

WHEN THE URBAN FRINGE IS NOT SUBURBAN*

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ABSTRACT. Research on the history of suburbs tends to either disregard the fringe of urban development or locate it beyond the city limits. In this article I argue that compounding fringe and suburban development misrepresents the real differences between the two. I then examine the metropolitan regions of three major U.S. cities—Baltimore, Buffalo, and Saint Louis in 1880 for evidence of how they differed. A consistent difference emerged between the residents of the suburban districts of a city and those of the presumed location of the fringe.
Keywords: Baltimore, Buffalo, Saint Louis, suburbs, urban fringe.

Attributing growth and development to suburbs is almost reflexive among urban scholars conditioned to the mass-produced housing and vast subdivisions of the latter half of the twentieth century. Many urban centers in the United States approached their maximum extent early in the twentieth century, and the interface of urban and rural land uses had moved beyond most city limits by the time suburban history emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, definitions of “urban fringe” after World War II invariably place it outside the city and in the suburbs (Kurtz and Eicher 1958). Prewar scholars have been more flexible concerning the location of the fringe and on occasion discuss it in the context of the city (Burgess 1925; Hoyt 1933, 1939; Kennedy and Woods 1969). Recently observers have suggested that the fringe may be most correctly located beyond the suburbs, given current trends in exurban sprawl and decentralization (Audirac 1999; Sharp and Clark 2008). This progression of the fringe away from the city core reflects well-recognized changes in the structure of metropolitan regions during the twentieth century, yet the importance of locating the fringe when discussing historical suburbanization has been generally overlooked. In this article I argue that the distinction between suburbia and the urban fringe remains a valuable one, demonstrating the argument with analyses of specific nineteenth-century cities.

If the potential for problems created by conflating the twentieth-century fringe with suburbs is low, circumstances indicate that the nineteenth-century context is challenging. In that era of aggressive annexations the urban fringe would often fall deep within the incorporation limits as cities absorbed their borderlands as rapidly as legislatures would allow. Following an annexation the settlements newly proximate to the city boundary, and therefore “suburban” by the common definition, could be very distant from the dense populations and direct links to the infrastructure of the city. Similarly, some number of settlements within the city boundary following annexation will conform to the assumed typology of a suburb in all respects except location. Untangling the fringe from suburbs thereby encompasses

*I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Colten, his staff, and several reviewers whose comments and assistance were incredibly helpful.

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