# PATTERN BOOKS AND THE SUBURBANIZATION OF GERMANTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA, IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

Nancy A. Holst

PREVIEW

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in Art History

Fall 2008

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**IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY**

PREVIEW

by

Nancy A. Holst

Approved: _____

Bernard L. Herman, Ph.D.
Chair of the Department of Art History

Approved: _____

Tom Apple, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

Approved: _____

Debra Hess Norris, M.S.
Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: _____

Bernard L. Herman, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of dissertation

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: _____

Damie Stillman, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: _____

J. Ritchie Garrison, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: _____

Jeffrey A. Cohen, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| APS | American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia |
| Deeds | Philadelphia County Deed Books, PCA |
| FFICR | Franklin Fire Insurance Company Records, HSP |
| GHS | Germantown Historical Society, Philadelphia |
| HSP | Historical Society of Philadelphia, Philadelphia |
| LCP | Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia |
| Minutes | Minute Book, Borough of Germantown, PCA |
| NARA | National Archives and Record Administration, Mid-Atlantic Branch, Philadelphia |
| PCA | Philadelphia City Archives and Records, Philadelphia |
| PCCQS | Philadelphia County Court of Quarter Sessions |
| PFICR | Pennsylvania Fire Insurance Company Records, HSP |
| Poulson | Charles A. Poulson, "Scrapbook of Philadelphia History," LCP |

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the relationship between prescriptive ideals and the actual suburban development of the Germantown section of Philadelphia from the 1830s through the early 1860s. Exemplifying many small towns on the outskirts of larger cities, Germantown's growth in this period was characterized by unplanned development, a speculative real estate market, and the involvement of numerous small-scale entrepreneurs. Germantown's suburban neighborhoods were not the product of a simple evolution but of a complex and conflicted process of community building and cultural change. Local privatism and ruralism gave way to a kind of progress that gradually overcame a strong disinclination to abandon the city for year-round residency in the suburb.

Germantown's evolving grid of streets, rectilinear lots, and new suburban houses differed significantly from the picturesque landscape ideals and house designs promoted by pattern-book authors. Pattern-book authors exploited cultural anxiety over tasteful expression and inappropriate displays of social ambition as a way to promote the services of professional architects. They encouraged custom-built, individualized homes with picturesque plans that would carefully express the character of their owners and be a source of long-term sentimental attachment. These ideals largely ignored the means, motives, and mobility of most middle-class, suburban residents. Moreover, Germantown's truly customized, architect-designed houses not only were exceptional examples but they also varied significantly in their reception of pattern-book ideals.

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Pattern-book authors sought to separate the real estate market from the sentimental idea of the home, but the two spheres were inseparable and effectively reconciled in Germantown's grid development and popular suburban house types. Developers and proprietors may have embraced the moderate level of sentimental individuation available in the new styles popularized by pattern-book authors, but they thwarted prescriptive rhetoric by employing a limited number of conventional house forms. They modernized the side-passage plan, center-passage plan, and twin dwelling, modifying these types for a suburban context in a way that combined urban symbolism and rural sensibility. Germantown's middle-class builders and buyers thus avoided the social uncertainties and market liabilities entailed by new-fangled, picturesque plans. They favored fashionable but standardized homes that were easily marketed, acquired, and sold again.

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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

The neighborhood of Germantown, once an independent community but now a part of the city of Philadelphia, contains a rich stock of housing from the mid-nineteenth century, a period when increasing numbers of well-to-do city residents chose to own a residence outside of the urban center. Although almost entirely filled in by later architecture and areas of dense row house construction, Germantown retains pockets of detached and semi-detached houses on leafy, open, scenic lots that have changed little in the last century and a half. Many of the houses dating from this era display such picturesque details as broad verandas, ornate windows, fancy carpentry, towers, and rooftop observatories. A walk along these blocks calls to mind the architectural types and perspective views illustrated in house pattern books from the period. Indeed, many local historians have observed that Germantown's character as a Victorian suburb derived from a prosperous and upwardly mobile middle class within the city which was receptive to romantic ideas about rural landscape and architecture, such as those exemplified in the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing of the 1840s and 1850s.[1]

A sustained investigation into the residential development of Germantown in the mid-nineteenth century offers fresh insights into a period often overshadowed by the weight of contemporary pattern-book rhetoric. Several reasons justify a case study of suburban development in this period within the context of a single community. The

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interval from the 1830s through the 1860s represents a transformative period for domestic architecture, residential patterns, and middle-class culture. Nevertheless, scholars have suggested that the characteristic suburb, or the "suburban ideal," embodied by a detached house and a suburban yard, was not truly codified until after the Civil War.[2] Partly in consequence of this view, very little scholarly attention has been devoted to suburban development in the preceding, antebellum decades. Indeed, the development that occurred in Germantown in the mid-nineteenth century, although it was not identified at the time as "suburban" or as a process of "suburbanization," was, in fact, a period of experimentation with suburban forms and lifestyles that helped earn Germantown its retrospective status as a "great suburb."[3]

There are few studies that address antebellum suburban development outside of the context of much larger surveys of domestic architecture and American suburbanization. These studies frequently rely heavily on prescriptive literature in order to present and interpret the development of the American home and suburb. Horace Bushnell, Andrew Jackson Downing, and Catharine Beecher are among the writers whose ideas figure prominently in examinations of the period. A close study of change in a single community, such as Germantown, provides an opportunity to probe numerous assumptions that have emerged from this rhetoric. Was suburbanization inevitable? Was it pursued by a broad consensus of the middle class? To what degree were suburban homes designed according to the formulas presented in house pattern books and other sources of prescriptive literature? Germantown presents a good focus for this type of analysis because of its proximity to Philadelphia and its long history as a desirable resort and location for large country seats, the property type that came closest to the pattern-

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book ideal. Consequently, this study brings together aspects of architectural history, the history of suburbanization, and the social and cultural history of the home to provide an interdisciplinary framework for a new interpretation of mid-nineteenth-century domestic architecture.

By the 1850s, Germantown earned praise as an increasingly desirable residential location, but the realities of suburban growth and residential design in Germantown indicate a complex process of interaction between old and new patterns. Physical changes in Germantown provoked considerable conflict among those who had a stake in the community, revealing a wide range of competing cultural values, as the market incentives presented by progress and change slowly prevailed against the pull of laissez-faire privatism and nostalgic ruralism. Older patterns of local land use heavily affected the development of suburban real estate, just as the strength of regional and vernacular building conventions greatly influenced new suburban residential designs. Cultural attitudes also presented an impediment to the possibilities of year-round residency in the suburb. Although growing numbers of city residents had the means and desire to spend summers in the country or in a rural village, many continued to view the notion of living permanently outside of the city center as a rather radical shift. Despite these ambivalences, Germantown's new streets and houses express a broadly ranging shared culture of domestic and suburban life, one that reveals considerable latitude from prescriptive ideals and can shed light on the character of the middle class in this period. Germantown's suburban residents superficially embraced the sentimental, picturesque aesthetic publicized by pattern-book authors while finding their high-minded ideals largely irrelevant to the social realities and market forces that governed modern life.

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