BEGINNING ABOUT 1830, A REMARKABLE EFFORT emerged to construct a rich and comprehensive ideology of the family. Its components included the concept of “separate spheres” for men and women, the primacy of “the domestic church,” and an elaboration of “true womanhood.” In a curious departure from American republicanism, the human archetype of this philosophy was Great Britain’s Queen Victoria. The influential *Godey’s Lady’s Magazine*, for example, put her forward “as the representative of the moral and intellectual influence which woman by her nature is formed to exercise.” The monarch’s qualities embraced “all that is majestic, all that is soft and soothing, all that is bright, all that expresses the universal voice of love in Creation.”¹ This ambitious effort to clothe traditional home-centered activities in a new “radiance” would actually constitute a “moral revolution,” with sweeping consequences of its own.² In constructing this ideology of the family, both men and women were involved; although it would be a band of “scribbling women” who played the more decisive part.

All the same, this sea change in social life involved “a reorientation of the masculine attitude” as well, from the coffee-houses and

taverns of the eighteenth century, toward home. Renewed evangelical energy among the Congregational churches after 1825 brought a reaction “against convivial excess.” As historian Walter Houghton summarizes, “[m]en were required to give far more time and attention to the business of the family.” English Victorian writers waxed poetic about the virtues of family life. Thomas Arnold cited “that peculiar sense of solemnity” with which “the very idea of family life was invested.” John Ruskin described the home as “the place of Peace; the shelter not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division.” Even John Stuart Mill noted that the life of men was “more domestic” now, including an “improved tone” over “the reciprocity of duty which bends the husband toward the wife.” Recoiling from the excesses of the industrial city and the distortions of “economic men,” middle class husbands and fathers—in Houghton’s words—could feel their hearts “beating again in the atmosphere of domestic affection and the binding companionship” of their families.3

American writers gave particular stress to the importance of the mother in the home. The Rev. John S.C. Abbott, writing in 1833, argued that “the world has been slow to perceive how powerful and extensive is this secret and silent influence” of women over children during their first eight to ten years of life. Mothers were key to “the formation of the character of man.” He (like many other American writers of the age) compared George Washington, who bore the character of his good and wise mother, to Lord Byron, whose mother had “taught him to defy all authority, human and divine; to indulge without restraint, in sin; to give himself up to the power of every maddening passion.” Parental faithfulness would bring joys “akin to those of heaven,” including the ability “of looking around among happy and grateful children” and grandchildren. Indeed, someday the whole household of faithful parents would be “happily assembled” in heaven, seated together “in the green pastures and by the still waters.”4

Others chimed in. In his book, *The Young Housekeeper*, Dr. William Alcott declared, “Let me have the control of the nursery . . . and I care comparatively little” how laws were made. Mothers were “the great agents in the hand of God, in bringing back our guilty race to duty and happiness.” Writing in his text on *Domestic Education*, Herman Humphrey argued that a mother’s duty was to educate her child for heaven, to convert “every little plaything into a teacher of self-denial and benevolence.” John Cowan, M.D., stressed the necessity of offspring. “A married life without children is an unlovable and unsatisfactory life,” he wrote. “It lacks the bands that make perfect the love union of man and wife—the new birth, that makes the twain as one in flesh and spirit.” Indeed, men and women did not reach “their true status in this world… until they originate and rear a child.”

Housing reformers advanced a similar argument. Haunted by the economic turmoil of a capitalist order and the distorted image of “economic man,” a growing number of nineteenth-century city-dwellers turned to their homes for succor and relief. The wealthy businessman “might feel his heart beating again in the atmosphere of domestic affection and the binding companionship of a family.” Meanwhile, clerks and others at a lower economic and social level could “escape from a cold, domineering Scrooge to the freedom and warmth of the family hearth.” Returning to primal Protestant practices, albeit with a new twist, the home emerged as a center of religious experience. Tranquility, serenity, peace of mind, reverence, and nurture “became domestic ideals,” promising stability within the new social and economic storms.

Indeed, American homes were actually beginning to look like churches. From 1780 until 1830, house construction favored “classical” themes linked to “virtuous republicanism”: Greek Revival structures
were common. From the 1830s until 1880, though, the dominant architectural forms were Gothic and Italianate. The former style found its first champion in A. Welby Pugin, who began writing in 1831. He called for “a Christian architecture” that would reflect “the three great doctrines” of redemption, the Holy Trinity, and the resurrection of the dead. Gothic design delivered these themes through use of the Cross, triangular forms in arches and tracery, and the application of “great height and vertical lines” as emblems of the resurrection. Early examples of this style in America included Washington Irving’s “Sunnyside” estate (1834) and the Gilmor family’s “Glen Ellen” (1835).

The young architect A.J. Downing further popularized the Gothic style, with a particular emphasis on housing rural and suburban families. Regarding the former, “farmers are really the most independent men in our community”; rural gothic cottages would stimulate their “interest and attachment” toward family and home. Regarding the new phenomenon of suburbs, Gothic cottages would allow parents and children to escape from urban vices, enabling Christian families to “worship God, with none to molest or make us afraid.” The Gothic style provided “beautiful and appropriate forms, characteristic of domestic life and indicative of home comforts.”

By the 1840s, these domestic housing reformers had gained “an unprecedented influence on the American public.” There was a dramatic increase in the number of builders’ guides featuring the gothic style, which could be found “in the library of every country gentlemen.” In practice, local carpenters also used them to build new homes in the latest style. The use of the cross in design and ornamentation, “gothic” windows, the application of stained glass, reliance on the three primary colors as symbols of the Trinity, and the pump organ: these provided “the proper associations for the Christian family.” As another housing reformer, Oliver P. Smith, summarized in 1852: “Nothing has more to do with the morals, the civilization, and refinement of a nation, than its

prevailing Architecture. Virtue and Beauty are twin sisters. . . .”

The celebrated French visitor of the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville, made his own significant impression on and contribution to the emerging ideology of the Victorian family in America. The laws and social customs of American democracy, he argued, had already dissolved the foundations of the patriarchal family. Paternal authority, of the Roman or aristocratic type, did not exist in the new world. The equal division of estates also undercut the power of eldest sons. As a result, the relations of fathers to sons actually become “more intimate and affectionate.” So too among brothers, where “filial love” and “fraternal affection” thrived among equals. While democracy loosened social bonds, “it tightens natural ones” and “brings kindred more closely together.”

The young women of America also exhibited extraordinary qualities, Tocqueville said. In such a democracy, tastes were “ill-restrained,” social customs “fleeting,” public opinion “unsettled,” and parental authority weak. Consequently, “nowhere are young women surrendered so early or so completely to their own guidance.” With their virtues likely to be exposed to many dangers, parents determined that young women should learn how to defend them; they “hastened” to give girls “a precious knowledge on all subjects.” Rare among American young women were the “virginal softness,” “ingenuous grace,” or “childish timidity” found among their European counterparts; instead, the former showed a “happy boldness.” Even in early youth, “an American woman is always mistress of herself.”

And yet, Tocqueville reported, American women were not egalitarians regarding the relation of the sexes. While there were Europeans who “would make man and woman into beings not only equal, but alike” in functions, duties, and rights, they had no counterparts in America. Rather, “Americans have applied to the sexes the great principle of political economy”—the division of labor—“in order that the great


work of society may be better carried out.” Accordingly, “constant care” was “taken in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes.” Men managed the external affairs of the family, ran the business enterprises, engaged in political life, and performed the harsh “labor of the fields.” Young women, taught beforehand what to expect, “voluntarily and freely” entered into matrimony, where they surrendered their independence and reoriented their lives “within the narrow circle of domestic interests and duties.” Understanding “that every association must have a head in order to accomplish its object,” American women accepted “that the natural head of the conjugal association is man.”

Rather than bemoan their lot, Tocqueville reported that “they attach a sort of pride to the voluntary surrender of their own will and make it their boast to bend themselves to the yoke.” Indeed, American men and women exhibited “an equal regard for both their respective” spheres of duty; “and though their lot is different, they consider both of them as beings of equal value.” Accordingly, “I have nowhere seen women occupying a loftier position.” This led the French observer to the remarkable conclusion that the most important cause of the Americans’ “singular prosperity and growing strength” was “the superiority of their women.”

Tocqueville’s analysis of American male-female relations would have a particularly strong influence on the work of Catharine Beecher.

Relative to family questions, the most important theologian of the era was Horace Bushnell. While the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and 1830s would have certain positive “family” consequences (see below), Bushnell rejected such revivalism and its focus on adult conversions as excessively individualistic. Instead, he threw his lot in with the mid-seventeenth-century Puritans, who had stressed that salvation was in some ways the product of Godly homes. He called for a reorientation of Christian churches to a focus on the nurture of infants and children. Depravity, or original sin, was “best rectified when it was weakest.” Grace could be acquired by children through the care and teaching of faithful parents.

15. Ibid., 201-3, 211-14.
16. See: Van de Wetering, “The Popular Concept of ‘Home’ in Nineteenth Century America,” 9-11; and Kuhn, The Mother’s Role in Childhood Education, 21-22,
“All our modern notions and speculations have taken a bent toward individualism,” Bushnell maintained. His purpose was to rekindle “a great and momentous truth—the Organic Unity of the Family.” He stressed that parents exerted an extraordinary power over their children, “not only when they teach, encourage, persuade, and govern, but without any purposed control whatsoever.” Indeed, each child actually breathed into his or her nature “the spirit of the house,” impressions “from everything he sees.” Bushnell put a special emphasis on the good household’s functionality, what he called “the organic working of a family.” Paraphrasing a verse from Jeremiah, he explained: “If the father kindles the fire, and the women knead the cakes, the children will gather the wood.” Family unity came from mother, father, and children being “all locked together, in one cause,” where they would “wear each other into common shapes.” And this home-centered endeavor would deliver salvation. As Bushnell summarized:

Understand that it is in the family spirit, the organic life of the house, the silent power of a domestic godliness, working, as it does, unconsciously and with sovereign effect—this it is which forms your children to God.

Simply put, this theological orientation—which had wide currency—represented a quantum jump in the value and importance of the home, with a similar leap in the status of the wife and mother in the home.17

Women As “National Conservatives”
It was a group of women of the era, though, who shaped the most coherent ideology of domesticity, family, and home. They were the writers who responded to Midwestern author Margaret Coxe’s call for “national conservatives in the largest sense.”18 Representative were Sarah Joseph Hale, Catharine Beecher, and Lydia Sigourney.

Born in 1788, Hale received a classical education in her home. She

18. Quoted in Ryan, Womanhood in America, 77.
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married at age 25 and bore five children before her husband died. As a widow, she turned to writing and editing. From 1827 until her death in 1879, she was “an arbiter of good conduct,” notable in particular for her editorship of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*.19

Catharine Beecher, born in 1800, was the eldest child of the famed preacher Lyman Beecher and Roxanna (Foote) Beecher, and sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe and pastors Henry Ward Beecher and Charles Beecher. She was engaged to a Yale professor, but he died at sea before the nuptials occurred. She never married. Instead, she devoted herself to the founding of schools (or “seminaries”) for young women and writing on sundry subjects. Until her death in 1878, she authored two dozen books and hundreds of articles. Relative to family life, her most notable work was *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, published in 1842.20

Born in Connecticut in 1791, Lydia Huntley married Charles Sigourney in 1819. Writing thereafter as Mrs. Sigourney, she authored in her “leisure” time a total of 67 books (including a dozen collections of her poems) and over 2,000 articles for at least 300 different periodicals. Her family-centric books included *Letters to Young Ladies* (1833) and *Letters to Mothers* (1838).21

Several factors contributed to the emergence after 1830 of what Nathaniel Hawthorne called “a damned mob of scribbling women.” Publishers launched a variety of magazines “for, about, and by women.” The “pioneer” in this regard was *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. Rejecting the hitherto common practice of attention to aristocratic women, Hale “celebrated instead the wholesome American woman who dedicated herself to the prosaic service of her family.” In doing so, she stamped a distinctive theory of “gender differentiation . . . on American popular culture.”22

This recognition of the mother “as a free and responsible individual


and participant in democratic progress” went along with recognition of children as of inestimable value. By the 1850s, according to historian Gayle Kimball, the values of motherhood, romantic love, and the child-centered home “were enforced by the centralized publishing industry, magazine serials, novels, poetry, and sermons”—in other words, by the media of the day.

A second factor contributing to the cause was emergence across the land of Maternal Associations. They were products of the Second Great Awakening, a fresh round of Christian revivals and conversions that reached a peak in the 1820s and early 1830s. Mary Ryan suggests that this religious experience was especially attractive to persons recently displaced from their failing home economies. It also appears to have been driven by mounting concern over the “licentiousness” to be found in the growing towns and cities. Whatever the case, “bands of reforming women” focused on motherhood seemed to be popping up across the land. A story from the late 1820s captured this development with a fictional comment from a child:

Mother there are so many societies! . . . I longed for you this afternoon when I came home from school, and they told me you were gone to the Maternal Society. You go very often. Mother what is a Maternal Society?

Maternal Associations originally emerged as Bible study groups. However, over time, they turned away from a focus on evangelism toward attention to homes and children. Across the Northeast and Midwest, women met weekly “to renew vows of devotion to their children” and to improve the practice of child care. They formed a substantial audience for the books and magazines on home and family that were flowing from the publishers. And they gave the first coherent shape to

25. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, 77, 116.
26. Quoted in Ibid., 105.
27. Kuhn, The Mother’s Role in Childhood Education, 27.
the “Maternalist” worldview that would bear real, and sometimes decisive, influence for the next 140 years.\(^{28}\)

For this was a national movement. Ideas on “true womanhood,” “domesticity,” and “maternalism” were standardized by publishers so as “to obliterate local and regional variations.” Carried by wagons, canals, steamboats, and railroads, maternalist magazines and books spread even to “the most remote corners of the continent.”\(^{29}\) The partial exceptions to this generalization were in the South. Abolitionist writers in the North frequently pounded on “the Patriarchal Institution” of slavery; this cadre of authors included not a few “scribbling women.”\(^{30}\) And it does appear that the new Maternalist ideas had relatively less impact among the white Patriarchs and Mistresses of the antebellum Southern plantations.\(^{31}\) For their part, African-American slaves faced the miseries induced by the much expanded labor market of King Cotton. All the same, they still managed to craft a version of family life. Most slave women were monogamous, bearing children with one man throughout their reproductive lives. Families remained large, with seven children being the average. Most surprisingly, “maternalist” behaviors actually showed some influence as well, in “a sexual division of labor and status, and at least a primitive distinction between the male and the female spheres.”\(^{32}\)

**Motherhood As Holy**

In crafting their vision of the home restored, the female writers of the nineteenth century confronted head on the question of sexual differences: how could inequality and the submission of women to men be justified in a democratic, egalitarian society? They came up with two somewhat different answers.

Catharine Beecher believed that the restriction of women to the

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domestic sphere was, by and large, a political expedient, necessary to the preservation of democracy. In a turbulent society, in which everything was changing and moving, “some form of hierarchy was needed to avoid a war of all against all.” On these matters, she drew extensively from Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Public order rested on forms of submission: subjects to magistrates; pupils to teachers; employees to employers; children to parents. In the United States, Beecher argued, both public opinion and practice held “that woman has an equal interest in all social and civil concerns.” However, for practical reasons, “it is decided that, in the domestic relation, she take a subordinate position, and that, in civil and political concerns, her interests be entrusted to the other sex.” In “compensation for this,” women gained precedence and honor “in all the comforts, conveniences, and courtesies of life.” And they held “a superior influence” in matters involving the selection and maintenance of a pastor, the schooling of their children, “all benevolent enterprises,” and the care and maintenance of their homes.

In contrast, Hale and Sigourney linked the sexual division of labor to women’s superiority. Sarah Hale, for example, turned to Genesis to cast woman as “the last work of creation,” “the real glory of human nature.” In the forming of Eve, “there were care and preparation . . . which were not bestowed” on Adam. The woman “was of finer mold, and destined to the more spiritual uses.” Through Eve, the “happiness and glory of Eden” were perfected. Men and women were not identical in physical or intellectual gifts, “but the differences were like the tones in music that make up the concord of sweet sounds.”

Indeed, God intended that women should control His “institution for human happiness” and “the highest moral culture”: “the sanctuary of the virtuous home.” This was the higher calling, superior to that left to men. As Hale summarized: “First in the destiny of the home circle,


34. Long passages from Tocqueville, for example, are found in Catharine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846), 28-32, 34-35.


we would place the mother; for this is her rightful domain. The father
goes abroad to toil for his loved ones, and is, of necessity, absent much of
the time.” It was the wife and mother, not the husband and father, who
guided her spouse and children, “by the aid of divine Grace, up to the
bliss of heaven.”\footnote{Ibid., 78, 116.}

For her part, Lydia Sigourney also cast the work of mothers as
superior to the tasks allotted to men. “The love of children, in man is
a virtue,” she wrote; “in women, an element of nature. It is a feature of
her constitution.” In becoming a mother, Sigourney concluded, a young
woman claimed “a higher place in the scale of being,” an “increase of
power,” engaging the “highest” and “holiest energies.” Indeed, “no uni-
versal agents of civilization exist, but through mothers.” In this light,
women had “wisely” been excluded “from any share in the administra-
tion of government.” Charged with lifting new immortal souls to adult-
hood and heaven, it would be wrong to mix the elevated “female mind”
with “the ferment of political ambition.”\footnote{Mrs. L.H. Sigourney, Letters to Mothers (Hartford, CT: Hunter and Skinner, Printers, 1838),
9-10, 12-14.}

Catharine Beecher’s sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, also claimed
that women were, in important respects, superior to men. Females were
made of “finer clay” and a “refined fiber.” Their nervous systems “are
more intense, sensitive, magnetic, mysterious, intuitive, and prophetic.”
In contrast to men reliant on “slow-footed reason,” women were “soul-
artists” with more elaborate and acute perceptions. They employed spiri-
tual, rather than political, power. Their submissiveness to men was nec-
essary, in part, to limit competitiveness and the divisions in society. More
fundamentally, in accepting subordination, women became redemp-
tive—Christ-like. Complementarity in male-female relations actually
produced a form of soul cooperation, so that man and woman together

An unsigned 1830 article on “Woman” for Ladies’ Magazine neatly
summarized the case. In all times, and all places, women’s “maternal
sympathy” elevated them morally over men, who were characterized
by “grosser habits” and “roug...er perceptions.” In the past, men had taken advantage of women’s relative physical weakness and made them servile dependents and slaves. Now, women found self-realization and flourishing in their homes. Their domestic tasks also involved leading husbands and children to salvation. These were “the noblest manifestations of woman’s superior virtue” and “a perfection” of her character.40

Other writers drove home the same point. In her 1850 book, Woman in America, Maria J. McIntosh concluded that a “wise” inequality, ordained in Paradise, excluded women from the political arena and its “strifes and rivalries, its mean jealousies, and meaner pretentions.” It was in “the quiet home,” rather, that “truth may show herself unveiled” to women. In sum: “Different offices and different powers—this is what we would assert . . ., leaving to others the vain question of equality or inequality. Each seems to be important to the fulfillment of God’s design.”41

Mary Hale, the daughter of Sarah, stressed how Christianity recognized the equality of the sexes, albeit operative in separate spheres. “High and holy” were women’s responsibilities, she wrote, but not in the legislature. Rather, “in the secrecy of the domestic circle, she establishes the principles, upon which future statesmen shall base their measures.” Miss Hale thanked “the higher and holier Power” which had crafted “this beautiful harmony of nature,” ordaining “that the sphere of woman should be in a less public, though not less responsible station than that of man.”42

**Mother Love for Children**

The female writers behind the nineteenth-century family revival invested motherhood, and the mother-child bond, with new honor and energy. Through their relationship with children, mothers were “builders of the human temple.” Practicing gentle nurture, mothers shaped the character

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40. “Woman,” Ladies’ Magazine 3 (1830), 442-44.
42. Miss Mary W. Hale, “Comparative Intellectual Character of the Sexes,” Godey’s Lady’s Book and Ladies’ American Magazine 20 (June 1840), 274.
of their offspring. This biological bond began through breastfeeding, deemed “one of the most hallowed and inviolate episodes in a woman’s life.” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* declared that the mother “must not delegate to any being the sacred and delightful task of suckling her child.” This was “one of the most important duties of female life,” an act “of peculiar, inexpressible, felicity,” the “sole occupation and pleasure of a new mother.”

As the baby weaned, the mother then transformed into the ideal and natural teacher of the child. The “active conservatives” behind the renewed family model—Hale, the Beechers, and Sigourney—argued that mothers possessed the character traits perfectly suited to be the most effective teachers of the young. As mothers and the mistresses of families, women “have for some time the care of the education of their children of both sorts,” with the greatest consequence to human life. Since the “least and most imperceptible impressions” received in infancy held consequences of long duration, mothers served like the channel of a river, able “to turn the minds of children to what direction we please.”

Sigourney declared it “the province of women to teach.” In her 1838 discourse on “Domestic Education,” she actually urged mothers “to take charge of the entire education of their children, during the earlier years of life.” Why, she asked, would women entrust the education of their children during their susceptible years to “the management of strangers?” Why expose their young “to the influence of evil example . . . ?”

In arguing for this path, Sigourney marshalled arguments largely identical to those used by home-school advocates in the late twentieth century. Common “objections” to the practice and her answers included:

*Too little time:* Two or three hours a day “would be all that the first eight or ten years of life would require and much more than they usually obtain.”

43. From: Ryan, *Womanhood in America*, 100.
44. Kuhn, *The Mother’s Role in Childhood Education*, 33-34, 90-92.
47. Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers*, 101-03.
I am not qualified: “Profound erudition is not demanded.” Basic instruction in reading, orthography, vocabulary, penmanship, arithmetic, and speaking were all that were needed. Regarding geography and the sciences, employ “treatises from the most gifted minds.” For history, use select biographies which emphasized character.

I have too much to do: “Do not be too ambitious a housekeeper. . . . Energy, and adherence to system, will accomplish wonders.”

I do not want to give up “all society”: Reserve evenings for social life and get priorities straight; “Will any Christian mother hesitate which she ought to renounce?”

Children require the stimulation found in schools: “Is this not merely another name for ‘envying and strife’?”

It is a relief to have them out of the way: “But will He who gave us our children, justify us in devising means to have them put out of the way?”

The public instructor was a “dry instrument” who taught rote items; “the mother of a family is a moral power.” Such home education worked best in “a rural situation, where the little pupils can enjoy free exercise [and] a room which can be devoted exclusively to their instruction.” Sigourney concluded: “Let us keep our children for our own, during their earlier years. The world will have them long enough afterwards.”48

Catharine Beecher placed her emphasis on the training of older girls for their joint vocations of mother, teacher, and homekeeper. Up to age 14, mothers would keep their daughters as “domestic assistants,” supplemented by home instruction in reading, writing, mathematics, needlework, drawing, and music. Young women would then enter a “female seminary” for three years of intensive education combining traditional studies with training in “the science and practice of Domestic Economy.”

48. Ibid., 104-17.
Where men had their schools of medicine, law, and theology for higher studies, these seminaries would ensure that young women would “be properly qualified” for their future duties in new homes. Traditional subjects included mathematics, English grammar, Latin, Natural and Moral Philosophy, Chemistry, Astronomy, Political Economy, Physiology, Archaeology, Vocal Music, and “the Evidences of Christianity.” To this would be added training in cooking, cleaning, child care, washing, ironing, gardening, and other domestic tasks. In such institutions, young women would learn “that it is refined and ladylike to engage in domestic pursuits,” and so help to spread the blessings of American values and institutions. Beecher encouraged the founding of such female seminaries in every part of the land. Over a hundred emerged, including several founded and guided by Beecher herself. 49

The “New” Home Economy

In these ways, “conservative” women endeavored to give new shape and value to the home economies being ravaged by the industrial revolution: The common heroine was the homemaker. Godey’s Lady’s Book drew on older agrarian images, casting the home as a place of grand earthly bounty. A typical story, “The Woodman’s Daughter,” showed a cottage surrounded by plants and vegetables, with an attached shed “from over the half-door of which protruded the mild-face of a sleek, well-fed cow.” 50 As historian Maxine Van de Watering summarizes, “It is a picture of orderly bounty, the riches provided by the good earth and a good, human cultivator. The mark of the homemaker is here.” 51 A second story, “The Farmer’s Daughter,” has a table before a glowing hearth filled by “wholesome plenty: brown, crusted loaves, savory meats, white foaming milk . . . and fresh-made butter, with a cluster of roses stuck in.” 52 The homemaker was an “ordered provender,” with bounty flowing from her very being, still exhibiting the skills of handwork and self-sufficient

labor within “the new American home of the Victorian period.”

On such matters, American women could draw on the sentiments expressed by Victorian writers back in Great Britain. In his novel *Our Mutual Friend*, Charles Dickens described the activities of the typical urban homemaker. She engages, he wrote, in a great deal of productive labor: “weighing and mixing and chopping and grating . . . dusting and washing and polishing . . . snipping and weeding and trowelling and other small gardening . . . making and mending and folding and airing.” Such were the necessary and productive tasks of the “household affairs of the day.”

Sarah Hale encouraged women in the growing cities to refunction-alize their homes, in order to “increase the sum of human happiness” and “economize in family expenses.” As she explained: “In our country, almost every family, with good management, might keep a good table.” As a first step in rebuilding a home economy, she told young mothers to “bake your own bread.” Learning Italian or instrumental music were “worthless accomplishments, compared with the knowledge of breadmaking.” Catharine Beecher’s whole scheme of female education rested on the upgrading and rationalization of housework, a mastering of “a complex body of knowledge and skills” that would recreate a vital home economy.

**Haven from the Industrial Order**

Another key theme for these women was the home as a necessary shelter from the tumult of the new economy. An 1830 article in *Ladies’ Magazine* pointed to the busy crowds produced by the new order, where “we behold every principle of justice and of honor, and even the dictates of common honesty disregarded.” It continued:

> and we turn from such scenes, with a painful sensation, almost believing that virtue has deserted the abodes of men; again we look

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to the sanctuary of the home; there sympathy, honor, and virtue are assembled.\textsuperscript{57}

Sarah Hale, in particular, saw a deep and enduring conflict between the virtues of domesticity and the perverse values of industrializing American society. She set “the Home” up against “a society given over without reservation to the pursuit of wealth.” If the work of women was uncorrupted by the acquisitive market mindset and if that labor was the strict product of love, not gain, then American culture “might retain its contact with primitive virtue and goodness.”\textsuperscript{58}

The distribution of homes also reflected this reaction against tumultuous economic change. In place of restlessness, Americans yearned for reattachment to a place, rooted in land. Ironically, the emergence of railroads in the middle decades of the nineteenth century actually spawned the first modern suburbs. These combined the conveniences of urban life with “the substantial advantages of rural conditions of life,” with a joint focus on the new homemaking and children. As architect Frederick Law Olmstead explained, “The essential qualification of a suburb is domesticity.”\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, the home—especially if constructed in the Gothic style—served as a form of church; a woman’s “shrine, throne, and empire,” a place—in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s words—“more holy than cloister, more saintly and pure than church or altar.” Historian Gayle Kimball correctly concludes that it: . . . “was in this milieu that the family assumed a new importance as a haven of calm in the alienation, rush, and competition of industrial society and its chief product—the city.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{Home and the Republic}

These themes flowed into a remarkable conflation of home and the American Republic. Sarah Hale placed great stress on what she called “the Eden laws,” by which she meant the creation by God of human marriage, the Divine command “to be fruitful and multiply,” and sexual

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} L.E., “Home,” \textit{Ladies’ Magazine} 3 (1830), 218.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Sklar, \textit{Catharine Beecher}, 162-63.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Clark, “Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History,” 40-41.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Kimball, \textit{The Religious Ideas of Harriet Beecher Stowe}, 76, 84.
\end{itemize}
complementarity: “Man is the worker or provider, the protector and the law-giver; woman is the preserver, the teacher or inspirer, and the exemplar.” Expelled from Eden after the Fall, Adam and Eve created The Home, where “they would seek to renew the joys of their lost Eden.” However, sin entered “the homes of the sons of God.” The Great Flood occurred. Through Noah, however, “… the Eden laws were established in all their holiness and purity.” They would ebb and flow over the millennia. Hale held, for example, that the old German tribes “kept the Eden-idea of marriage and the sanctity of home.” Then, in the seventeenth century, the Eden-laws came to America: “They come, that Pilgrim band, they come!/This lone land is their chosen home,/And this new world is won!” Hale added: “Do you not perceive a striking similitude between the family on Mount Ararat and the Pilgrim band in the ‘Mayflower’?” Two hundred years later, she held, the American Republic continued to embody the spirit of Eden: “Perhaps no people in modern times have preserved the habits and feelings of those days more than the Americans.”61

Such expressions of American exceptionalism and destiny in matters of family life were common in the period under review. Catharine Beecher argued that “[t]o us is committed the grand, the responsible privilege, of exhibiting to the world, the beneficial influences of Christianity, when carried into every social, civil, and political institution.” She especially raised up “the part to be enacted by American women” in this great task. To them, “more than any others on earth,” was “committed the exalted privilege” of renovating “degraded man” and draping “all climes with beauty.” American women focused on their domestic tasks “are agents in accomplishing the greatest work that ever was committed to human responsibility.”62 She concluded: “This is the country which the Disposer of Events designs shall go forth as the cynosure of nations, to guide them to the light and blessedness of that [millennial] day.”63 In the same spirit, Lydia Sigourney wrote “that no universal agent of civilization exists, but through mothers”; and it fell to American women to carry that banner in

63. In Sklar, Catharine Beecher, 159.
the nineteenth century.  

Renewing the Middle Class

Beyond such lofty claims, these authors actually advanced another, more prosaic, but equally important task: expanding the middle class. Kathryn Sklar argues that “by adding a middle class bias” to women’s identity, Catharine Beecher greatly enlarged “the scope of middle class values and behavior. For every woman then became a purveyor of middle class culture.” These women taught their children the values associated with the middle-class personality: “honesty, industry, frugality, temperance, and, preeminently, self-control.” And they extended the middle-class concept of domestic womanhood to new immigrant populations.

The housing reformers involved in the crafting of this domestic ideology also succeeded in crafting “a distinctly American housing style.” Home ownership became an increasingly important value among Americans, “one of the distinctive marks of having gained economic security.” And the number of such homeowners grew sharply, even among laborers. In one case study of a small city in upstate New York, only ten percent of wage-earners owned any real property in the 1840s. By 1880, and despite a civil war and two major economic depressions, about 70 percent of workers owned a home! In this way, the family home emerged as a symbol of a growing middle class during the 1830 to 1880 period. As historian Clifford Clark summarizes: “It stood for the individual’s taste and virtues, for his dedication to his family and his belief in the ideals of efficiency, order, sobriety, and domesticity.”

The years 1830 to 1880 also witnessed the rapid settlement of new farms in the Upper Mississippi Valley and the Plains region. Steamships

64. Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers*, 12, 16-17.
68. Clark, “Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History,” 53.
70. Clark, “Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History,” 56.
and railroads facilitated this movement of new settlers into the virgin lands of central and northern Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and eastern Kansas and Nebraska. The Homestead Act of 1862 opened to farming vast new tracts of free arable land, mostly in the territories of the Dakotas, western Kansas and Nebraska, Montana, and eastern Colorado. In the old South, the destruction of slavery and the war-induced deaths or bankruptcy of many members of the white gentry led to a break-up of the great estates. Tens of thousands of new family-scale farms took their place. Meanwhile, Mormon leaders guided the creation of new farming settlements within the vast inter-mountain territory which they called Deseret. Notably, in the 1880s, the availability of good, virgin farm land in America ended. All the same, since 1830, the number of American farms had climbed almost fourfold, to 4,565,000.71 Inhabited by farm wives who largely took their moral and cultural cues from the same books and magazines as their urban/suburban sisters, the new farms formed what could be called a rural middle class.72

The concept of a distinct woman’s sphere also proved to be popular as a sign of middle-class status. The new notions surrounding domesticity rehabilitated the Puritan concept of the individual’s subordination to the greater social welfare. In this case, the lines of authority were recast as “natural” bonds between superior and subordinate.73 Complete with a “finely wrought ideology” to justify their status, mid-nineteenth-century American women could claim “that rarest of delights, having one’s cake and eating it too.” As Ryan explains: “They could remain at home and still achieve accolades from popular culture and a real but indirect power in society.”74

Indeed, after a flirtation with industrial employment, women en masse returned home. By 1860, 90 percent of adult women were full-time homemakers; a mere 10 percent reported any gainful employment

73. Sklar, Catharine Beecher, 163.
74. Ryan, Womanhood in America, 91.
outside the home, even part time. The wife and mother at home so became a symbol of middle-class status.\textsuperscript{75} These women by and large found happiness as the silent partners of their husbands, focusing on the non-market, consumptive, psychological, and child-rearing tasks “still necessary to family survival.” The men were shopkeepers, clerks, professionals, managers, skilled laborers, and successful farmers: “They were middle class.” However, their wives did not merely marry into this status. Rather, as Ryan nicely summarizes, these women “played a major historical role within the domestic sphere, as [they] worked to shape the American middle class into its nineteenth-century mold.”\textsuperscript{76}

In her able study of the Christian home in Victorian America, Colleen McDannell stresses the successful convergence of both Protestants and Roman Catholics around a shared domestic religion. This conflation of faith and home “had its own intrinsic logic, leadership patterns, and symbols” which provided a sense of the sacred. A shared “social and spiritual ideology” elevated the importance of the family as an institution, strengthening its claims over the individuals who were its parts. For Protestants, the “ideology and symbols of the home” leapt across sectarian divisions, presenting “an agreed-upon notion of an eternal, God-given, Bible-based family life.” Among Catholics, the same domestic ideology energized the life of the laity by attaching home life to the sacred; it also served as a vehicle for assimilating a new flood of immigrants—heavily Irish and German—into their new land. As McDannell nicely puts it:

By combining traditional religious symbols with a set of middle-class domestic values the Victorians rooted their home virtues in the eternal and allowed the more abstract traditional symbols to assume a real presence in everyday life. Domestic religion . . . bound together what was truly meaningful in Victorian society.\textsuperscript{77}

Once again, the expansion and strength of the middle class, along

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 103.
with the expansion of property ownership in homes and lands, were bound to a strengthened family system.

**Statistical Evidence?**
What do fertility rates show regarding this period of seeming family strength? There were several social forces at work: two suppressing fertility; and two encouraging it.

Over the course of the whole nineteenth century, the dominant theme was fertility decline. While accurate direct measures of fertility were lacking, the U.S. Census Bureau did count the number of living children under age five. When compared to the number of women of reproductive age, 16 to 44, the resulting ratio was a reasonable substitute for the fertility rate. In 1911, demographer Walter F. Willcox reported results for the whole of the nineteenth century:

Number of children under age five per 1000 women, ages 16 to 44

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>928</td>
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<td>1830</td>
<td>877</td>
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<td>1840</td>
<td>835</td>
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<td>1880</td>
<td>635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prior to this study, most analysts had thought that U.S. fertility had remained high and unchanged through 1860. Willcox’s work showed that fertility decline actually began in the 1810s and continued
throughout the century—with the exception of the 1850s. These results were consistent with a somewhat earlier study from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, reporting similar results since 1850—including the curious rise in fertility during the 1850s. How might these results be explained?

General F.A. Walker, Superintendent of the Census of 1880, blamed the heavy influx of immigrants after 1865 which “constituted a shock to the principle of population among the native element,” who “more and more withheld their own increase.” Writing in 1893, John Shaw Billings offered a more complex set of causes: (1) the diffusion of birth control information among married women; (2) growing public opinion that contraception “may even be under certain circumstances commendable”; (3) “... a great increase in the use of things that were formerly considered as luxuries, but which now have become necessities”; (4) a new view of marriage as being “less desirable, and its bonds less sacred”; and (5) the spread of feminist opinions that women should “aim at being independent of possible or actual husbands,” should earn their own living, and should avoid the “domestic slavery” of housekeeping.

Such factors may have been in play. However, they fail to explain certain secondary developments, such as: the rise in the fertility of both whites and African Americans in the South after 1865; the nationwide increase in fertility during the 1850s; and the continuing high levels of fertility in certain rural areas.

More recent investigations have clarified the cause of fertility decline in the nineteenth century. Several sophisticated studies have shown that fertility decline from 1800 to 1830 was primarily driven by the shortage of nearby new land for the settlement of children. Demographer Yasukichi Yasuba calls the process “crowding”: “as time passed, the acquisition of new land in the settled areas became increasingly difficult and costlier,


and the average distance from the settled to the new areas where land was plentiful became further.” Indeed, he calculates a high rank correlation of -.857 between “rural crowding” and fertility between 1800 and 1830. He speculates that this derived from a “decreased demand for children” and a “rise in the age of [first] marriage.” Economic historian Richard Easterlin concurs. After considering and rejecting a number of other possible causes of fertility decline in the early nineteenth century (decline in the value of child labor? rising “opportunity costs of women’s time”?), he also settles on the rising expense of establishing children on nearby farms in the settled areas. Demographers Colin Forster and G.S.L. Tucker tested Yasuba’s thesis, using somewhat different measures, and also agree. The birth rate decline during the first half of the nineteenth century, among a still overwhelmingly rural people, largely derived from the “difficulty of establishing new rural households” near to parents. Notably, this finding is almost identical to the existence of a land shortage that destabilized the Puritans after 1680, and also led to a decline in fertility.

However, starting around 1830, and accelerating with real force after 1860, a different force drives fertility decline: urbanization, the consequence of the industrial revolution. Yasuba reports that already by 1830, there was “an inverse association between urbanization-industrialization and fertility.” However, the relationship was weaker than that associated with rural “crowding.” From 1860 to 1890, though, the rank correlation between fertility and the level of urbanization swells to -.638. At this point, urban-industrialization assumes the “major role as a determinant of fertility”; the quantum shift in human behavior portended by the experience of Manhattan in the eighteenth century had arrived nationwide.

Even so, important anomalies remained, giving evidence to the success of the forces of family renewal in resisting this demographic

84. Forster and Tucker, Economic Opportunity and White American Fertility Rates, 26, 100.
revolution. First, fertility remained significantly higher in rural areas. Analysis of the 1910 Census, for example, found that while the number of children per 1,000 women fell sharply among city dwellers of childbearing age between 1850 and 1880, the ratio found among rural women remained unchanged, and 55% higher than among urban women by the end of the period. Among African Americans, the ratio of small children to 1,000 women ages 20 to 44 continued at the pre-industrial level of 1,072 in 1860. Following emancipation and the distribution of land to former slaves, the figure actually increased to 1,090 by 1880. Data also showed that, in urban areas, greater income resulted in lower fertility. In contrast, higher income in rural areas continued to be associated with higher fertility.

And second, after falling for 40 years, American fertility actually increased during the 1850s by a modest but real amount. Some have interpreted this as a demographic echo, so to speak, of Irish immigration in the 1840s. This seems unlikely, though, for the same phenomenon occurred even in places with negligible Irish immigration. Instead, this modest “baby bump” should probably be seen as the result of the new ideology of the American home reaching full flower. This creed of domesticity actually succeeded in pushing back the anti-family and anti-natal effects of the urban-industrial revolution. Such a brief—but meaningful—episode was then shaken by the demographic traumas of a horrific and bloody civil war during the 1860s. The child/woman ratio fell nine percent in that decade alone. During the 1870s, though, the ratio almost stabilized once again, as the forces of family renewal regained cultural attention and influence.

It was during the 1880s that the child/woman ratio would tumble sharply in a time of peace. A new age of troubles had arrived.

86. Grabill, Kiser, and Whelpton, The Fertility of American Women, Table 9, at 22.
87. Ibid., 20.
89. Ibid., 32.
Allan C. Carlson, Ph.D., is Editor of The Family in America. This essay has been adapted from a chapter in his forthcoming book, Family Cycles: Strength, Decline and Renewal in American Domestic Life, 1630-2000, to be published by Transaction in 2016.