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NATHANIEL PARKER WILLIS: IN SEARCH OF THE
SUBURBAN IDEAL.

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NATHANIEL PARKER WILLIS:
IN SEARCH OF THE SUBURBAN IDEAL

BY
Larry Edward Gobrecht

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture.

May, 1980
NATHANIEL PARKER WILLIS:
IN SEARCH OF THE SUBURBAN IDEAL

BY
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INTRODUCTION

While Americans of the ante-bellum era (1830-1860) made great advances in the areas of economic growth, technology, and territorial advantage, the growing complexity of the post-colonial culture brought new problems. Literature of the period often reveals concern about the breakdown of rural culture and the family unit, and the rise of technology and urban centered living. Rapid economic growth benefited many Americans, but much of the newly acquired wealth was concentrated among the few. These changes created varying degrees of ambivalence and confusion in the minds of many Americans about their social roles, their personal and national identities, and their collective destiny.

Many Americans chose to ignore or push aside these issues and continued to be intrigued with more pleasant thoughts about their economic potential, their vast resources, and their unique chance to start a new society without the baggage of the Old World. Yet despite continued faith in the ability of the democratic system to deal with growing economic inequalities and despite an almost
religious belief in the infinite capacity of the land and the western frontier to release them from the pressures of problematic growth, many Americans became increasingly uncomfortable with certain aspects of their chosen destiny. There was a growing awareness that rapid change, large and varied ethnic immigration, quickly acquired fortunes, and the intensified democratic rhetoric brought direct challenges to the comfortable social stability of the older colonial culture. In many cases, as recent scholarship has shown, these challenges were met with conservative reaction. Furthermore, such reaction came not only from the franchised but also from the traditionally liberal artistic and intellectual communities.

The idea of an American artistic, literary and intellectual "community" was a new one for most Americans of the period as such men were usually Americans who had become "Europeanized" by their training. But along with other patriotic ideas came the notion that Americans should call upon their own artists and thinkers, not only to answer esoteric questions about artistic or literary theory, but also to deal with questions of proper life style, social behavior, and appropriate aspirations for Americans in need of "good models." To further complicate matters, artists and writers were themselves experiencing a material success that altered
their own position in society and created new questions about their own role and identity. As a result, "the need for definition--of social class, nationality, skill--emerged as the clearest artistic problem" for artists of the period.4

This essay concerns the particular reaction of one member of this group: Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806-1867). Perhaps more than any other writer of his day, Willis worked out this artistic and personal dilemma in full view of the American reading public. The major concern in the chapters that follow is with the biography of a set of ideas and attitudes that Willis proffered to help Americans deal with their changing culture. Willis's response is particularly important, not because it was unique or because he was the first with such attitudes, but because it was widely disseminated and appreciated by silent Americans who saw his views as representative of their own unarticulated beliefs, desires, and aspirations. Willis created a popular literature and a highly visible personal life style that provided models of social behavior and good taste. It was Willis's particular interest in the symbolic values of the external world of fashion and taste that has made his prose a rich source for the analysis of the function, meaning, and importance certain aspects of the material world had for Americans of that
Because of the clear connections between Willis's social and aesthetic thought and the events of his personal and professional development, this essay has taken on a loosely biographical format. Nevertheless, the real focus is on a particular response to American life by one who presumed to live intently and critically in an age of bravado and confusion. Hence, the major episodes in Willis's life are intimately and intricately tied to the events of the era, and the biographical framework provided is designed to bring about a balance between Willis's personal and artistic growth and the larger cultural changes of the period. Ultimately, I believe, the pattern of Willis's life can be seen in part as a reflection of the cultural dilemma many Americans faced during that period. But here, however, I am more concerned with the process by which one man came to deal with the particular issues of class and taste and with his use of the tools of fashion to help establish social distinctions.


CHAPTER I

THE CREATION OF A CULTURAL COMMENTATOR:
1827-1836

With the exception of specialist literary historians, few remember "Natty" Willis, his voluminous writings, or the controversial life style he made so familiar to large numbers of Americans of his time. But in the time between his graduation from Yale in 1827 and the Civil War, Willis became perhaps the most conspicuous and widely read of American literary personalities. His publishing record bears witness to his popular appeal and to his commercial success. A complete bibliography of Willis's writings has not been compiled, but a survey of book titles in the National Union Catalog and some recently located unlisted titles and editions provide us with a good idea of his popularity. Willis's twelve poetry titles went through at least forty-nine editions; his twenty-six prose titles survived at least ninety-nine editions, and his published drama a total of six editions. Beyond this, Willis was editor or compiler of twelve other titles, mainly gift and souvenir books. Other literary activities included the editorship of six newspapers and journals and numerous contributions to publications other than his own.
During his lifetime, Willis's success was nothing less than phenomenal—but with his death came a sudden obscurity. Considering the volume of his prose it is no surprise that he seldom produced polished writing. But this fact notwithstanding, his subject matter was usually temporal in nature and did not lend itself to serious consideration by critics and later historians. During his lifetime critics gave him credit for slick and entertaining journalistic writing, but seldom failed to notice that its content was superficial and his style exaggerated and often tedious.

Willis's career and the rapid growth of the American reading public neatly coincided. The 1830's and 1840's saw the beginning of the great age of magazines—and it was to this sphere of publishing that the stylish and socially aggressive Willis was attracted. Almost all of his "books" are merely collections of previously published pieces from newspapers and journals. Although his first efforts were in the direction of poetry, using popular, standard romantic themes such as nature, religious feelings, and family life, Willis soon became aware that a comfortable living might be earned by writing short prose pieces for the popular magazine audience. In fact, "Willis was, perhaps, the first of our poets to prove that literature could be relied upon as a good business."² By 1840 he had branched out from poetry into a
full range of journalistic pieces, and his well received weekly commentaries were primarily responsible for his expanding readership.

Willis's characteristic prose was, throughout his career, most interesting for its social commentary; its chatty but authoritative discussions about the rules of etiquette, the nuances of fashion, and the behavior of the rich and the famous. Also delighting readers were the ubiquitous accounts of travel which ranged from the American back country to Old World cities. Such literature has seldom captured the attention of literary historians concerned with the seminal ideas and issues of the era, but in its very superficiality it provides a record of the rationale behind the external world of taste, fashion, and lifestyle that is useful in providing another level of appreciation of the real nature, in all its complexity, of the American culture of that era.

That complexity, however, is likewise found in the career of Willis himself, whose own meteoric rise to success paralleled the rise of the American Republic. It is important, therefore, to examine the early career of Willis, as many of his early experiences made lasting impressions and would return as themes in his later writings. It was also in these early years that Willis found his formula for
popular success—that is, integrating his own colorful life style with the themes and subjects of his journalism.

By the time of his graduation from Yale in 1827, Willis was already a prize-winning poet, and managed, in that same year, to convince the entrepreneur Boston publisher, S.G. Goodrich (Peter Parley) to publish a collection of his religious poetry. Goodrich was much taken with the twenty-one year old Willis and hired him, in 1828, to edit The Legendary, a new publishing venture "designed as a periodical, and to consist of original pieces in prose and verse, principally illustrative of American history, scenery, and manners." Goodrich's design and purpose were well suited to the young Willis who was quite patriotic, had a romantic interest in nature, and loved the world of the stylish and the socially prominent. It was only the first of many such editorial positions Willis would hold over the next quarter century.

This first effort was not a commercial success. "It was kindly treated by the press, which generously published without charge, the best pieces in full, saving the reading million the trouble of buying the book and paying for the chaff, which naturally was found with the wheat." Goodrich coolly remarked that "the time had not come for such a
publication." The lack of copyright laws would continue to be a problem for American writers and publishers, and the failure of the publication was Willis's initiation into the harsh world of literary publishing.

Goodrich, however, did not blame Willis for the failure and soon found him a position as editor and contributor to the second volume of The Token (1829), the Boston publisher's answer to the newest publishing fad—literary annuals. Willis edited The Token for only one year, but his contributions appear on occasion in succeeding years. The Token evolved, with the help of Willis, into a successful venture. In later life, Goodrich recalled that Willis's "articles were the most read, the most admired, the most abused, and the most advantageous to the work." Willis loved all the attention and the fact that he was abused in the critical press only served to keep his name and whereabouts in the public's consciousness—a factor which proved an asset to his commercial literary success. It seemed to be his special talent to be able to draw the public's attention to his controversial personality. The jealousy of less successful writers only added fuel to the discussions. Goodrich could conclude, in 1857, that Willis, "has been, I suspect, more written about than any other literary man in our history."
Willis's style, since it had so much appeal, should tell us something about the nature of the popular mind of the period. Perhaps the most perceptive comments on this aspect of Willis were written by Edgar Allan Poe, who well understood that merit alone does not insure success. Poe wrote, in May of 1846, for his famous series in Godey's Lady's Book entitled "The Literati of New York," "Whatever may be thought of Mr. Willis's talents, there can be no doubt about the fact that, both as an author and as a man, he has made a good deal of noise in the world-- at least for an American."8 More specifically, Poe conceded that Willis possessed literary talent, but that "two-thirds of his appreciation by the public should be attributed to those adventures which grew immediately out of his animal constitution."9 In Poe's estimation, Willis's intellectual capabilities were at best adequate for a success that depended so much on that personal style. He emphasizes his point by asserting that even the most successful of Willis's literary efforts, the "sketches" of society and locale in which his writing was "unequaled," achieved their effectiveness "for no other reason than that they afford him the opportunity of introducing the personal Willis-- or, more distinctly, because this species of composition is most susceptible of impression from his personal character."10
What then was the essence of that "personal character?" Poe identifies it as "fancy." This quality, Poe explained, Willis possessed "in an extraordinary degree; it is in fancy that he reigns supreme: this, more than any one other quality, and, indeed, more than all his other literary qualities combined, has made him what he is." In a lengthy footnote, Poe explained what he meant by the term "fancy," and in the process gave us an insight into the reason for the public's appetite for Willis and his writing. Poe delineated, for purposes of argument, four distinct levels of creative thought: imagination, fancy, fantasy, and humor. "The imagination is the artist of the four (in that) it selects (combinations) such only as are harmonious... the result, of course, is beauty itself." The fancy, however, has a special character of its own, occurring when the harmony of the combination is comparatively neglected, and when, in addition to the element of novelty, there is introduced the sub-element of unexpectedness-- when, for example matters are brought into combination which not only have never been combined, but whose combinations strikes us as a difficulty happily overcome, the result then appertains to the fancy, and is, to the majority of mankind, more grateful that the purely harmonious one-- although, absolutely, it is less beautiful (or grand) for the reason that it is less harmonious.

Poe could easily have changed the word fancy to that of...
picturesque, as that was the real nature of Willis's character and taste. Willis, with his commentary for American Scenery, published in 1840, emerged as one of the major popular interpreters of the picturesque mode, which for the writer himself was an aesthetic system that was indeed more than literary or visual, but was rooted in the personal style and character of the man himself.

Willis's talent for fancy, a second rate creative faculty in Poe's estimation, endeared him to the "majority of mankind," whose unsophisticated sensibilities responded more emphatically to the excessive, abnormal, less subtle "creative combinations" of the artist. Poe described, then, a man whose literary style, like his personality, was well suited to the taste of the majority. These characteristics, along with a personality that was also described as "impulsive, generous, bold, impetuous, vascillating, and irregularly energetic," made him out to be a living example of the picturesque. It is not surprising that such a man could capture the imagination and attention of the American public.

Although Willis's personal style was influential in helping him develop a large audience, the subjects of his prose had even more to do with his popular success. Both Willis and his readers were most interested in subjects that
permitted him to comment upon manners, taste, and "society." While many writers addressed themselves to these issues, Willis was especially appreciated because of his colorful and frank discussions of the implications of particular styles, fashions, or behavior in terms of social status. His readers could learn the meaning of their life style, the level of society and accomplishment that certain elements of material culture represented, and, ultimately, how to control the image of their own life as an aid to their social purposes. This was important in a period when technology and economic growth increasingly permitted many more Americans to achieve middle-class status—at least in terms of material well-being.

The nuances of the social system and the images of success and status among the socially prominent were issues that fascinated Willis even while still a student at Yale, where he was well known for being in the vanguard of fashion. The reaction of many in the conservative New Haven climate was predictably critical, but Willis seemed to relish the attention. It is probable that it was during these early years at Yale and the first few years in Boston after graduation that conflicts with the established social order increased Willis's awareness of the realities surrounding issues of class and social status. His early experiences
in this vein are worth noting.

It was only natural for the recent graduate to return to his hometown to begin his literary career as Boston was still the center of American literary publishing; besides, his father was an established publisher with experience and contacts helpful to the young writer. But his father was involved in somewhat conservative religious publishing and his son turned his interests to the more exciting and demanding upper-class literary circles. The young writer's talents and easy sociability were not received with open arms as he had hoped. While he did manage to claim the attention of some fashionable ladies, including Mrs. Harrison Gray Otis, the elite circles of Boston were generally unhospitable to the bright but flamboyant "Natty" Willis. His biographer, Henry A. Beers, noted that Willis was subjected to a great deal of private and public criticism of his personal habits, especially those that affronted the still residual Calvinistic beliefs of the established Boston community. Beers maintained that

Willis's position in Boston was in some respects a difficult one. His family connections were plain, good folks, not 'in society,' -- not, at least, in the literary society, which was Unitarian, or in the so-called aristocratic society, which was mainly either Unitarian or Episcopalian. Willis himself was socially ambitious, and these were the circles he wished to frequent.
Willis's stay in Boston ended with the financial failure of his *American Monthly Magazine*. He did not seem to have much talent for business management and the failure brought, Willis believed, unusually harsh criticism from his creditors. He was further embittered by his congregation reading him out of church for theatergoing. The good-looking and successful young literary star had expected acceptance into the best society of Boston. His rejection was a bitter pill to swallow. Like others before and after, Willis decided to leave Boston for the more cosmopolitan environment of New York City. As a token of disgust Willis decided to ignore "some $3,000 of debts" incurred in his last venture. A few years later, in 1835, the feeling had not subsided as he wrote in a letter to his mother that "the mines of Golconda would not tempt me to return and live in Boston."¹⁷ His difficulties with its closed "society" were not forgotten and remained as the inspiration for frequent discussions of social mobility in his later writings.

Shortly after his arrival in New York City in 1831, Willis joined his talents with those of George Pope Morris, successful editor of the *New York Mirror*. Like many writers of the day he found journalism lucrative and often the quickest way to success. One type of writing that had achieved wide appeal was the travel letter from abroad. Willis had
long desired to travel to the Old World, as it was standard procedure for aspiring artists of the time to seek inspiration from the romantic past. Morris quickly agreed to send Willis to Europe for the purposes of sending back "letters of travel" for weekly publication in the Mirror. Willis set out immediately for France, arriving in Le Havre in November of 1831. The first letter back appeared in the February 13, 1832 issue. The letters continued, often irregularly, due to the mails, for a period of four years, ending in January of 1836. As Morris had expected, they were a great success, even among Europeans. He proudly noted that "they were copied into five-hundred newspapers."18

These letters soon brought Willis an international reputation and solidified his public image as a cosmopolitan journalist well versed in the elements of fashionable life. As early as 1835, even before Willis had returned from Europe, the English publisher John Macrone offered an incomplete collection of the letters as Pencillings by the Way. Before Willis's death there would be seven more editions.

The literary marketplace was flooded with travel literature during this period and much of what Willis presented to his readers was similar to the efforts of other writers. But his real popularity stemmed from his concern for and
discussion of the life styles of the rich, famous, and cultured in European society. Americans of the period had become excessively defensive about their cultural shortcomings, especially as a result of their Tory detractors, and were eager for images of cosmopolitan life which they could imitate. In Europe, unlike Boston, Willis found that his talent and good looks permitted him to move with the "best society." The eagerness for the vicarious experience attracted readers to Willis, who provided them detailed and instructive accounts of the everyday life of "society." Such accounts were often criticized by those whose confidence or privacy had been betrayed--but controversy generally served only to broaden Willis's readership. Americans who aspired to lead more cultured lives could learn the subtleties of upper class existence from the observations of Willis, who, sensing himself an outsider, a token artist, was sensitive to the nuances of each occasion and provided a commentary well suited to the interests of the other "outsiders," his readers.

The European experience left Willis ambivalent about the best place to develop his talents. It was a dilemma common to many American artists who traveled to the Old World and indulged in a culture that America seemed to lack. He seriously considered staying on, hoping that with the benefit of a diplomatic appointment he might be able to continue his
travel and indulgence in more of the "best society." Yet he finally made the decision to return to America.

A number of factors were no doubt involved in this decision. Willis was quite patriotic and despite his acceptance in the circles of the upper classes, he retained at least a romantic appreciation of republicanism. He was also very aware of his large readership and realized the commercial possibilities his return might entail. As an artist he had his fling with the Old World; besides, it was the growing fashion for Americans to pay more and more attention to the romantic possibilities of the American natural landscape. At this time, Americans who had gone to study and travel in the Old World began looking back to America for themes and inspirations. As Willis would point out by the end of the decade, the New World, although lacking the mystery of ancient cultures, had its own special quality worthy of the same attention paid the Old World.  

In another sense it can be said that Willis returned because he was an American. For all the glamor and heady antiquity of the Old World, it was not without its faults, and on occasion Willis would betray his American self-righteousness. He could tell his readers, for instance, that the Palais Royal, despite its "Alladin-like magnificence," was
"the most corrupt spot, probably, on the face of the civilized world." In comparison, the cleanliness and order of Geneva reminded him of the New England "plain style" he fondly remembered. He would ignore the contradiction between his own worldliness and attention to fashion and his romantic appreciation of the plain and simple in other folk. A traveler's fondness for home grows and in four years time Willis was ready to go home to a place where he could be content. But often times it is the visceral reaction that most accurately pinpoints the roots of our motivation. Willis could not help letting his readers in on his deepest feelings and exposing the reason why many Europeans became Americans.

If ever I return to America, I shall make a journey to the west, for the pure refreshment of seeing industry and thrift. I am sick to the heart of pauperism and misery. Everything that is near the large towns in France is either splendid or disgusting. There is no medium in condition--nothing that looks like content--none of that class we define in our country as 'respectable.'

The European experience had great appeal to an artist who found himself much more appreciated among the elite circles of Europe than those of Boston. But for all his fascination with the cosmopolitan world, he recognized that the political and social problems in Europe were unappealing realities. Willis seems also to have recognized his own
conservatism and middle-class values, and although America had its flaws, he was finally convinced of its vast potential for the rise of a refined "respectable" class of citizens led in taste and sensibilities by accomplished artists and writers. From these early experiences Willis had learned the limits of social mobility and began to develop his role as a popularizer of artistically progressive taste for the growing American middle classes within the framework of social conservatism. Indeed, in later writings, Willis would severely chastise those who failed to recognize their own social limitations.
FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER I

5. Ibid., p. 258.
6. Ibid., p. 264.
9. Ibid., p. 10.
10. Ibid., p. 12.
11. Ibid., p. 13.
12. Ibid., p. 13.
16. Ibid., pp. 92-93.
17. Ibid., p. 99.
CHAPTER II
A RURAL EXPERIMENT:
1836-1846

In 1836, when Willis returned from England with his English bride, Mary Stace, his literary fame had already been firmly established. His popular appeal had been noticed by the London publisher, George Virtue, who saw the commercial possibilities of Willis providing the letterpress to a planned picturebook of American scenery with illustrations by William Bartlett. Willis signed a contract with Virtue shortly after his return and soon afterwards began a series of expeditions to the sites of Bartlett's picturesque drawings to gather the firsthand impressions and local lore necessary for the prose descriptions.

While traveling with Bartlett in the summer of 1837, the cosmopolitan Willis fell in love with a site near the confluence of Owego creek and the Susquehanna river in upstate New York. That same fall he purchased two hundred acres and a "picturesque" cottage. There he hoped to raise a family, continue in his literary pursuits, and indulge in an informal experiment in rural farm life. In weekly
letters to the New York Mirror Willis provided his town and city readers with a colorful and varied commentary on rural American life in the 1830's. Later collected as Letters from Under a Bridge (first edition, 1840), his writings during this period document the beginnings of Willis's struggle against what he called the "pocket aristocracy" and also his encounter with the first manifestations of change wrought by the transportation and industrial revolutions in America.

The idea of a poet with an urbane and cosmopolitan background retreating to the world of plainness and natural simplicity was not new. The importance of Willis's act, however, was that the larger reading public, not merely the literary circles, became involved in sharing his "encounter" with the pastoral life style. The Jacksonian years, with their social and political disruption, brought a distrust of cities, politics, money, and power— and Willis's personal and singular act of rejection became an act of popular interest to large numbers of Americans beginning to lament the loss of a "world gone by." Willis charmed his readers with reverent stories about nature and the lives of picturesque farm folk, lumberjacks, and raftsmen. They were treated to discussions of events in the life of a "token" farmer, whose cosmopolitan viewpoint and occasional misunderstandings of
rural practices often provided subjects for amusing anecdotes. The appeal of these "letters" was unmistakable. In modest but tasteful surroundings, close to nature, life went on without the tensions created by crowds, money getting, or the harsh voice of the common man. Rural readers could be entertained by a "slicker" in the country while city folk could vicariously enjoy the journalist's pastoral paradise.

Yet beyond the appeal of his descriptions of the picturesque locale, many readers were also interested in the particulars of Willis's life style—perhaps even more so than in his rustic neighbors. The well publicized model Willis created was a scaled-down version of a life style long familiar to "country gentlemen." Its appeal was not purely romantic as, by the 1840's, many aspects of such a life style were becoming increasingly possible for those middle-class families who had profited from the economic growth of the 1830's and 1840's.

An examination of Willis's life style provides evidence of what his readers found so appealing. The poet would spend part of the day helping or supervising his farm hands and day laborers. Later in the day he could retire to his favorite spot "under a bridge," where his thoughts could be collected for the "letters" to his editor and readers, or a
poem composed, if suitably inspired by some fortuitous event. Such a daily schedule was enhanced by frequent excursions to New York City for business, shopping, and pleasure. City friends and celebrity travelers, on the other hand, would often visit the cottage, "Glenmary," bringing news and cosmopolitan flavor. As a literary man of some means, though certainly not wealthy, Willis was not pressured by daily drudgery or business routine. His time was his own and his thoughts could wander, as a poet's should. Each day brought new adventures and excursions. One of his favorite activities, for instance, was seeking out ideal sites for picturesque villas for friends and visitors with like means and sensibilities. The experience at "Glenmary" was one for a man of leisure and means, one which indulged in both the rustic and cosmopolitan pleasures, one which accepted, in the end, the merits of both worlds while insulating itself from the detractions of each.

The conclusion that rural life of the kind Willis wrote about was only available to men of wealth and leisure seems inescapable. These factors were essential ingredients in overcoming the country's shortcomings and enjoying its benefits. As Willis pointed out, men who had to make a living off the land did not have "country freedom." But at the same time he also reminded his readers of the realities
of country living, especially that its pleasures were only for certain kinds of people.

Nature is prodigal of flowers, grapes are cheaper bought than raised, fruit idem, butter idem, (though you mayn't think so,) and, as for amusement— the man who cannot find it between driving, fishing, shooting, strolling, and reading, (to say nothing of less selfish pleasures,) has no business in the country. He should go back to town.¹

For himself, such an "out-of-doors life" permitted him to escape from the "narrow places and usages (he) had known in town," and had brought him a "degree nearer to Arcadian perfectability."² But in a more mundane context, Willis was responding to the beginning of a change from a producer to a consumer economy.

While such a search for "perfectability" had historically been largely the domain of the rich and the talented, Willis saw his own experiences as useful models for other Americans, particularly ones like himself with middle-class means and upper class taste. In a somewhat romantic conception of his audience, Willis identified those to whom his advice was addressed.

The most intense and sincere lovers of the country are citizens who have fled to rural life in middle age, and old travellers who are weary, heart and foot, and long for shelter and rest.
Both these classes of men are ornamental in their taste— the first because the country is his passion, heightened by abstinence; and the latter, because he remembers the secluded and sweet spots he has crossed in travel, and yearns for something that resembles them, of his own. To begin at the beginning, I will suppose such a man as either of these, in search of land to purchase and build upon. His means are moderate.3

It was this concern for the man of urban background, rural inclinations and moderate means that helped bring him his large readership. Willis was aware of the complex issues at stake and the disparity between what could be expected of him, a poet and man of sensibilities, and the average man. While he may have been unrealistic to expect many men of moderate means to be "weary" of travel, he was not wrong in assuming that many men, as soon as they could afford it, usually moved from the cities. Since the wealthy already had their country homes and did not need Willis to remind them of their benefits, the journalist/poet became a favorite of the aspiring and the parvenus, who by definition needed advice and counsel in matters of proper taste and behavior. It was to this group that Willis catered with his advice for the man of "moderate" means with the presumed sensibilities of a country squire. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Willis did not count himself a member of this group.

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To begin with, Willis felt that the middle classes were misled by literature describing the elegant and expensive estates and villas designed and popularized by Andrew Jackson Downing and Alexander Jackson Davis. While he shared Downing's view that modest, well designed homes in the fashionable taste would be available to men at all levels of society, most Americans, Willis found, regardless of their means, seemed to want copies of the fashion plate houses pictured in the design books. Few could be interested in the dressed up and reformed "cottages" because of the implications of social status associated with such dwellings. Willis reminded his readers, who were so enamored of villa architecture and country estates that "few books can be more expensively misapplied than the treatises on landscape gardening." He saw the Downing fashion as becoming the exclusive privilege of the wealthy--so much so that he was inspired to sardonically comment that his fanciful idea for a "new order of architecture," inspired by pillars of water at picturesque Trenton Falls, be passed on to Downing, who would "mention it, (for the use of some happy, extravagant dog, who can afford a whim or so,) in his next book on Rural Architecture." Willis could appreciate Downing's "elegant and tempting books," but it was his belief that not enough of the advice being passed out in such works was appropriate to
the needs of yeoman type farmers or the townsmen retired to the country. "Tell us in the quarterlies, if you will, what a man may do with a thousand acres and plenty of money; but I will endeavor to show what may be done with fifty acres and a spare hour in the evening-- by the tasteful farmer, or tradesman retired on small means." Willis perceived a void in the literature designed to guide the taste of rural Americans, but overlooked the important fact that Downing's popularity was generated and sustained by having his designs first appreciated and adopted by the wealthy and fashionable. Americans of more moderate means naturally wanted to use similar designs as symbols of their own economic and social achievement. In time, such imitative behavior deeply disturbed Willis, who saw these financially capable members of the middle class, those who could afford "villas," as contributing to a breakdown in the class system. Willis, who was an elitist despite his interest in men of moderate means, saw this as an assault on the integrity of the class structure. As a reformer he wanted improvement within the established social order. To his dismay, the merging of cultured taste with moderate means brought scaled-down versions of the country seats and partially achieved gentility rather than picturesquely improved farmhouses and cottages. Willis's confrontation with the aristocracy of wealth, with those who were spending their money to improve their social standing by
imitating the trappings of the upper class, began with his realization that more and more Americans were purchasing unearned and undeserved status. In the process it must have become clear to Willis that such trends tended to undermine his own accomplishments and status which he felt he had earned through talent and performance rather than wealth. The subject became one of Willis's frequent points of discussion, especially in his later years when he resided in the Hudson Valley.

On another level, beyond his growing frustration with the excesses of the newly rich, Willis's life at "Glenmary" was further confronted by important technological changes which brought threats to the pastoral idea he cherished. It was in this period that Willis's response to these changes form the genesis of his more comprehensive attitudes of the mid-century years.

Soon after his move to "Glenmary," much to his surprise, he found that the cosmopolitan spirit and commercial enterprise of the back country was much more highly developed than he had expected. His readers were informed that the town of Owego was quite worldly for being so remote. There one could find "body coat soirees," "ice cream and champaign," and tradesmen so up-to-date one need not go to
New York for modish hats, boots, or coats. Even as far out in the country as "Glenmary," Willis could perceive the inevitable and not entirely unwelcome compromise.

I had imagined, and continued to imagine for some weeks after coming here, that, so near the primeval wilderness, I might lay up my best coat and my ceremony in lavender, and live in fustian and a plain way. I looked forward to the delights of a broad straw hat, large shoes, baggy habiliments, and to leave the sigh or whistle without offence...

He wanted to indulge in the life of the "honest yeoman," to be clear of mortifications, envies, advice, remonstrance, coldness, misapprehensions, and etiquettes... but, alas! Wherever there is a butcher shop and a post office, an apothecary and a blacksmith, an 'arcade' and a milliner-- wherever the conveniences of life are, in short-- there has already arrived the Procrustes of opinion. Man's eyes will look on you and bring judgment, and unless you live on wild-meat and cornbread in the wilderness, with neither friend nor helper, you must give in to compromise-- yield at least half your independence, and take it back in commonplace comfort.

Willis was not entirely comfortable with this compromise. In another letter he told his readers that "If I am to be happy, my imagination must keep my body company, and both must be in the country, or both in town." But the
merging of the city and country was something that Willis would learn to appreciate. He was realistic enough to realize that even he, who had so deeply immersed himself in the rural life style, was vulnerable to the benefits of the inevitable compromise. When told by a railroad commissioner that in five years New York City will be but seven hours away, and a canal engineer boasted that "in three years I should run in a packet boat from my cottage to the tidewater," Willis's "breath was taken away." But the reader is also told that "with a little time, I dare say, I shall come to think it a... pleasant intelligence."¹¹

Willis was perceptive enough to realize that the powerful new forces of the cities and technological growth could not be stopped. For all of his celebration of the pastoral life in the picturesque countryside, he was quick to recognize that what Americans really wanted was to have the best of both worlds, a "city of the West," as Emerson described it.¹² That the city would come to the country was inevitable. Willis recognized that the "metropolis is the great throbbing heart in whose pulsations the distant hand and foot have sympathy."¹³ The task for men was to mediate the two forces in some happy arrangement that gratified the needs of men. For this reason Willis was an active proponent of open air spaces and rural enclaves in American cities.
He pointed out to his readers, for instance, that Philadelphia was especially enhanced by the picturesque Laurel Hill Cemetery (begun in 1836), which, Willis was convinced, indicated a "purer growth in our national character than politics and money getting."  

Because the bulk of Willis's prose during this period focused on the great American landscape and aspects of rural life, it is easy to assume that Willis had an anti-urban bias. Yet it was his belief that American cities were destined to be the major factor in the definition of American culture of the future. Much of his popularity and success was predicated upon the fact that in his protests against a changing culture he did not categorically exclude or include any one element of the culture from appreciation or consideration.
FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER II

2 Ibid., p. 21.
3 Ibid., p. 176.
4 Ibid., p. 176.
5 Ibid., p. 354.
6 Ibid., p. 175.
7 Ibid., p. 125.
8 Ibid., p. 125.
9 Ibid., p. 126.
10 Ibid., p. 107.
11 Ibid., p. 106.
14 Willis, Rural Letters, p. 154.
CHAPTER III

NEW YORK CITY AND THE WORLD OF FASHION:
1846-1852

Willis moved from "Glenmary" in the summer of 1846, ending his romantic, rural indulgence. A series of events: the failure of his publisher and the need to make new literary arrangements, and the failure to receive an expected inheritance after the death of his father-in-law, forced Willis back to New York City and the heart of literary commerce. For the next ten years Willis would call New York City his home as he expanded his literary and publishing career.

Earlier, in April of 1843, he had rejoined his old associate, George Pope Morris, as joint editor of The New Mirror, successor to the well known New York Mirror. From the mid-forties until his death in 1867, Willis was associated in one way or another with Morris and the New York magazine/newspaper world. His conspicuous presence in the city helped bring more commercial successes and he soon found himself with an income larger than usual for an American writer. As a result, he could indulge his fondness for

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the cosmopolitan life in the city which had emerged by that time as the leading cultural and commercial center of America. Astutely, he focused his writings on the fast moving personalities, life styles and social trends.

But, despite Willis's attraction to the best of what cosmopolitan life could offer, his experiences in the city only brought an intensification of his conservative feelings. Aware of his large readership and the power of the New York press, Willis began to show more concern with the larger social issues of the day in the hope that he could help give direction to a culture that seemed to be developing a distorted value system. We must remember that for all his charm, wit, and good looks, and for all his good taste, Willis was a middle-class, New England Congregationalist in origin. He had a strong sense of community and firmly believed in the positive benefits of a stable social order. Yet he was also an artist who saw himself apart from the community, a man with special talents and, therefore, authorized to perform a special role in the society.

Willis had reason to be confident in his presumed social status. While in Europe in the early 1830's, he had been received cordially and with genuine interest in some of the most dazzling literary and aristocratic circles. One could do this in societies which had a tradition of
recognizing and rewarding genius. Willis greatly appreciated his entre into the "best" society. But when he tried the same thing in New York, just as in Boston, he found a somewhat different response. He found the newly powerful "aristocracy of wealth" unconcerned with the "aristocracy of the mind." Willis, who had previously enjoyed the benefits of meritocracy abroad, found the New York elite too often defined by displays of wealth. Such a condition deeply disturbed him and prompted his concerted efforts to educate the public in the proper criteria for judging a person's worth. These efforts to educate became a pervasive theme in his writings during the 1840's and 1850's.

Perhaps the most impassioned of his attacks on the American materialistic bent and its social implications was made in a published address given before the New York Lyceum in 1844. Under the guise of a "Lecture on Fashion," Willis took the opportunity to attack the improperly defined class structure. His concern was not focused, however, on the struggle of the poor for their economic and social equality, but on those with superior mental capabilities whose talents were being ignored by wealthy New Yorkers. Fashion was indeed Willis's stock and trade, and with it, he believed one should move unrestricted through society. As he bluntly stated, "Fashion is a position in society-- attained by
different avenues in different countries— but, however arrived at, giving its possessor consequence in common resort, value in private life, authority in all matters of taste, and influence in everything." Recalling his experiences in France and England in the early thirties, Willis lectured his audience on the differences between the workings of fashion in those countries as opposed to what was happening in America, or at least in New York City. In Paris, admission to the sphere of fashion, in the final analysis, had but one "homogeneous and predominating principle in it— but one invariable 'open sesame,' and that is, INTELLECT!" In Paris, the influential leaders of fashionable society were living authors, editors of newspapers, active politicians, resident diplomatists, and talented clergy. Willis gave France highest honors for it was there one would find the "indisputable republic of intellect."

England, on the other hand, was a country where rank was "more highly prized" and wealth more commonplace, yet neither was a guarantee to the possessors that he could be secure in the realm of fashion. The English, for Willis at least, had a much more complex system than the French. During his visits to England, he had enjoyed acceptance in some of the most fashionable circles of London. But in his
opinion, the English "men of genius, unless newly risen, are seldom to be found in vogue among the exclusives." The "passport to pre-eminence" was given to those who had "beauty of person combined with assurance and a natural air of superiority." The English chose a "balance of the physical and intellectual endowments" which not surprisingly, Willis felt, might be a better idea than the French system which concentrated on "particular qualities of the brain."

The appeal of this English practice where those with both beauty and genius may enter and take the places of wealthy and wellborn members who do not measure up to standards, was simply that it encouraged social stability. "A revolution cannot put down such a class," wrote Willis, that takes "grafts from the strong and the beautiful" to add to its "garden of superiority." For comparison, Willis summarized the current requirements for fashionableness and consequence in New York City (reminding his audience that his remarks applied only to New York as in other cities such as Boston, Philadelphia and Albany the "natural claims to aristocracy have, at least, a hearing"). Willis noted that in the last "fifteen or twenty years... the old aristocracy of the Knickerbockers has been shoved aside by the enormous increase of wealthy and pretentious population." Such a "social transition (is) unexampled for extent and rapidity."
Innovations, whether commercial, scientific, or social occurred with such rapidity that the Americans "have beaten England and France in progressive civilization and elevation, three centuries in one." But progress brought social upheaval that was directly related, Willis felt, to the loss of effective leadership from a qualified elite that would have brought stability and direction to American society.

On the matter of who really were the fashionables or the elite in New York, Willis admitted that "no one circle confessedly holds the power." The old families of New York seemed to have dropped from sight, or the few members of which who remained did not claim favor according to their descent. Indeed, Willis observed, "I may venture to say there is an instinctive hostility to the assumption of consequence by old families..." The political leaders, as well, instead of setting the fashion seemed to be the victims of "fashionable indifference." Nor did publishers, men of the bar, scientists, or distinguished artists have any clear impact on the community as members of a recognized elite. If none of these qualifications had given consequence enough to men to form a "principle of fashion," what then, Willis inquired, were the requirements?

For Willis, the title of New York fashionable was not deserved by those who currently held it because fashion
was not merely a function of one's ability to display wealth effectively. He lamented that the social elite were the extravagant, the "conspicuous in expense" who were often difficult to identify because they come and go, rising and falling with the 'stock.' To Willis's dismay, anybody could belong "who spends up to the mark." Listeners and readers were advised, as citizens of a republic, that there should be a "rebellion against unnatural authority." Willis was worried that without a fashionable class of superior citizens, America was certain prey for the "monster," which Willis identified as "unexamined, unauthorized, uncontrolled PUBLIC OPINION," an opinion that did not benefit from the consideration and approval of the trusted aristocracy of "fashionable" men. It should be no surprise to us that New York City should have been the scene for such a vision, with its massive influx of immigrants, rising crime, increase in poverty, and resultant anxiety. The vast wealth of many New Yorkers during the period contributed to a large, but Willis would argue, dysfunctional and irresponsible elite who retreated to their clubs, country residences, and materialism.

The proper aristocrat, Willis argued, should be in the vanguard of new ideas and set the standards for behavior by which all others would benefit. Willis hinted at the responsibilities of such men. "Discussion, enquiry, active
ridicule of false pretention, and generous approbation of that which is truly admirable, are means-- ample means-- in our hands, to make it (the American aristocracy) what we will." Through this process is created an "oracle" that could "crowd mammon from our altars." Willis believed America had the potential for such an aristocracy. If Americans would just follow the patterns set by writers and artists like himself, who brought conservative good taste, education, and imagination to the issues of the day, the quality of American life would be improved. Willis returned to this subject frequently, and despite the characteristic lightness of his prose, one can sense his bitterness about the American system of reward.

With the beginning of The Home Journal in 1846, his role as a broker for the dissemination of proper taste and fashion enlarged. The new publication's statement of purpose firmly asserted the editor's desire to "furnish a paper by which families can be kept up with the times." To accomplish this, Willis moved even further away from the strictly literary scene of his early career and concerned himself more with the broad spectrum of American cultural activity-- a necessity for editing a publication designed to "suffice for families that wish to take but one paper." It is difficult for us now to accurately measure the impact
of Willis's opinions on "society" on his largely middle-class readers, but there is no question that The Home Journal "exerted a great deal of influence" and was a "favorite of the fashionable world."[4]

His popularity was predicated upon a number of factors, but not the least was his constant and close attention to the nuances of the external world of fashion as they related to a person's social status. As a self-appointed arbiter of taste, he created a role for himself as a guide in the ever changing world of fashion. Reader acceptance of his posture well served his ego, his pocketbook, and his social philosophy.

Willis's favorite target for criticism was the parvenu taste that seemed to increasingly dominate the world of fashion in New York. Whether it be in a play, a poem, a "letter," a sketch, or an essay, one does not have to read far to discover that Willis consistently returned to discussions of social class and the elements of taste and behavior through which it is defined. A catalog of the ideas Willis presented to his readers can be found, for example, in one sketch "drawn under a thin veil of fiction," entitled "An Uptown Crisis; or, Mrs. Luther Leather's First 'Friday Morning,'" in which Willis depicts the comic pretentiousness
of the ambitious wife of an unfashionable, rich businessman. With heavy handed satire, he describes a parvenu's attempt to enter the fashionable circles of New York "society" by inviting selected members of the social leadership to her home during calling hours. The scene is set in a "new four-story house, within fashionable reach of Union Square." With "two drawing rooms," "glass door handles," and a "showy French clock wound up for the first time," it is clear that Mrs. Leathers was an upstart. Willis explains that it was standard procedure for such ladies to have "one fashionable male friend--her counsellor in all matters of taste, and the condescending guide of herself and her husband's plebeian millionaire through the contempts which form the vestibule to 'good society.'" In this case the male friend, Mr. Cyphers, was a "dwindled remainder" of an "old family," with a "genteel ugliness of personal appearance" and an utter lack of ability to do anything useful that was not connected to the "art of gentility." In Willis's "meritocracy," of course, Mrs. Leathers and Mr. Cyphers could never have joined the fashionables, and Willis cleverly demonstrates the foolishness involved in selecting elites who qualify on one basis alone.

While Mr. Cyphers (Mr. Nothing) and Mrs. Leathers (Mrs. Thick Skin) discuss the subtleties of a proper reception call upstairs, the millionaire himself dines on a plain but
hearty meal in the basement without the aid of a servant and in the company of a "hunchback girl of nineteen or twenty," whom he had saved from the poor house. Mr. Leathers cared little about what was going on upstairs, but rather preferred the "real" human relationship with a talented and intelligent hunchbacked young woman who offered "genuine" friendship. In the outside world Mr. Leathers was a very successful stockbroker, but despite his economic status he was not deluded into thinking he could ever attain the "refinement" of the truly elite. "Too sensible a man to play a losing game at anything, he had stifled his desire to shine, and locked down the natural chivalry, for which, with his lack of graces, he was so certain to lack appreciation." His satisfaction would come from his relationship of the heart with Lucy and from controlling the financial destinies of those who had "rejected and exiled him." Willis's final point is made with an ironic twist. Mrs. Leathers's most coveted visitor called because her husband was in the basement begging Mr. Leathers to save him from financial ruin and public ridicule, and not, as the neighbors had conveniently assumed, because Mrs. Leathers could command a social call from one of New York's social leaders. Willis condemned an aristocracy whose wealth was tenuous, who were enslaved by the world of appearances, and who had become more than they deserved. Those who did deserve the best
had, not surprisingly, taste, talent, and good looks just like Willis himself.

Willis's critique of the parvenu taste was not limited to the indirect comment often found in his short fiction, but was often the subject of instructive essays on alternatives to the prevailing New York City taste. Indeed, he used The Home Journal as an informal organ of the forces opposed to what Thorstein Veblen later called "conspicuous consumption."

One such essay that well demonstrates the tone of Willis's writings on such subjects as architecture, dress, manners, and art is one that intended to instruct his readers on "the moral of furniture." Americans were advised that they should begin their efforts to create a fashionable drawing room by looking to England for their example, for there, "not two drawing-rooms look alike, (while) the twenty thousand drawing rooms of New York are all stereotyped copies, of one out of three or four styles." Willis did not lose the opportunity to criticize the American method of furnishing a house--a procedure where the seller made the decision as to what furnishings were provided and also where they were placed in the rooms. Willis much preferred Americans to follow the English example of trying to create a "home" rather than a showplace. And even in England, when
the wealthy wanted to create a showplace, they did not rely upon the taste of the seller, but rather on the designs of an "educated person whose profession it is." Readers were instructed that the most important feature of a well furnished home was its avoidance of any appearance of "newness." In England, Willis reminded them, new furniture is "repulsively associated" with "people of low origin." The English would never dream of going to a vast warehouse of cabinetmaking or upholstery, and "finding all they want in a day." Not only did the old furnishings which had affectionate associations appeal more to the English, the English also attempted to make their drawing rooms look unlike other people's. American homes, for Willis, were too often symmetrically arranged, hence lacking in visual interest, and were too often, due to a "formal emptiness," lacking in the "home associations" that gave quality to home life. Willis suggested, in explanation of these conditions, that the "facility with which families break up" and the readiness Americans showed to escape their own history, contributed to these conditions. And again, as in his Lecture on Fashion, Willis pointed to the role the "elite of the mind" should play in remediying these conditions. "The culture of HOME ASSOCIATIONS... is one of those cultures for which poetry and the pulpit might improovingly and patriotically join, for its popularization and promotion."
Although Willis's conservative reaction reached a wide readership, he was only one of several New York magazinists to chastise the public for their imitative and showy taste. As early as 1840, Edgar Allan Poe made much the same point as Willis about furnishings in American homes. The English, again, reigned "supreme" compared to the French who were too enamored of marble and color or compared to the Yankees who were simply "preposterous." Reminding those Americans who were creating an aristocracy of wealth that "the true nobility of blood... rather avoids than affects that mere costliness in which a PARVENU rivalry may at times be successfully attempted," Poe hoped Americans would see that "magnificence and beauty (were) two entirely separate ideas." As an example of what he felt to be a tasteful and stylish chamber, Poe described for his readers an expensive, but not extravagant or ostentatious interior. It was conservative in the sense that it was without visual complexity, without "brilliant effects," and conveyed warmth and repose. A so-called "well-furnished" American interior of the period, Poe argued, was "directly offensive to the eye of the artist." The implication is the same as Willis's. In America, the artist, the poet, and the cultured man, were excluded or ignored in discussions about the aesthetic quality of American homes. Americans had turned instead to showrooms on Broadway and to the aristocracy of wealth for
their models, ignoring the advice of thoughtful observers.

Other critics of the flashy New York taste included James Fenimore Cooper. In 1838 Cooper published *Home as Found*, perhaps America's first "novel of manners," and directly attacked the prevailing New York taste. He was followed by numerous others including the influential George William Curtis, editor of the Whiggish *Putnam's Magazine* and author of the famous "Potiphar Papers," satirical sketches of New York fashionables and their behavior. Such critics were joined by scores of foreign travelers whose narrative accounts seldom lost an opportunity to note the preoccupation of Americans with matters of fashion and taste.

But Willis, unlike most critics, indulged in frequent and lengthy instruction in alternatives to those aspects of behavior he found distasteful. This was to Willis's advantage as his popularity was largely based on his assumed role as arbiter of taste. While the upwardly mobile depended upon him to pass judgment upon the latest fashions and ideas, Willis catered as well to the middle class, or, as he called it, the "respectable" class, those tied to the economic and social status quo who found comfort in his rhetoric advocating the "meritocracy." For these readers Willis provided a kind of inspirational literature as he reminded them that upward mobility was possible for those who
qualified, that men of merit need not be extravagant in their spending, that the "plain style" did not mean that one was poor, and that good taste and "fashion" could be available to all who could read.

Willis was himself a model by which his readers could measure their own potential and their own success. The difficulty in interpreting the real meaning of Willis and his popularly expressed ideas about fashion and social class comes when we observe that Willis was attempting to integrate the desires of the larger public with its democratic aspirations into an earlier social system designed for the few, and into a period when a natural hierarchy of men's talents was assumed. His biographer, Beers, cites in part the remarks of R.H. Stoddard, a poet acquaintance who noted that "Mr. Willis belonged to a past school of men. He had the ways and tastes of a more isolated and restricted society than belongs to our day, when fortunes are fusing men and manners into one great glittering ball that rolls through the year, before us and over us...."9

It is clear that Willis fancied himself an artist and a gentleman in these old fashioned terms and important changes during the 1840's and 1850's made such a self-concept possible. Edward Cady has pointed out that historically, since the Renaissance, increased wealth among nations
has traditionally had a direct relationship to the concept of the "gentleman" as it emerged as a "loophole" through which the monied middle class could move upward in previously inflexible class systems. It should not be surprising, then, that the increased wealth and new fortunes that resulted from the rapidly growing economy of New York City in the 1840's would bring an increase in concern for the proper definition of a "gentleman." The older colonial class system was being challenged by the power of wealth. Willis's role was a major one in that with his reputation as artist, writer, cosmopolitan, and man of taste, he was instrumental in helping the upwardly mobile form "right" opinions and behavior patterns that would give them credibility in the social world. But significantly, the concept of the natural aristocrat was essentially conservative in nature, as Willis had already noted; accepting the talented from the lower ranks of society to fill the upper ranks only helped a stable social order through co-optation of potential threats to the system.

On another level, Willis's outrage at the failure of the bourgeois taste to meet the standards of aristocratic cultivation left him with the conclusion that his criticism and instructive efforts were futile and misconstrued. Willis could not escape his own family history, and despite his
advocacy of a natural aristocracy, the realities of the social system still submitted him to the disapproval of many of the established elites, including Cooper, who despised the Whiggish New York journalists who posed as elites. Cooper's dislike was based on his observation that men like Willis catered to the *nouveau riche* culture hounds even as they constantly disparaged their behavior. The contradiction was not hard to see. For all his conservative rhetoric, Willis was still known as one of the flashiest and most fashionable men to be seen on the streets of New York.

Cooper's idea of a proper aristocrat was based on the premise that such men should ignore the world of taste and fashion. But Willis could not be so aloof from the social milieu. For the middle class, including himself, it was still a vicious battleground where money and emotions ran wild and many men found themselves in the difficult situation of having to espouse the idea of equality to give credence to their own status while having to reject the idea of absolute equality because it would check their own aspirations for upward mobility.

Willis's personal and public solution was to bolster and control the idea of quality and make it unassailable by the forces of quantity. As a middle-class artist he could only protect himself by defining the character of the elite
in terms that precluded easy application from the parvenus. His advocacy of an aristocracy of the mind, while commendable as a better role model for the growing middle class than the parvenus, was also a gesture of defensiveness. Likewise, it is not surprising that his large readership could find comfort in the knowledge that one did not have to be rich to be truly "cultured" and could themselves create, with Willis's guidance, something even the parvenu's money could not buy.
FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER III

1 Willis, Lecture on Fashion, p. 12.
2 The Home Journal, 2, No. 3 (21 November 1846), p. 2.
3 Ibid.
9 Beers, N.P. Willis, pp. 228-29.
CHAPTER IV

THE SUBURB FOUND AND EXPLAINED:
1852-1867

Although Willis's years in New York City had brought him commercial success and an ever increasing readership, an old health problem, generally described as "frail constitution," was frequently aggravated by the cool, moist coastal air of the seaport city. He was constantly on the lookout for places where his health would improve, and after a visit to the tropics in 1852 did nothing to bolster his condition, he finally decided to return to the Hudson Highlands where he had spent the summer of 1850 in relative comfort. Again finding the air of the "Highland Terrace," sixty miles north of New York City, better for his health, he decided to build a home on a picturesque site overlooking the Hudson near the village of Cornwall. He named the site "Idlewild."

The rationale behind this decision was presented to his readers in the context of his description of the "Highland Terrace," a "ten miles square" rise on the west bank of the river above Butter Hill. The physical attributes of the "Highland Terrace," Willis proclaimed, made it an ideal
location for a "revolutionizing change" in the life style of Americans. The wonders of the transportation revolution permitted a new concept, "viz:-- homes in the country and lodgings in town, instead of homes in town and lodgings in the country." "Taste, Study, and Luxury, we repeat, are about removing to the country." His own earlier experiences at "Glenmary," which had been an attempt to mediate between his needs for both city and rural life, led him to conclude by mid-century that Americans will come to prefer only "such rural life as leaves the pleasures and advantages of a city within reach." Life in the country, he had found, had its disadvantages, the most important being its "effect on the mind," which forced men into "narrow" and "egotistical" world views, and insulated them from the "liberalizing and generalizing influences" associated with city life. Willis advocated that a social and artistic life was best in urban centers while an aesthetic and family life was more appropriate for a rural setting. It was all possible now that "science (had) so far reduced distance that we may mix town and country life in such proportion as pleases us." This had not been possible at "Glenmary," which had been more of a retreat than a home.

Willis's celebration of this new life style had only begun with the brief rationale first published in The Home
Book of the Picturesque. From the time of his arrival in Cornwall until the outbreak of the Civil War, the journalist lived the life of a convalescent, and with the exception of his one novel, Paul Fane, almost all of his writing during these years centered on the creation and working out of his new life style at "Idlewild." Before his death, Willis would write hundreds of "letters" from "Idlewild" to the readers of the Home Journal about many subjects including "the shaping of a home on the banks of the Hudson." These were later collected in two volumes: Outdoors at Idlewild (1854) and The Convalescent (1859).

After carefully selecting the site, Willis turned to the currently fashionable architect Calvert Vaux, recently of the firm of Downing and Vaux, for assistance in designing his suburban residence. Andrew Jackson Downing had perished in a steamboat mishap in 1852, but his colleague Vaux continued work in the same picturesque tradition of Gothic and Italian revival styles originally popularized by Downing and enthusiastically supported by Willis. Although "Idlewild" no longer stands, the house with its floor plans and description was included in Vaux's Villas and Cottages of 1857. Vaux's remarks, written in 1855, give us an idea of Willis's role in the creation of what by then had already become a Hudson River landmark.
"Idlewild" was first described as a "simple picturesque country house" although it had eleven bedrooms and was situated on seventy unfarmed acres. Vaux reminded his readers that Willis himself contributed much to the planning of the house and grounds, but characteristically, "seemed to take more interest in accommodating the house to the fancies of the genius of the place than in any other part of the arrangement." Willis was greatly concerned with getting the most advantage out of the location--one which indeed had great potential with its long vistas overlooking Newburgh Bay and "Butter Hill" (which Willis promptly renamed "Storm King"). Near the house was a cavernous ravine through which flowed the dramatically cascading Canterbury Creek.

Although the house was clearly an impressive sight when seen from the well-travelled Hudson, Willis and Vaux intended it should be, as well, a "plain, roomy cottage residence," and should not display the showy newness that would conflict with its naturally picturesque situation. Indeed, the new house was made to look not new, points of view were not sacrificed, and time was not lost in waiting for young trees to grow in place of old ones that would have had to be removed for the sake of a prospect... (the result being) Mr. Willis's house looked like an old familiar settler almost before the roof was on...³
It is clear that Willis did not want his house to communicate that "showy newness" associated with homes of the parvenus, but rather wanted to have the house identified with "old money" and "old families." But the fact that the house on its site was quite impressive did not escape Vaux, who was aware that despite Willis's attempt to create a conservative image, some were likely to perceive it in the wrong terms. "Idlewild," in its location "high up among the trees," he noted, might be compared to the "strong-hold" of a "medieval knight," and a "little imagination may easily transmute the simple domestic cottage into the turreted and battlemented castle." Vaux well understood the popular romantic imagination and hence took the opportunity to remind his readers that the romantic associations of old castles were not "in reality, either touching or true." Vaux noted that "a nobler phase of poetic thought, and more courteous chivalry properly belong to this freer country and more civilized era." Willis's house should represent, Vaux argued, the same "beauty of outline and color" and "picturesqueness of grouping fully equal to that which was realized by the barons of yore..." But, since it was American, it had a "different spirit to guide it" and must be viewed from "the proper point of view."

Vaux's hope that Americans would not fail to see
beyond the image was seldom realized, as Willis later would frequently lament. Willis had hoped that he and other "arbiters of taste" such as Downing, would be able to mix the old standards of design and beauty with the newer democratic spirit-- the result being a country of "art loving republicans." But these men were not altogether successful in helping Americans make the subtle decisions necessary for homes that were stylish as well as simple and republican. Both Willis and Vaux were using many of the ideas of the Englishman J.C. Loudon as they had been popularized by Andrew Jackson Downing. Those ideas included a hierarchical system of structures of refined design that in their scale and elaboration reflected the economic and social status of their owners. To Americanize these ideas, Downing, and Willis as well, had inserted a more insistent concern for the needs of the large American middle class. But it is nevertheless true that "the kind of living which Downing (and Willis) admired was most easily realized in the homes of the educated and the prosperous." Vaux's remarks betray his awareness that the image of Willis's home could easily contradict the rhetoric of conservatism and modesty in which the new home was "explained." It was so stylish and so picturesquely handsome that Americans who saw it would naturally assume it to be the home of an upper class citizen. Vaux's fear was not without basis since the fascination Americans held with such
elaborate houses and landscaping was rooted not so much in an appreciation of their aesthetic quality but in what they symbolized in terms of social class. The houses and the elaborate landscapes they occupied did in fact represent the taste of the upper class— they were owned by men who could afford them and who also had the education and sensibilities to regulate their own quality of life.

Despite the concern Willis and others showed for men of moderate means, such ornamental homes and indulgent life styles were above the standards of simple republicans. Indeed, Willis took the time to remind his readers, before they became too intrigued with the possibility of creating their own "paradise," that it was in the domain of the rich and talented where such life styles were enjoyed in their perfected form. He took "pains to specify" that his advice was addressed to a "certain class," to

those who have their time in some degree at their own disposal— who have competent means for luxurious independence— who have rural tastes and cosmopolitan refinements rationally blended— who have families which they wish to surround with the healthful and elegant belongings of a home, while, at the same time they wish to keep pace with the world, and enjoy what is properly and only enjoyable in the stir of cities— for this class— the class, as we said before, made up of Leisure, Refinement, and Luxury— modern and recent changes are preparing a new theory
of what is enjoyable in life. It is a mixture of city and country, with the home in the country.\textsuperscript{5}

As Hudson River suburban villas became the standard among the upper economic classes they also became tools used by the middle classes to define one's place in the social system. Houses had always provided evidence of one's wealth and social status in the past, but with the rise of living standards among the middle classes in the purportedly democratic social system, the subtle and not so subtle distinctions of social status became a matter of even more intense concern. It is not surprising, then, that most Americans chose to ignore Willis's suggestion about such estates being for the leisure classes and looked for hints from the "fashionables" that they too could use as evidence of their arrival in the upper economic strata of society. The importance of "Idlewild" in this respect is clearly documented by Willis's observation that during the summer months perhaps "fifty strangers a day" came by to observe his residence and grounds overlooking the Hudson.\textsuperscript{6}

While probably few visitors were taken in by Willis's claim that his home was modest, it is clear that Willis did not count himself among the wealthy. The cost of his home was underwritten by an inheritance from the estate of his father-in-law and the seventy acres were purchased cheaply
from a farmer who found them useless for his purposes. He also purchased the land before his own writings made it a fashionable area and therefore an increasingly expensive location for suburban villas.

But the image of wealth that "Idlewild" gave was inescapable and Willis, while enjoying the attention he received with his cottage/villa, was concerned with the intense interest shown by parvenus. From the letters and visitors Willis received, he learned that much of his instruction to the American public had been misinterpreted. At one point he felt obliged to comment to his readers that

I have often thought of preaching a sermon on the one stereotype idea with which city people select and model a home in the country. From the numbers who call on and write to me for information as to the sites for residences hereabouts, I am, perhaps, more in the way of knowing what is usually sought. They all want a villa, or its capabilities:—parks and lawns; beautiful view from the portico; barn and outbuildings out of sight; gravel walks and flower gardens, groves, gardens, and a fountain... But is there no other class of seekers of new homes in the country?

With New York City only a few hours away by train or steamboat, his life at "Idlewild" was clearly more cosmopolitan than at the earlier "Glenmary." But the token farm life and the fascination with the rural ideal still had great appeal to him. Willis, despite "Idlewild," reminded his
rural readers that their existing homes should not be forsaken, but rather should be improved by cultured taste. Even at "Idlewild," a civilized residence with a drawing room and a library, he felt the need to be close to his horses and cows for the "animal magnetism" which made their company so agreeable. In fact, after building his new Gothic "cottage," Willis would tell his readers that

my own sympathy is rather with a place that looks like a farm, an old one. A new building is rather a drawback. I would rather take any house, of whatever shape, and, by a few very easy and uncostly alterations, make it look picturesquely homely.

But, importantly, Willis's "Idlewild" was a fashionable "new" house and not an improved farmhouse. His readers and visitors perceived a difference between his creation at "Idlewild" and what he suggested for the middle class. For all his conservative advice to the middle class and for all his romantic ideas about the proper lodging for a poet, he could not resist the trappings of a suburban squire in a class apart from the masses, educated to appreciate the finest and well-off enough to afford it. His attempt to make it all seem much humbler than it was did not fool the public who saw it as the perfected suburban villa with concomitant life style. Its image was impressive, enviable, and
inspirational, but attainable by very few.

Much of what he wrote during the years at "Idlewild" praised the qualities, both moral and picturesque, of the local population of the "Highland Terrace." City readers were told of the talents of local craftmen and the exploits of local farmers who still remembered the Revolution and the majestic Washington. But despite his unbridled praise of the qualities of the "Highland Terrace" and his invitation to others to join in with his new suburban lifestyle, his emotional responses to the changes taking place along the Hudson betray his conservative sensibilities—he real reasons for celebrating the remains of the rural life he had found when he first came to "Idlewild."

In the summer of 1853, in his second year of residence at his new home, he already found himself defending the integrity of the area from the ravages of economic and technological growth.

Were it not for the proposed railroad on the Hoboken side of the Hudson (which will at once thoroughly us into the featureless come-at-ables of the rest of this valley of hurry), we should remain a rare shelf of country-life still untainted—domestic and economic ruralizing still to be found, here, for quiet families and lovers of unceremonious seclusion. We may last simple, for a while yet, it is true—but I cannot help croaking over the inevitable foreshadowings of 'improvement in the
vicinity,' however much my neighbors may rejoice to the prophetic dollars it adds to the prices of their lands. With no deliberate leisure—no contemplative repose to strengthen the inward structure of character, and mortar into proportion the broken edges of events—life becomes a mere scaffolding of destinies un-built, loosely incomplete, and unworthily slight and temporary. I dread more industry hereabouts. I would patriotically oppose any more stir, any more hurry, any more of what could call for larger shop signs, fresh paint and 'business enterprise.'

It was increasingly evident that "a class who can afford to let the trees grow is getting possession of the Hudson," and although Willis thought that homes with elaborate landscaping would embellish the Hudson's banks, the wealth of such a class would bring increased commerce—a factor Willis could not abide. The "natural aristocrat" living among farmers in a picturesque and healthy environment was threatened with progress. He thought that he had escaped the city when he found this nearby enclave on the Highland Terrace, but he had no sooner settled in when he realized that it was already near the end of an era.

Perhaps the most evident element of change that disturbed Willis was the retreat of the old farming families from the banks of the river. The poet was informed by one of his neighboring farmers that he had to move his farm "twenty miles farther back, where a man could afford to
farm. The farmers could sell the expensive riverfront property for enough to capitalize larger ventures in the western areas of the river counties. Willis lamented that these families would lose the scenic quality of the river and the human activity of the river thoroughfare. He also realized that the steamboat landings and rail stations brought city ways and city problems and this was something to be avoided. He may also have noticed that farmhouses were being replaced by villas inhabited by parvenus who threatened to destroy both his status and his uniqueness as the "natural aristocrat" of the community.

The forces bringing change to the American culture were ultimately more than Willis and other patrons of the pastoral life could turn back. At that time, almost forty years before the western frontier was declared closed, many romantically inclined writers had fallen into the role of purveyors of American nostalgia. As Willis had perceptively noticed years back while living at "Glenmary," the "city" would emerge as the source of America's destiny, and even men like himself, who had resisted change and had romantically involved large numbers of Americans in the search for stability and beauty in everyday rural life, would slowly come to realize that a new "culture" was growing from the urban centers and they could not escape its fascination.
The real pleasures of technological advance could not be ignored, and by the spring of 1854 Willis was already giving evidence of his softening attitude toward those threats to his convenient solitude. "Idlewild" was about sixty miles from New York City, but with the newest and fastest of the "floating palaces" one could make day trips to the metropolis, leaving at nine after a "leisurely breakfast," and arriving on Broadway for four hours of business. At "4 p.m. you return to your floating palace, and glide away toward your home again..."13

There was yet another advantage that came to Willis's mind concerning the benefits of the new, rapid transportation. Beyond the pleasure of riverboat "society" and the magnificent morning and afternoon rides through the picturesque Highlands, Willis observed that the mediation between city and country provided by fast boats and trains contributed to a balanced and healthy psyche. "One goes to the city, at least an individual--a lump of sugar or a slice of lemon--but the feeling of being suddenly lemonaded into insignificance, on plunging into that busy stir, is common, I suspect, to those who land from a steamboat and walk toward Broadway."14 The loss of ego problem, Willis found, was in part solved by technological advance coming to the defense of individualism. "The instinctive preference
for the space and liberty to be an individual, is at the bottom of the arrived-passenger's feelings, ...and I presume the general dignity and self respect of the human race are increasing with the improvements in steam and railroad which are putting country life in reach of a greater number."\textsuperscript{15}

Americans could have both their country and their cities on a daily basis. Willis provided nothing less than a rationale for the suburban life style for the middle classes, who, like the wealthy before them, could have the best of both worlds.
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FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER IV


5. N.P. Willis, Outdoors at Idlewild; or the Shaping of a Home on the Banks of the Hudson (New York: Charles Scribner, 1854), p. 25. (First appeared in The Home Book of the Picturesque, p. 112.)

6. Willis, Outdoors..., p. 155.

7. Ibid., pp. 383-84.

8. Ibid., p. 385.


10. Ibid., p. 120.

11. Ibid., p. 47.

12. Ibid., p. 45.


15. Ibid., p. 409.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, Willis's personal experiences with varied life styles finally brought him to the perfection of "Idlewild." That solution involved the negotiation of compromises between the Old World and the New, and between the city and the country. It was a synthesis that incorporated what Willis thought to be the best from each mode and it specifically resolved certain persistent problems created by the complexities and uncertainties of the coming modern age.

Willis first addressed the problem of his own social position in what he felt was an inflexible social order. Depicting himself as a "natural aristocrat" was a means of avoiding the restrictions brought on by a class system defined most often by wealth and family. While he indulged heavily in, and contributed to the romantic concept of rural life with its common folk, he knew, as a writer, that he had to remain closer to the source of most social, cultural and economic activity. In that cosmopolitan context Willis saw himself apart from the common man as he fulfilled his role.
as a "natural aristocrat," as an artist—a person with special sensibilities who was somehow himself above categorization. Furthermore, by effectively posing as an arbiter of taste, Willis was able to interpret aristocratic and refined ideas for his largely middle-class readership with a fancifulness and sophistication which earned him a wide readership.

Beyond his personal concern for an unassailable social position, Willis saw himself as a mentor to an increasingly large and powerful middle class that was in need of guidance in matters of fashion and taste. The popular press of the nineteenth century was replete with writers who assumed this role, but Willis's particular contribution was his use of models and his lively, journalistic approach to the issues of the day. The poet had learned early on that the best country homes and the finest urban enclaves were the exclusive domain of the rich who could afford such amenities. Willis sought these same contexts for himself involving his readers in what was a public experiment in both rural and urban life. By mid-century he had come to realize that perhaps suburban life on the "Highland Terrace," with its compromise between the city and the country, could provide a model for a new kind of life style for the middle classes. The last ten years of his life were spent in
celebration of that further suburb, beyond the "cockney influence" but within an hour's travel to the metropolis. In proper suburbs, the aspiring middle classes could create a refined life style which mitigated the boredom of rural life and the growing poverty, filth, and disease of the urban centers.

Willis's advocacy of the suburban ideal was itself a compromise with, if not a retreat from, the pastoral and romantic ideals of many of his contemporaries. He chose not to ignore the power and attraction of the cities but saw them, despite their unsavory aspects, as positive and vital forces in American life, positive enough for him to ensure their convenient access. Hence it was very important that "Idlewild" be close to the city even though it was in the country. Americans, Willis thought, must be able to periodically (daily if possible) remove themselves to the country to become individuals-- to be revitalized and made "significant" again.

Willis's "new" American life style must also be seen in the context of its symbiotic relationship with other changes in the American culture. Industrial growth and the expansion of the transportation network brought the beginnings of the consumer economy and mobile life styles.
It was Willis's self-appointed role to provide the restraint and guidance Americans needed to deal with their wealth and to provide a model life style in a suburban villa which utilized the age of steam to allow for the simultaneous enjoyment of country and city. Willis sensed that he had discovered an important new mode of living and that there, in Cornwall, on the Highland Terrace, was "the spot with the most advantages for the first American trial of this new combination."\(^1\)

Willis's writings are also important for what they reveal about the changes in American culture in the decades preceding the Civil War. It was a culture profoundly concerned with its destiny and sensitive to changes in both the social and physical environment. The problem of the cities and the immigrant poor, the effects of rampant land speculation, social mobility and immobility, and the love and fear of technological change became the concern of more and more Americans as the popular press grew to accommodate the middle class's appetite for social and cultural commentary. Willis expanded his role from fanciful poet/journalist to tastemaker by offering himself as a model inhabitant of a model community where persons of taste, moderate means, and conservative sensibilities could settle in picturesque surroundings not far from the civilizing influence of the city.
Willis was only one of many who provided cultural commentary to the public, but his casual and fanciful reporting of his "real life example" had special appeal to the reading public as it struck a perfect balance between the practical and the romantic. His contribution did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. Willis's fellow journalist, T. Addison Richards, after a visit to "Idlewild" in 1857, wrote a lengthy, illustrated account of his visit for Harper's New Monthly Magazine. The meaning of "Idlewild" was succinctly stated.

Every settlement thus made is a missionary station of social progress, which, in our ambitious and imitative land, must be speedily surrounded by a large parish of disciples, each going forth in turn to teach the faith, until the influence shall spread like the widening circles of pebble-broken water.²

The meaning of Willis himself lies in his wide acceptance among the public of the era. Richards, himself a popular journalist and sensitive to the accomplishments of his contemporaries, could flatly state "no writer has so unvariedly and so entirely won the admiration of readers of the most refined sentiment and the daintiest fancy, and at the same time the full sympathy of the masses of all tastes and calibres."³
FOOTNOTES: CONCLUSION

1 N.P. Willis, Outdoors at Idlewild; or, the Shaping of a Home on the Banks of the Hudson (New York: Charles Scribner, 1854), p. 25.


3 Ibid., p. 166.
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