious havens and utopias that would be established in the colonial period of American history.

I used this source to better understand Olmsted’s contribution to the progressive spatial tradition. In particular, this work provided helpful information on Olmsted’s opinion on the ideal suburban community, as well as specifics regarding the construction of Riverside, Illinois, Olmsted’s most significant venture in suburban community planning.


Sylvia Doughty Fries, a former professor at Temple University, discusses the supposed paradox of the ‘anti-urban’ origins of the American city. This work surveys the idea of the city in early American history. By examining the cities of Boston, New Haven, Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and Savannah, Fries illustrates how the early Americans envisioned the city as the center for the landed gentry. Of particular interest to my research is Fries discussion on Savannah, as it is one of the utopian communities I include in my survey of American utopianism as it relates to the greenbelt town program.


Dolores Hayden is a professor of architecture, urbanism, and American studies at Yale University. The author of several books on the American landscape, Hayden’s work in *Seven American Utopias* examines the architecture of a select number of American utopian communities. For the purposes of my research, the chapter entitled “Eden versus Jerusalem,” illustrating the communitarian utopia building of the Mormons, was particularly helpful, as Salt Lake City is one of the utopian communities I have identified as being especially significant in the context of the history of American utopianism.


This recent addition to the historical literature on the New Deal was used in my research to provide further details and commentary on New Deal ideology and policies. I utilized this particular source so that my discussion on the New Deal did not solely rely on Badger and Schlesinger.


This work by the esteemed Richard Hofstadter was used in my research of the Progressive Era. In particular, I utilized Hofstadter’s claim that the New Deal was a continuation of progressive politics to bolster my own claim that New Deal programs such as the greenbelt towns borrowed heavily from progressive traditions, and that this borrowing resulted in the utilization of the progressive spatial tradition in the construction of Greenhills.

This work by Kenneth Jackson is the preeminent source on the history of suburbanization in the United States. Since Greenhills was a fundamentally suburban project, I familiarized myself with the context of suburbanization to better understand where Greenhills fits in this history. I also utilized Jackson to understand the geography of cities during the Progressive Era, and how progressive planners started to consider the benefit of living in the suburbs.


The late John Brinckerhoff Jackson was one of America’s most esteemed social geographers. I utilized his seminal work, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* to provide additional analysis of Greenhills’ spatial construction. In particular, I used this work to interpret the inclusion of gardens and parks in this planned community.


Allan B. Jacob, a renowned urban designer, examines the function and aesthetics of the world’s so-called ‘great streets.’ This work was useful for my research in its stunning description of Savannah, Georgia, one of the utopian communities included in my discussion of American utopianism.


I used this work, which covers the Progressive Era in great detail, to deepen my understanding of progressive ideology, and, as a result, the progressive understanding of space. In particular, Lears’ discussion on the rise of the city in the late 19th century was useful in contextualizing these spatial understandings as a response to a rapidly urbanizing country.


I utilized this article from the *Journal of Housing* to provide further detail on the greenbelt town program from the perspective of a city planner. Especially helpful aspects of this report were Mayer’s discussion on the intricateness of Greenhill’s pedestrian footpaths as well as the claim by a local legal authority that Greenhill’s spatial commitment to nature proved to be a positive effect on its residents, in particular its children.

This monograph on the Progressive Movement provided me with further understanding of progressive ideology and the movement’s effects on American society in the latter half of the 19th century. This work was especially helpful in placing the Country Life movement in a progressive context, and in turn how this affected contemporary understandings of space that I argue led to the creation of the greenbelt towns a few decades later.


This book, part of Arcadia’s *Images of America* series, which focuses on local history, is the only published book that deals exclusively with Greenhills. This book provided essential information on Greenhills that was not found elsewhere, such as quotes from residents and a timeline of the village’s early years. Furthermore, I utilized this book to fact-check other sources, which often deal with the greenbelt towns as a whole, in order to distinguish Greenhills from the other communities.


Michael Namorato, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Mississippi, is one of two biographers of Rexford Tugwell. Namorato provides an illustrative look at Tugwell’s childhood and early career as it pertains to his later work in the Roosevelt administration. While Sternsher’s biographer is more widely esteemed, Namorato’s work was useful in attributing influence to Bellamy and other utopianists in the formation of Tugwell’s political philosophy. This connection is essential to my argument which claims that utopianism was a critical influence in the formation of the greenbelt town program.


Miles Orvell, a scholar of American studies, illustrates the unique role that small towns hold in American culture. In particular, I utilized this resource’s discussion on the construction of space in small towns in order to place Greenhills within a context of other suburban villages.


Nell Irvin Painter, a leading historian on the United States, provides a sweeping overview of the Progressive Era. I utilized this source in order to provide further information for my chapter on the progressive spatial tradition. Since I argue that the
progressive spatial tradition was a response to societal issues of the period, sources such as this that provided information regarding these issues were essential.


Intellectual Vernon Louis Parrington, Jr., son of the renowned American literary historian, illustrates how the notion of utopia has been associated with the American continent since its settling by European peoples. This work, submitted as Parrington’s doctoral thesis in American Literature at Brown University, examines how utopia has been a constant theme through the course of American literature. For the purposes of my own research, Parrington’s work was helpful in further elucidating the inextricable connection between Americanism and utopianism.


I utilized this source as an introduction to the New Deal. From this source, I was able to identify more substantial literature on this period that I utilized elsewhere in this chapter. This source was useful in introducing me to particularly significant components of New Deal literature, as well as acting as a quick reference check for this chapter.


Beth Reiter, of the Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission, provides information regarding the architecture and planning of Savannah, Georgia. I used this resource for my own research into the specifics of the Savannah town plan. Using this plan, I was able to place this plan into the larger context of American utopian communities and the layout of these types of spaces.


Anne Rose, Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University, illustrates the manner in which Transcendentalists sought to reform religious, intellectual, and spiritual tradition in order to reimagine society. I used this source in my research to explicate how Transcendentalists organized themselves as a social movement in order to advance their philosophy. Specifically, this source aided in my discussion of how Transcendentalism affected utopia building.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. was perhaps America’s most distinguished historian of the New Deal and the Great Depression. I leaned on this source heavily to understand the complex nature of the New Deal, its agencies, its functions, and its goals. This understanding was essential to arriving at the conclusion that the Resettlement Administration constructed Greenhills in a particular way as to promote an alternative for a cooperative society.


This master’s thesis appears to be one of the earliest works of history that covers Greenhills. I utilized this work to gather additional specifics regarding Greenhills that could not be found in more general literature.


Bernard Sternsher, the late Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History at Bowling Green State University, was a historian of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Sternsher taught at R.I.T. and Seton Hall University prior to moving to BGSU in order to establish the doctoral program there. Among his many qualifications is this work, the preeminent study of Rexford Tugwell and his influence within Roosevelt’s New Deal. As my research is very concerned with Rexford Tugwell and his greenbelt town idea, such a biographical work was essential in illustrating Tugwell’s motivations, philosophies, and policies, as well as providing more cursory information regarding his life and career.


I utilized this biography of Herbert Hoover during the Depression years to understand early federal responses to the Depression. Subsequently, I juxtaposed these responses with those of Roosevelt’s administration in order to emphasize how the New Deal’s strategy to solve poverty was a radical departure.


Robert Wiebe, late professor of history at Northwestern University, was an ‘authority on American political and social history.’ This work, part of Hill and Wang’s ‘Making of America’ series, is one of the foremost works on this era of American history. *The Search for Order* provides a panoramic yet deeply illustrative study of this period. For the purposes of my research, I used this work as one of my main sources for understanding the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era and the precedence found within these periods for the greenbelt town program.

This work by Thomas Wilson illustrates the spatial design of Savannah. In particular, this source was useful for my research as I gleaned information regarding Oglethorpe’s intention for Savannah and the Georgia colony writ large. Furthermore, this source provided me with context for understanding the societal issues of the time that Oglethorpe saw as solvable through the construction of an ideal city.


This article discusses the creation of community in early New England villages. The most pertinent component of this article as far as my research goes was its section on the spatial configuration of New England villages and how this configuration contributed to the village’s sense of community. Specifically, the meeting house, that served as a center of civic life, was perhaps the most significant component of this configuration.


I referenced this work by Donald Worster, an environmental historian, to guide my readers to a masterful discussion on the plight of rural communities in the 1920s. While my thesis doesn’t deal with this specifically, the hardship of rural communities is essential to understanding Roosevelt’s motivations to rehabilitate the countryside, a task he sought to accomplish through agencies such as the Resettlement Administration.

United States Census Bureau. “Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890.” *United States Census Bureau.* Published September 6, 2012. [https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/001/](https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/001/)

I briefly utilized this web source to provide a specific fact regarding the census of 1890. I used this fact, in concert with Turner’s Frontier Thesis, to introduce how Americans thought about space in the latter half of the 19th century.