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Introduction

THE COLONY OF VIRGINIA, 1748

BEFORE HE was a soldier, before he was a statesman, and before he was a president, George Washington was a surveyor. He traversed the wilderness with compass and measuring chain, creating maps that helped transform the Virginia backwoods into private property. It appeared from an early age that this would be his life's calling. When he was a boy, George's first school exercises were applied geometry: drawing and manipulating parcels of land. His earliest journals show him carefully elaborating geographic terms—"the torrid zone is that which is on each side of [the] equatorial line"—or sketching maps—"turnip field as survey'd by me."¹

His surveying career had started at sixteen. He was an apprentice to George William Fairfax, one of the most powerful landowners in the colony. The young Washington joined a 1748 expedition that would be his first exposure to the rigors of life in the backwoods, far from the genteel homes and plantations in and on which he had grown up. One night, Washington, "[not] so good a woodsman as the rest of my company," stripped down and went to sleep in an old bed while his compatriots slept under the stars. He quickly realized he was on "nothing but a little straw—matted together without sheets . . . only one thread bear blanket with double its weight of Vermin such as lice fleas &c."² It would be a long night. For the rest of the trip, Washington made careful note

of the quality of the beds he found and was a lot more willing to sleep in the open air.

There were other experiences that would stick with Washington for a lifetime. One day his party encountered “thirty odd Indians coming from War.”³ Washington’s compatriots offered the men liquor. The war party was soon “in the humour of dauncing,” and the future president watched in awe as the men formed a circle around a great fire and danced late into the night. Washington did not record where the men came from or where they were going. There had been relative peace with Native peoples in the area since 1744, when the Lancaster Treaty ceded Haudenosaunee lands that had already been functionally taken by settlers.⁴ There would eventually be war over this issue and many others. But on the night of the dancing, the mood was celebratory. The next morning was a quiet one; it seems everyone was a bit hungover.⁵

Over the course of the expedition, Washington’s surveying skills grew rapidly. He learned to see the potential profits embedded in a landscape, that lush forests could become equally lush farms. He spent much of one day “admiring the trees & richness of the land” and another day was excited to write that he had seen one plantation with “the Land exceeding Rich & Fertile” and that it “produces abundance of Grain Hemp Tobacco &c.” Just a year later, at the age of seventeen, Washington was appointed surveyor for the new county of Culpeper. It would make him rich; land was one of the few things in abundance in Virginia colony. If you were helping sell it, you had one of the best businesses going.⁶

Land was not only a youthful interest. Later, when Washington was not busy fighting wars or leading a country, he would be a persistent, if unsuccessful, land speculator.⁷ He acquired almost sixty thousand acres in what today is West Virginia and far western Pennsylvania. Scotch Irish settlers moved onto that land, and Washington would spend decades trying to either evict them or force them to pay rent. The settlers found the attempt outrageous; their toil had made the land theirs. Was it Washington who had gone into the backwoods and cleared fields? Was it Washington who dug stones—boulders even—out of those same fields, piling them into low walls to serve as primitive

boundaries? Washington ultimately prevailed in court, but the squatters simply left without paying him. They were headed westward in search of fresh opportunities and free land.

The American story is the story of land. The United States was not just a nation born of the process of seizing a continent, but a country that found its prosperity and power through constant reinvention of its relationship to land. Before the United States even existed, settlers saw North American land as the raw material for building a prosperous life. Their leaders viewed that same land as a means for building a people, first into British subjects, and later, into Americans.⁸ It was similar in the twentieth century. The suburban home was a place for Americans to create their personal utopia, of lawns and living rooms, of washing machines and dishwashers. For the government, this new suburban world would be a way out of the depths of the Great Depression.

This is a history of land that people call home. In this sense, the home is a source of personal and family sustenance as well as a social and political foundation. Even today, almost three-quarters of Americans see homeownership as central to the American dream, despite ever-rising home prices putting that dream ever further out of reach.⁹

The history of American land is most often told as two distinct stories. One is a story of homesteads and countryside, the other of single-family homes and suburbia, the former about agriculture and westward expansion, the latter about mortgage finance and the consumer society.¹⁰ This is all one story. Putting it together reveals surprising ruptures and unexpected continuities. We see a shift from a nineteenth-century vision of plenty—where vast quantities of land made it possible to dream new social and political forms—to a twentieth-century vision of scarcity—where the value of our home and the joy we take in our community is diminished the more widely it is shared. We also see a shift from seeing the government as a means for securing our prosperity to seeing it as a threat to our independence. Underlying all of this is one bedrock assumption: Widespread landownership is a requirement for a functioning society and politics.

There was a belief at the founding, sustained through the nineteenth century and beyond, that there exists a fundamental link between

individual ownership of land and representative government. Ownership enables independence, and independence creates the stability needed for self-government. You can vote your own interest when you do not have a landlord to please. You can be loyal to a nation when you own a piece of it. For the landed and the landless, property ownership has long been Americans' highest ambition, and the link between ownership and self-government is Americans' polestar.

This view of the link between land and representative government grew out of centuries-old European political theories. John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* starts with land becoming property and builds from there to his conception of the social contract and representative government.¹¹ Even England's Magna Carta, which in 1215 enumerated the rights (and responsibilities) of "all free men," took that phrase almost definitionally to refer to landholders.¹² The idea was that those with a stake in governance—landowners—were the ones who should have political rights.¹³ In Europe, however, landownership could be only so widely diffused; almost everything was already owned by some aristocrat. Representative government rooted in widespread landownership was mostly theoretical.¹⁴ Nobody really knew what it would look like when it was put into practice or even if it could be done.

But the colonization of North America created radical new possibilities. Settlers willing to put in the work could own their own plot of the future United States. The United States would be a land of plenty. Landholding would be so widespread—and accessible—that it would not need to be a requisite for voting.¹⁵ While the authors of the *Federalist Papers* fretted over whether a geographically vast and populous republic could long survive, settlers went ahead with building it anyway. There would be no kings, no dukes, and no barons, despite the ambitions of the wealthiest American families like the Livingstons and Van Rensselaers.¹⁶

Of course, one should not overstate this egalitarian vision. This land was all taken, often violently, from people who already called it home.¹⁷ Representation, like ownership, was available only to heads of household. Slavery was a core part of national life. Only a slice of men of European ancestry were considered fit for self-government.¹⁸

Violence and exclusion not only coexisted with American egalitarianism, it seemed to make it possible; settlers believed they were all in it together because it was them against the world.¹⁹

The egalitarian vision of land was always to a significant extent myth. It was never as equal as imagined, never as widely available as suggested.²⁰ But it had real power. For one thing, it inspired those originally excluded. In the aftermath of the American Civil War, many formerly enslaved people believed that land would be the only way to secure a foothold to participate in American political life. Some of them set out west, founding towns like Nicodemus in northwestern Kansas. These towns would be much like others scattered across the West, with many of the same hopes, dreams, and ambitions underpinning their development.²¹ By the twentieth century, demands for the federal government to protect what was widely hailed as the “American Dream”—often this meant access to suburbia—would provide crucial energy for the civil rights movement. Over the past two hundred years or so, more and more people have been brought into the earliest settlers’ initial sense of “us,” even if only haltingly, uncertainly, and (so far) incompletely.

But land is more than ideas or even dreams; it is something actually lived on and worked. The reality of living on and by the land—of tilling fields, building a house, or even paying a mortgage—reveals a powerful tension between land distribution as a political project and ownership as a material reality. Throughout American history, the goal of widespread ownership has been advanced through the market. Land is something we buy and sell. At times, this market has been heavily regulated, and at times it has been relatively unfettered. At times of crisis, whether in the struggles of farmers in the wake of the Panic of 1893 or of homeowners in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the tension between widespread landownership as a social and political goal and the market as a means for securing it has become clear. During those periods, the inability of people to profit by their land or afford their shelter created a pervasive sense that society was broken. What, in those cases, is the obligation of a government to its people? Of people to each other? The story of American land, then, has also been a debate

about the proper relationship between government and markets and between society and economy.

This is a history at once local and national, at once material and abstract. A story of what happens on the ground and of the wider political and economic changes that empower (or disempower) landownership. The big picture matters: Politicians and wealthy elites shaped American engagement with land. But people of limited means drove that politics and translated it from ideas into action. Understanding this history requires taking the perspective of men and women of modest means, who built lives and communities out of a struggle to make and remake American land.

Landed Democracy and the Ownership Society

Two great land regimes have defined American history: “landed democracy” and the “ownership society.” The name of the former I borrow from nineteenth-century farmers, and the latter I borrow from twentieth-century politicians.²² Both represent enormously powerful ideologies, alive with possibility for their advocates as well as riddled with contradictions and tensions.

Landed democracy was a vision of a radically egalitarian country made possible by widely diffused landownership. Its most well-known proponent was Thomas Jefferson. Though part of a slaveholding elite, Jefferson was obsessed with the political philosophy of the age, which was more concerned with the strivings of the many than with the refinement of the few. Jefferson became fascinated with theories linking individual liberty, landownership, and representative government.²³ He was also agrarian; Jefferson thought the best society was one comprising enlightened farmers, who periodically left their fields to debate politics in the town square. As he once wrote to George Washington, agriculture “is our wisest pursuit, because it will in the end contribute most to real wealth, good morals, and happiness.”²⁴ Jefferson saw Britain, a nation of workshops and factories, as a land of corruption and decay. But he was not backward looking. Jefferson did not reject wholesale the Industrial Revolution or the growing importance of the market to daily life.

He was a commercially minded agrarian: The United States would ground its political and economic life in the ancient relationship between farmer and land. But that would be made possible by infrastructure to move crops and trade policy to secure markets in which to sell them.²⁵

Farmers themselves shared this view. They believed that people who grew their own food and owned their own fields would have the stability to freely participate in American democracy. It was a “producerist” vision of America: that society should be by and for people who actually grow or make things. In this view, the state had an obligation to secure land for ongoing settlement and distribute it for free to those who would make it productive. It was also a vision of plenty; key to this idea was the belief that there was (and perhaps always would be) enough land to distribute. Further, the state should secure the conditions for prosperity—the infrastructure and healthy agricultural markets that Jefferson envisioned.

But the success of widespread landownership was never foreordained. Elites seeking to re-create a European aristocracy, whether owners of vast estates in the North or plantation owners in the South, had their own hopes for the country’s future. The landlord aristocracy of the North would be dismantled (mostly) peacefully, but the aspirations of southern elites could not so easily be defeated. As coexistence of a vision of widespread landownership in the North and the “Slave Power,” or slavocracy, in the South became less and less imaginable, violence became more and more likely.²⁶ It seemed like the United States, in trying to swallow North America, might choke to death on it instead.

Though landed democracy was a vision ultimately successful as a result of the American Civil War, it would collapse under the weight of its own success during the late nineteenth century. It was not that the country stopped expanding, though the United States did start to run out of land to distribute. Rather, economic forces crushed American farmers. New transportation technologies and a host of legal and commercial innovations led to the consolidation of local and regional markets into national ones. Once farmers could quickly sell crops

almost anywhere, every farmer was in competition with every other. In one sense, this was good; relentless competition made agriculture into a centralized and highly efficient modern industry. American farm productivity became the envy of the world. Farmers, however, were growing more and more for less and less return. Agriculture had become a terrible social and political foundation.

Building a new social and political foundation was one of the great projects of the New Deal of the 1930s. The ownership society was the result. This vision anchored the polity in the suburban single-family home. It was, famously, a place for consumption rather than production. American democracy no longer depended on growing bushels of wheat but depended now on buying radios and televisions, vacuum cleaners and lawn mowers. But this focus on consumption does underestimate another dynamic, one that helps explain the politics that would emerge from the American suburb.

Yes, consumption mattered, but as with landed democracy, the ownership society contained its own kind of producerist vision. Not only did the home become Americans' most valuable asset, but suburban Americans would come to think of their home's value as something they produced, by the lawns they mowed after work and the DIY projects they pursued on the weekends. This remains true today. Home remodeling shows air on television around the clock, and home improvement stores like Lowe's and Home Depot are ubiquitous. But there was and is a darker side to this version of producerism. Americans also thought they produced value for their home by excluding undesirable neighbors, either through the bloodlessness of zoning restrictions or by the bloodiness of mob action—as was the case when the first Black family integrated Levittown, Pennsylvania, in 1957.

Existing landowners and homeowners have long hoarded resources. They have prevented the entry of too many new residents or the construction of too many new homes as they try to protect their financial and emotional stake in their community. In recent decades, exclusion has become more subtle, with homeowners voting down any sort of development that might threaten property values, especially new affordable housing. The NIMBY movement—"Not in My

Backyard”—has become BANANA—“Building Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone.”

Property value—how much a home is worth—reflects the quality and pleasure of home and neighborhood. The problem is that although we have a vital stake in our home’s value, that value is a product of our own efforts as well as broader forces. Economic policy, job prospects, demographics, and even weather patterns all shape the long-term value of a home.

“Property value politics” was what emerged from homeowners’ attempts to protect the value of their homes.²⁷ It is the attempt to insulate oneself from market forces even if that protection comes at the cost of the wider community.²⁸ Often this is motivated by simple greed. But at times, it is also an understandable response to feeling oneself at the whim of distant economic forces.²⁹ For instance, the modern antitax movement grew out of a backlash against spiraling real estate values and real estate taxes.³⁰

As the ownership society matured into the 1970s and beyond, possibility curdled into dread. There was no longer a dream to foster and homes and communities to build. Further, that this new suburban world had not been shared fairly meant that new participants represented a threat. This shift from the plenty of landed democracy to the scarcity of the ownership society has corroded our politics. A system meant to promote ownership has put it out of reach. A system built by state and market together has turned many Americans against government. Worse yet, under both land regimes, the government’s legitimacy has been tied to its ability to ensure ownership for future generations.³¹ This is why when housing is unaffordable, the social and political system feels unstable.

Finally, what of the city? This history begins in rural places and ends in suburban ones. Yet the city has long been the heart of American industry and deeply influential on American culture and ideas. For almost the entirety of the arc of landed democracy, real economic power rested in cities. Factories and railroads drove American economic development—industrial life was what mattered. And yet, ideologically, the land regime was about rural places. So, too, in the twentieth century,

when vast cities drove American society, but the suburb became the heart of the nation.³² Cities are important throughout this book, particularly in chapter 5, focused on Chicago, but they will be discussed in relation to the book's core focus—first the rural and then the suburban. It was only for three or four decades that the majority of Americans lived in cities; the nation transformed relatively rapidly from mostly rural to mostly suburban.³³ In 1870, roughly half of Americans lived on farms, and in 1970, more Americans lived in suburbs than anywhere else.³⁴ Even more importantly, across all of American history, rural and suburban populations have held wildly disproportionate political influence.

Telling the Story of American Land

Each chapter considers a particular place at a particular moment. For instance, one chapter examines Levittown, Pennsylvania, during the suburbanization and civil rights struggles of the 1950s and another chronicles the rise and fall of the community of Nicodemus, Kansas, during the aftermath of the American Civil War. The places and times have been chosen to exemplify crucial dynamics in the history of American land (figure 1).

The story starts in upstate New York in the early 1840s, where tenant farmers fought wealthy landlords. Then we move to eastern Kansas to examine the fight between adherents to the yeoman vision of the United States and foot soldiers of the slave power. A key theme here is Indian removal as a prerequisite for the nation's great political dramas, many of which obscured the land taking on which they depended. Following a discussion of the American Civil War and the tragic failure of land redistribution away from slaveholders and to formerly enslaved people, we find the triumph of landed democracy in the war's aftermath. We visit a Great Plains farming community, much like any other, except that most of its residents were Black Americans, many of whom had been enslaved. This section will also reveal how landed democracy collapsed under the weight of its own success. As agricultural output skyrocketed, prices dropped; in 1883 wheat prices were over \$1 per bushel, and twelve

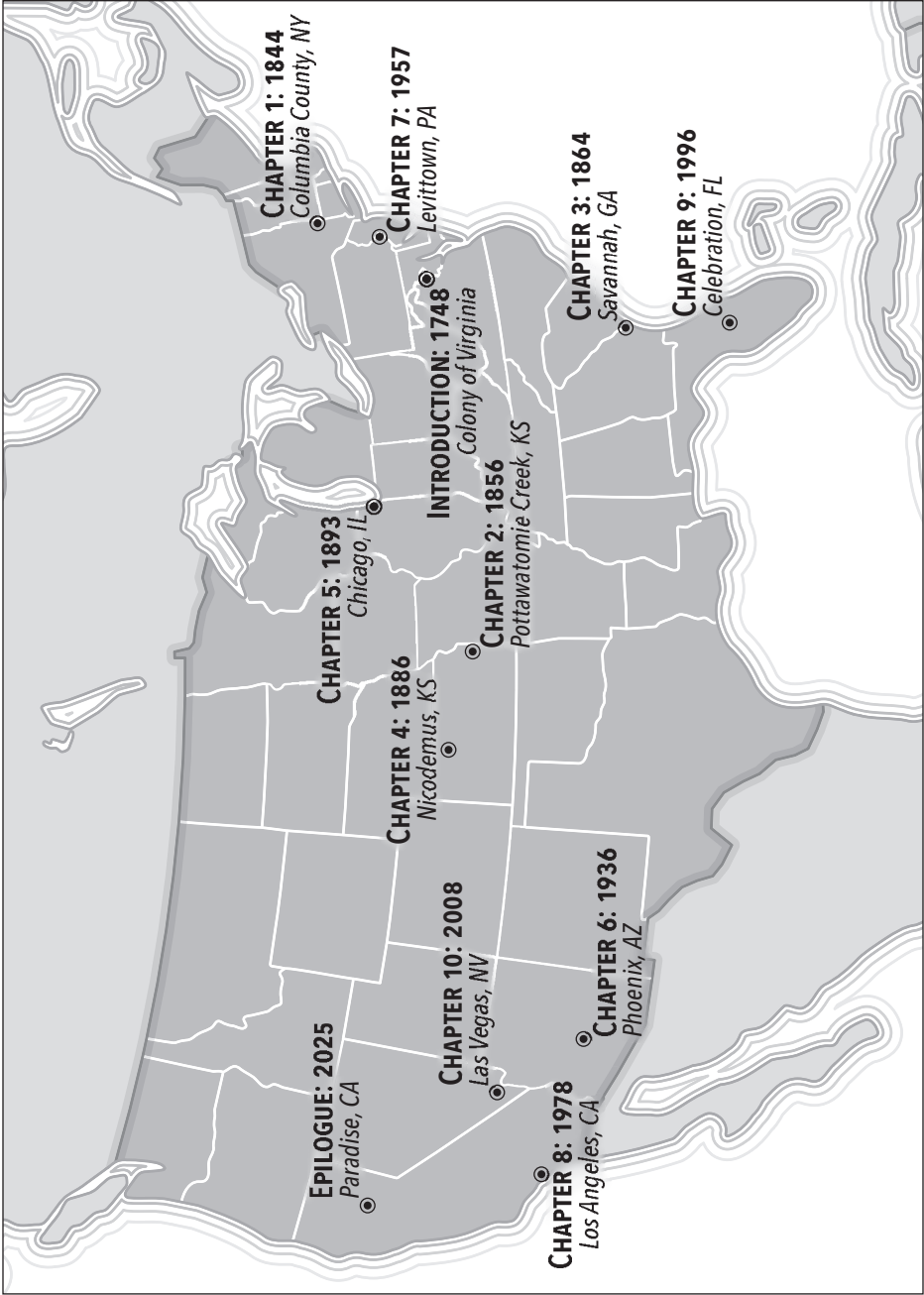


FIGURE 1. Map of the United States showing the time and place of each chapter. Map by Daniel Huffman.

years later, in 1895, they were hovering around sixty cents per bushel.³⁵ Nobody, it seemed, was making money as a farmer.³⁶ At the same time, Americans were coming to terms with the end of abundant land—the frontier was closing. A discussion of Chicago around the turn of the century will highlight how some prominent Americans thought about the future of landed democracy in an increasingly urban country.

The end of landed democracy and the invention of the ownership society would not come until the Great Depression. We will focus on one family's journey across the American West in the midst of the Depression. Dispossessed farmers from across the Great Plains drifted down to Texas and then over to California. Migrants could no longer turn a profit farming for themselves, but there was plenty of work on vast industrial farms in places like California's Central Valley. City dwellers who had lost their jobs and homes went in search of work too, some of them even heading back to the farming communities where they or their parents had been born.

It was a time when everything was coming apart and, somehow, got put back together. In terms of housing, salvation was found in a vision of single-family homes in suburbs across the country, bought and sold through a market heavily subsidized and backed by the federal government. This grew out of a desperate need to address housing shortages that appeared as World War II veterans returned home, hopeful and ambitious. They were starting families and looking for a fresh start, often away from the ethnic urban neighborhoods where they had grown up. This fresh start would become the new American Dream. At the heart of that dream was a renewed, if fleeting, feeling of plenty.

Soon Americans' financial and cultural stake in these new communities would drive a new kind of politics. As Black Americans sought inclusion in the new world of the suburbs, white homeowners reacted violently. Concerns about property values would not only justify bigotry and racism, but it would provide a value-neutral language that could be used to maintain a desired status quo. That story will be told through the story of the Myers family and the few neighbors—denounced as communists—who would welcome them to Levittown, Pennsylvania.

The political impulses embedded in the ownership society will be driven home by an account of a tax protest in 1970s California. Very real concerns about rising property taxes were channeled into a solution that overwhelmingly benefited the very rich. California Governor Ronald Reagan would take this antitax energy and nationalize it when he ran for president. Property values provided a language for expressing political beliefs and goals as well as its own metric for judging the worth of any proposal. By the end of this story, property value politics and skepticism of government had become defining features of the American political landscape.

Following a trip to Disney World—to examine a creeping feeling of suburban malaise and a new and now ubiquitous way of organizing communities—the book closes with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the near death of the ownership society. An epilogue considers our present challenge: a cost-of-living crisis that, among other things, has pushed American communities into wilderness areas where they are vulnerable to the consequences of the planet’s warming climate. The very end of the book ranges through the history of American land to assemble a new, historically grounded vision of land and home.

From Pioneers to Bystanders

Pioneers are everywhere in American history. To nineteenth-century Americans, pioneers were the brave souls who moved into and settled the wilderness, whether the Ohio Valley in the eighteenth century or anything west of the Mississippi in the nineteenth century. *The Pioneers*, James Fenimore Cooper’s 1823 novel about settling upstate New York, ends with Cooper’s most famous character, the frontiersman Natty Bumppo, headed “towards the setting sun—the foremost in that band of pioneers who are opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent.”³⁷ By the late nineteenth century, Americans used the word *pioneer* not only to describe their own efforts settling the wilderness, but also to connect themselves to earlier generations that had done the same. For instance, the first settlers of Nicodemus, Kansas, many of whom had been enslaved, self-described

as pioneers in order to put themselves at the heart of the larger American story.³⁸

Even in the twentieth century, Americans were using “pioneer” in much the same way: to imagine their own strivings as part of something much bigger, something special. In the 1950s, the “first families” of Levittown spoke of themselves as pioneers.³⁹ The first people to move into Disney’s planned community of Celebration, Florida, in the 1990s also thought of themselves as pioneers. There were no wagons, there was no felling of trees, and there was no taking of land, but all these people felt like they were getting in on the ground floor, excited to build something.

The desire to be a pioneer might seem like a minor part of this history, but the evolution of what people meant by “pioneer,” an evolution that took centuries, says much about the American relationship to land. The word was borrowed, sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth century, from the Middle French word *pionnier*, referring to a digger, often a foot soldier digging preparatory trenches for fortifications or battle.⁴⁰ *Pionniers* prepared the way for others. From there, *pionnier* evolved into a variety of spellings: “pianer,” “peionaris,” “pyonaris,” and “pioneir.”⁴¹ *The Art of Warre* from 1591 explains that a successful general must have a vigilant captain to direct “pyoners,” who must be provided with “pick-axes, spades, shovels, . . . baskets for the hande, wheelbarrows, and other such instruments.”⁴² A 1675 math problem asks: “If 6 Pioners make 18 yards of Trench in 9 days . . . how many pioners will make 36 yards in 3 days?”⁴³ Out of this variety of spellings evolved our current one, “pioneer.”

These early uses of the word referred to someone who worked at the behest of another, making preparations on behalf of some ruler. In a sense, these people were mere pawns—a related word—and they were working for those who had actual power. There was little about being a pioneer to celebrate.

By the eighteenth century, this meaning was changing.⁴⁴ Pioneers were the vanguard of a larger project of settlement, but now they were working for themselves, preparing land for their own use. It was a shift from dependency to self-possession. It was no coincidence that the

place where the meaning transformed was North America.⁴⁵ This was the place where theories of independence and mass democracy could be put into practice. Working for yourself was now participating in a larger project of settlement. In this sense, the gradual shift in the meaning of pioneer went hand in hand with the rise of landed democracy.

But at some point, people mostly stopped thinking of themselves as pioneers. This was not only because we are more sensitive today to the violence that the first pioneers brought to North America's settlement. It was also because people stopped feeling like they were building anything bigger. Landed democracy and the ownership society were both conceived as collective projects: things built, through politics, through the market, and through collective efforts in neighborhoods and communities across the country. Since then, there has been a feeling that great changes and collective endeavors are in the past. We merely navigate a world of housing already built, for good and for ill. This shift from viewing housing and community as dynamic—something we are actively building—to something static, a simple question of property values and their protection, is behind many of the challenges we face today. No longer pioneers, we have become bystanders. We have come to see the housing market as something with a life of its own, to which we bend our hopes and dreams.

Perhaps there are two things to be recovered from what people meant by “pioneer,” both in its American meaning and in its archaic French one. The American sense of pioneer is about independence, about building something for oneself and one's family. Historically, that inspired heroic efforts and was the source of great pride. But that meaning's individualism obscured the fact that the United States was something people built together. This sense of collective effort and even sacrifice is more obvious in *pioneer's* older meaning. In the same way one might celebrate and encourage pioneering efforts in spaceflight or cancer research, maybe Americans should spend less time watching the housing market and trying to survive it and more time working to build something better, together.

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