

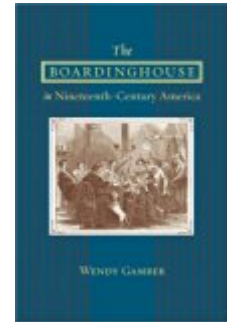
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Wendy Gamber. *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. xii + 213 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8571-6.

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The Opposite of Home

In *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America*, Wendy Gamber examines a common but much-maligned institution. The boardinghouse proves to be a fertile place to study the concept of home, that paragon of nineteenth-century sentimentality. In home's perceived opposite, the boardinghouse, the desired disconnect between domesticity and money is violated; the home could not be a place where a resident had to pay for domestic comforts, according to nineteenth-century ideology. But Gamber finds boardinghouses to have been important accommodations in which boarders created their own versions of home.

Boardinghouses were a popular housing arrangement for unmarried men starting white-collar work in a new city; for unmarried women who supported themselves by teaching; for newly married couples not able or ready to set up housekeeping; and for a host of other people, transient or not, who required or desired non-familial living arrangements. Boarders would usually receive their own room and share meals with the landlady, her family, and the other boarders. Besides food, landladies would generally provide cleaning and laundry services.

Gamber explores the ambiguities of this arrangement. Although home to many, boardinghouses were not "home" in the conventionally understood meaning of the term. Home in the nineteenth century, as Gamber points out, was seen as a refuge from the marketplace, a retreat from an increasingly commercialized world. Board-

inghouses, on the other hand, entailed a commercial arrangement, bringing home into the market economy. Second, rather than a loving maternal figure graciously and freely lavishing care and affection on her family, boardinghouses required that the home-creator be paid. To many observers, this meant that boardinghouses were inherently lacking. And third, the concept of family was stretched to the breaking point. Could a group of unrelated strangers who lived under the same roof ever be a family?

To investigate these issues, Gamber draws on a number of sources that she uses wisely. Because the boardinghouse was often the subject of satire and mockery, Gamber found numerous contemporary sources that exaggerated boardinghouse conditions—inedible food, slovenly surroundings, loose morals—as well as the people found there, such as skinflint scheming landladies with marriageable daughters, nosy and gossiping spinster boarders, not-quite-respectable gentlemen. One treasure trove in particular was Thomas Butler Gunn's 1857 humorous expose, *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses*. Gamber balances these hyperbolic sketches with other primary sources. In particular, she focuses on four boarders who left exceptionally rich collections of diaries and letters, adding complexity to the boardinghouse story.

Respectability was key to the middle-class boardinghouse. Already on the edge of propriety by their very nature, boardinghouses had to struggle to maintain their

reputations. Ironically, one way they did it was by not calling themselves boardinghouses but, rather, “private families,” so that a boardinghouse keeper would advertise a room “with a private family.” Denial of the commercial relationship made it harder to run a profitable establishment, as landladies pretended to a respectability that downplayed money, while at the same time desperately needing the income to stay afloat.

Gamber also devotes chapters to the two main products that her boarders bought and that boardinghouses provided aside from a room: cleanliness and meals. She describes the intense labor that housekeeping required. Although usually assisted by servants, landladies had to be prepared to augment or replace servants’ work themselves. Boarders often complained of seldom-washed linens and grubby furnishings. Boardinghouse fare was an even clearer reflection of the economics; the landlady’s profit could be undermined or increased by the quality of the food. But if the food were too cheap, she would lose boarders.

Many newly married couples faced the decision of whether to take a room in a boardinghouse or set up their own household, usually in rented quarters. Advice manuals uniformly encouraged the latter, viewing woman’s proper role as running a moral household. Wives themselves were not so sure, seeing the hard labor and drudgery that housekeeping involved. Many wives elected to be boarders, undermining the cult of domesticity that upheld housekeeping as the ideal circumstance. To Gamber, the popularity of boardinghouses illustrates a conscious rejection of the wife’s role as enlightened housekeeper.

Gamber addresses the morality issue in a chapter on crime and vice. The popular press was certain that boardinghouses were dens of iniquity, with sexual improprieties, boarders stealing from each other, and landladies and boarders scamming each other in a variety of ways. Gamber’s inclination, in establishing boardinghouses as acceptable alternatives, is to cast doubt on these stories as hyperbole.

Her last chapter looks at four housing arrangements that called themselves “homes” although they were really boarding arrangements. Reformers established homes for sailors, the elderly, working women, and newsboys in order to provide moral alternatives to bad housing situations. Their uses of the term “home” for institutions that accommodated, in some cases, hundreds of tightly regulated inmates, show how compelling the associations with “home” were. Here, the paradox of the

boardinghouse was reversed: rather than a home setting which because of commercial associations could not be a home, these were institutional settings determinedly called “home” when they were anything but.

Although Gamber’s study is far-reaching in its exploration of the meaning of boardinghouses, it has limits on place and time. The boardinghouses she discusses are mostly in the northeastern United States, and heavily weighted toward Boston and New York. One wonders if boarding experiences in newer cities, such as Chicago or San Francisco, would have been the same. She also overlooks congressmen in early nineteenth-century Washington, D.C., who particularly relied on boardinghouse accommodations and wrote about them frequently. Although the book purports to cover the nineteenth century, the “golden age” of boardinghouses, it concerns the last half of that century almost exclusively. As Gamber explains, by the early twentieth century the more free-form lodging house, in which residents did not dine, gained in popularity. For the middle class, apartments became a respectable and viable alternative.

Further, the book is heavily weighted toward the middle class. Not only are these the people who documented their own experiences, they are also the ones with whom ideas of “home” are intensely identified. Gamber’s intention to interpret boardinghouses as overlooked but viable varieties of homes, and the way boardinghouses undermined middle-class ideals of domesticity, keeps her focus tightly on the middle class, which included both boarders and boardinghouse keepers. She gives equal space to the points of view of landladies and boarders—and, in fact, even finds the diaries of a boarder who became a landlady—but has little on the views of the servants.

Gamber also concentrates on urban boardinghouses almost exclusively, ignoring those in remote regions or small towns. The location of boardinghouses within cities is not well explained, though. Were there boardinghouse districts, perhaps in newly unfashionable neighborhoods? Another type of spatial analysis that is lacking is a study of the architecture of some representative boardinghouses. Assuming that the design of most boardinghouses was not distinguishable from a single-family house, some analysis of spatial usage would have been helpful and might have explained the extent to which boarders interacted with each other, the landlady, and servants because of the layout of the house. Similarly, it is not clear if boarders generally congregated only in the dining room, or if the parlor also was expected to be used for socializing.

Gamber's self-imposed limitations on her study do not seem unreasonable, given her focus on middle-class meanings of home. One of the strengths of this study is that Gamber has shed light on an important urban living arrangement. Estimates range from one-third to one-half of the urban population either living in or keeping a boardinghouse in the nineteenth century. The city contained a variety of living arrangements, many of them transitory, and therefore understudied. Gamber has done a great service by illuminating one of these important forms.

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