

***GEORGE
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A scenic view of a rural landscape, likely in a tropical or subtropical region. The foreground shows terraced fields with young plants, possibly a vineyard or orchard, and a small white house with a red roof. The middle ground features rolling hills with patches of green fields and clusters of trees. In the background, a larger hillside is covered with dense vegetation and small houses, suggesting a village or farmstead. The sky is clear and blue.

***VILLAGE
IMPROVEMENTS
AND FARM
VILLAGES***

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Village Improvements and Farm Villages

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It may be because the newness of our country and the fragile character of our early structures have prevented the accumulation of inferior, ugly, and uncomfortable houses, as the nucleus around which later building has crystallized; it may be from circumstances which have prevented the isolated residence of the better classes of our people; or it may be the result of accident. Whatever the reason, it is beyond dispute that the United States is *par excellence* a land of beautiful villages. North, south, east, and west, there are plenty of hideous conglomerations of poor-looking houses, with an absence of every element of beauty; but there are thousands of other villages scattered all over the land, which are full of the evidences of good taste in their regulation and in their management.

As a rule, these more attractive features are very much modified by the presence of badly-kept private places or neglected public buildings, and by a general air of untidiness. Still, the foundation of attractiveness is there; and nothing is needed beyond a well-organized and well-guided control of public sentiment, to remove or to hide the more objectionable features, and to permit such beauty as the village may possess to manifest itself.

The real elements of beauty in a village are not fine houses, costly fences, paved roadways, geometrical lines, mathematical grading, nor any obviously costly improvements. They are, rather, cosiness, neatness, simplicity, and that homely air that grows from these and from the presence of a home-loving people.

To state the case tersely, the shiftless village is a hideous village, while the charm which we often realize without

analyzing it comes of affectionate care and attention.

There are villages in New England, in Western New York, and all over the West, even to the far side of Arkansas, which impress the visitor at once as being homelike and full of sociability and kindness; which delight him, and lead him almost to wish that his own lot had been cast within their shades. These are chiefly villages where the evidences of public and private care predominate, or are at least conspicuous. A critical examination would, in almost every case, develop very serious evidence of neglect, unwholesomeness, and bad neighborhood.

Within a few years, beginning, I believe, in Massachusetts, the more thoughtful of those whose affections are centred in their village homes have united in organized efforts to make their villages more tidy, to interest all classes of society in attention to those little details the neglect of which is fatal, and to make the village, what it certainly should be, an expression of the interest of its people in their homes and in the surroundings of their daily life.

The first of these associations of which I have any knowledge (though, as such work is unobtrusive, there may have been many before it) was the "Laurel Hill Association" of Stockbridge, Mass. It takes its name from a wooded knoll in the centre of the village, which had been dedicated to public use. The first object of the association was to convert this knoll into a village park. Then they took in hand the village burial-ground, which was put in proper condition and suitably surrounded with hedge and railing. Then the broad village street was properly graded and drained, and

agreeable walks were made at its sides. Incidentally to this, the people living along both sides of the streets were encouraged to do what they could to give it an appropriate setting by putting their own premises into tasteful condition and maintaining them so. The organization worked well, and accomplished good results. The Rev. N. P. Eggleston, formerly of Stockbridge, in a paper on village improvements written for the "New York Tribune," thus describes the collateral work and influences of the Laurel Hill Association:

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"Next followed the planting of trees by the roadside wherever trees were lacking. The children, sometimes disposed in their thoughtlessness to treat young trees too rudely, were brought in as helpers of the association, while at the same time put under a beneficial culture for themselves. Any boy who would undertake to watch and care for a particular tree for two years was rewarded by having the tree called by his name. Other children were paid for all the loose papers and other unsightly things which they would pick up and remove from the street.

"Gradually the work of the association extended. It soon took in hand the streets connected with the main street. Year by year it pushed out walks from the centre of the village toward its outer borders; year by year it extended its line of trees in the same manner; and year by year there has been a marked improvement in the aspect of the village. Little by little, and in many nameless ways, the houses and barns, the dooryards and farms, have come to wear a

look of neatness and intelligent, tasteful care, that makes the Stockbridge of to-day quite a different place from the Stockbridge of twenty years ago. Travellers passing through it are apt to speak of it with admiration as a finished place, and, compared with most even of our New England villages, it has such a look; but the Laurel Hill Association does not consider its home finished, nor its own work completed. Still the work goes on. Committees are even now conning plans for further improvements. By itself, or by suggestions and stimulations offered to others, the association is aiming at the culture of the village people through other agencies than those of outward and physical adornment. It fosters libraries, reading-rooms, and other places of resort where innocent and healthful games, music and conversation will tend to promote the social feeling, and lessen vice by removing some of its causes."

No one can drive through this beautiful old place without realizing the effect of some influence different from that which has usually been at work in country towns. One feels that it is a village of homes; that the people who live in it love it, and that it has no public or private interest so insignificant as to be neglected.

I have cited this instance somewhat at length, because it was the first, as it is the most complete, that has come to my notice. In other places, more serious work of improvement has been undertaken in the direction of sewerage, gas-lighting, &c. In fact, the present writing was

suggested by frequent requests for information and advice on the more practical parts of the subject.

At the outset it is to be said that the organization and control of the village society is especially woman's work. It requires the sort of systematized attention to detail, especially in the constantly-recurring duty of "cleaning up," that grows more naturally out of the habit of good housekeeping than out of any occupation to which men are accustomed. Then, too, it calls for a degree of leisure which women are the most apt to have, and it will especially engage their interest as being a real addition to the field of their ordinary routine of life. The sort of enthusiasm which has led to marked success in the Dorcas Society and other organized action outside of the household, for which American country women are noted, will find here a new and engaging object. This, however, is only a suggestion by the way, and one which may or may not be appropriate under varying circumstances.

If we assume, which is not altogether true, that the main purpose of village improvement is to improve the *appearance* of the village, we must still understand that the direct object of the society should not be alone nor chiefly in the direction of appearance.

What it is especially desirable that a village should appear to be is: a wholesome, cleanly, tidy, simple, modest collection of country homes, with all of its parts and appliances adapted to the pleasantest and most satisfactory living of its people. All improvements should therefore have this fundamental tendency, and every element of adornment, and every evidence of careful attention, should

be only an outgrowth of the effort to obtain the best practical results. Costly park railing where no railing is needed, width of roadway greater than the needs of the community require, formal geometric lines and surfaces where more natural slopes and curves would be practically better, elaborate fountains or statuary out of keeping with the general character of the village, (the gift of a public-spirited, ambitious, and pretentious fellow-townsmen,) and isolated examples, as in a church or schoolhouse, of a style of architecture which would be more appropriate for a city,—all these are obtrusive and objectionable, and are consequently in bad taste. In so far as these or any other elements of improvement are unsuited to the conditions in which they are placed, they are undesirable; and it would be well for those having the interest of the village in charge, to adopt an early resolution to accept no gifts, and to allow no work of construction or embellishment, which is not, first of all, appropriate to the modest character of a well-regulated country village.

If every public building is sufficient for its uses and suggests no undue outlay for show alone; if the roads and walks are such as the uses of the people require; if the fountain suggests a tasteful ornament and centre of freshness and coolness, rather than a monument of some citizen's liberality and ambition; if the village green or park is a proper pleasure-ground for old and young; and, in short, if every thing that is done and every dollar that is expended has for its object only the improvement of the conditions of living,—then there will be needed only the element of

careful keeping to maintain always the best sort of beauty that is possible under the circumstances.

No satisfactory result can be attained without organization. The work will necessarily require much money and more time in order to avoid an undue tax upon individuals. It is desirable, too, that, so far as possible, every member of the community should be interested in the work, and should contribute in labor or in money according to his means. This general interest can be secured much better through the influence of an organization in which all are interested, than by any individual effort.

The association should become the distributor, not only of the moneys accruing from membership fees, &c., but of contributions made by citizens, or subscriptions raised by combined effort for general or specific works of improvement. It should be, in fact, not only the inciter of public spirit, but the director of public effort.

The precise form of constitution for such an association must necessarily depend more or less on circumstances; and I sketch only as a basis for discussion, the following form suggested by the regulations governing the Laurel Hill Association of Stockbridge:—

ARTICLE I.

This Association shall be called "The Village Improvement Association of ——. "

ARTICLE II.

The object of this Association shall be to improve and ornament the streets and public grounds of the

village by planting and cultivating trees, establishing and maintaining walks, grading and draining roadways, establishing and protecting good grass plats and borders in the streets and public squares, securing a proper public supply of water, establishing and maintaining such sewerage as shall be needed for the best sanitary condition of the village, providing public fountains and drinking-troughs, breaking out paths through the snow, lighting the streets, encouraging the formation of a library and reading-room, and generally doing whatever may tend to the improvement of the village as a place of residence.

ARTICLE III.

The officers of this Association shall be a President, two Vice-Presidents, a Secretary, and a Treasurer, who shall constitute the Executive Committee. These officers shall be elected at the annual meeting, and shall hold their offices until their successors shall have been elected.

ARTICLE IV.

It shall be the duty of the President, and in his absence of the senior Vice-President, to preside at all meetings of the Association, and to carry out all orders of the Executive Committee.

ARTICLE V.

It shall be the duty of the Secretary to keep a correct and careful record of all proceedings of the Association, and of the Executive Committee, in a book suitable for their preservation; to give notice of all meetings of the Association and of the Executive Committee; to make all publications, and to give all public and private notices ordered by the Executive Committee, and to attend to all the correspondence of the Association.

ARTICLE VI.

It shall be the duty of the Treasurer to keep the funds of the Association, and to make such disbursements as may be ordered by the Executive Committee.

ARTICLE VII.

It shall be the duty of the Executive Committee to manage all the affairs of the Association, to employ all laborers, to make all contracts, to expend all moneys, and generally to direct and superintend all improvements which in their discretion, and with the means at their command, will best serve the public interest. The Executive Committee shall hold a meeting at least once in each month, and as much oftener as they may deem expedient.

The Executive Committee shall have power to institute premiums to be awarded for planting and protecting ornamental trees, and for doing such other acts as may seem to them worthy of such

encouragement. They shall also encourage frequent public meetings of the Association and of citizens generally, both with a view to maintain an interest in their work, and for the general encouragement of the habit of meeting for discussion and amusement.

ARTICLE VIII.

Three members of the Executive Committee present at any meeting shall constitute a quorum for transacting business; and the vote of a majority of those present shall be binding on the Association.

ARTICLE IX.

No debt shall be contracted by the Executive Committee beyond the amount of available funds within their control to pay it; and no member of this Association shall be liable for any debt of the Association beyond the amount of his or her subscription.

ARTICLE X.

Every person over fourteen years of age who shall plant and protect a tree under the direction of the Executive Committee, or who shall pay the sum of one dollar annually, and shall obligate him or herself to pay the same for three years, shall be a member of this Association; and every child under fourteen years of age, who shall pay or shall become obligated to pay

as before the sum of twenty-five cents annually for three years, shall be a member of this Association.

ARTICLE XI.

The payment of ten dollars annually for three years, or of twenty-five dollars in one sum, shall constitute a person a member of this Association for life.

ARTICLE XII.

The autograph signatures of all members of the Association shall be preserved in a book suitable for that purpose.

ARTICLE XIII.

An annual meeting of the Association shall be held at such place as the Executive Committee may direct, on the fourth Wednesday of August, at two o'clock, P.M. Notice of such meeting shall be posted on each of the churches and at the post-office at least seven days prior to the time of holding said meetings, and a written notice shall be sent to all non-resident members. Other meetings of the Association may be called by the Executive Committee on seven days' notice as above prescribed.

ARTICLE XIV.

At the annual meeting, the Executive Committee shall report the amount of money received during the