



A GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF RESIDENTIAL FRONT YARD  
FENCES IN THE SACRAMENTO URBAN REGION  
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Introduction

Cultural geographers have a long research tradition of interest in settlement processes and settlement forms, particularly as they express and define the contemporary landscape. Most studies have pertained to settlement features such as house and barn types, location analyses, and agricultural patterns.<sup>1</sup> These geographic studies have most often focused on the rural landscape,<sup>2</sup> but recent work has also investigated the nature and distribution of settlement forms in urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

Research accomplished by cultural geographers to date has emphasized the importance of the spatial arrangement of types of buildings in both rural and urban regions. In fact, Kirk Stone's comments on the nature of settlement geography narrowly defines the discipline to a study of "the analysis of the distribution of buildings";<sup>4</sup> but, as Terry Jordan suggests in his criticism of Stone's limited concept, it is also important to remember to study field patterns, house and barn types, and even the spatial arrangement of fences as they relate to the settlement landscape as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

We agree that fence types and fence distribution is an important, but often overlooked, aspect of both the rural and urban scene; therefore, cultural geographers need to pay close attention to fencing as a functional part of any landscape analysis. Although anthropologists and even sociologists have spent considerable time researching the nature and significance of fences,<sup>6</sup> cultural geographers have shown little interest up to this time.

The primary focus for the study of Settlement Geography has been concerned with structures other than fences as tools for analyzing and categorizing culture areas. Our research indicates that fencing plays a much more important role in settlement analysis than has been previously recognized. The sheer

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diversity of fence types makes the strongest statement on cultural variation within a region--shelterbelts, redwood barriers, picket, wrought iron, barbed wire, rock walls, chain link--these represent only some of the fence types available for study. Equally important, and offering an even broader base of study, was our investigation of the functions of fencing. Beyond the more obvious uses of fences for privacy, protection, and property enhancement, fences are also indicators of societal values, restrictions and laws, as well as of socioeconomic status and ethnicity.

A fascinating example of the importance of fencing in the settlement process occurred in the western United States. Consider the Great Plains "wars" between farmers and cattlemen. These battles were literally caused by fences. . . and later solved by fences. As people settled closer and closer together, first in small towns and later in larger communities, fencing became even more accepted in this peacemaking and peace-keeping role.

### Research Questions

Our study focused on fences as important features in the urban landscape using a typical northern California city as a case study. We investigated several questions concerning the nature and distribution of fence types as settlement forms, including:

1. What historical and cultural factors have led to the use of fencing in our modern urban landscape?
2. What was the earliest type of fence used in California cities and what was the original purpose of fencing?
3. What other factors have led to the large-scale fencing now popular in urban neighborhoods in California?

### Study Area

To answer these research questions concerning fence types and fencing functions, the city of Sacramento, California offers an excellent example for use as a case study. Sacramento's urban area provides a fine example of a pioneer California city that has been influenced by many diverse outside cultures. Because of its location at the confluence of two major rivers and at the entrance to one of the Sierra Nevada major pass routes, Sacramento developed into a major crossroads and focus for people migrating west. With them came some of the cultures which have influenced the settlement patterns in this western city.

Sacramento also was influenced by the influx of diverse cultural groups with the discovery of gold at nearby Coloma, and later by the completion of the trans-continental railroad to the city. Additionally, Sacramento has a rapidly expanding residential pattern of settlement in the modern landscape, thus offering an excellent location for the study of residential fencing of all types.

### Methodology

Our earliest awareness of the variety of fence types in the Sacramento area began with field observations including map interpretation and photography. The wide variety of fencing was immediately evident especially in the area's residential neighborhoods. To understand these areal variations, we began with the earliest American settlement in our study region prior to the Gold Rush in 1848.

This early townscape analysis involved not only field work, but also archival research via old newspapers, journals, historical books, census data, and city directories. We also conducted interviews among leading authorities in the field of landscape design and with those who remembered the early days in our study area. Interviews with local fencing companies tied together the data.

### Fence Types and Functions in Early Sacramento

In our observation of historic neighborhoods in Sacramento we noted variations in fence types according to the chronological settlement period of each area. Certain types of fencing were evidently most popular in pioneer Sacramento and were frequently associated with particular house types. For example, large Victorian homes were often surrounded by wrought iron, decorative fences, especially in the front yard,<sup>7</sup> while smaller clapboard houses usually had low, picket fences.<sup>8</sup> (Figure 1)

Fences mean different things to different people. They were used to keep things out, or simply as a decorative trim for a house. Some fencing was erected as a physical barrier either for protection or for privacy or as a boundary marker. These fences were usually thick, live hedges or narrow picket styles, and functioned to keep children and animals in or out. (Figure 2) The latter was an important function in early Sacramento since the city had many slaughter yards nearby. This necessitated driving animals through the city streets to the slaughter yards daily. Since the city was also a major railroad and agricultural processing town, sheep were frequently driven through town to the rail station or docks for export, thus making strong, front yard fencing important in residential areas.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 1



Figure 2

Front yard fences serve important social and psychological functions. In the early days, wrought iron fences were a definite status symbol and added to the beauty and value of property. According to our local historical society, many owners of Victorian houses in Sacramento paid local artists to depict their property in a more architecturally complete manner by adding nonexistent fences to their renderings.<sup>11</sup> Picket fences seemed to balance a bare front yard and also added a feeling of security and privacy to a small lot. Robert Frost's "Good fences make good neighbors" certainly was appropriate in the early days in Sacramento, especially as privacy became an issue of real concern for its crowded residents.<sup>12</sup>

Fences also functioned as obvious boundary delineators in a crowded city where property was expensive and lots were small. (Figures 3 and 4) Privacy was at a real premium in residential areas of the city. The spatial closeness of neighbors in Sacramento must have made fencing almost a psychological necessity.

As an example of this neighborhood crowding factor, our field work took us to one of Sacramento's original residential areas, Alkali Flat. This region contains a good sampling of many types of Victorian homes, some still retaining their front yard fencing. One notices immediately that the homes are very close to the street; however, this factor seems to have very little to do with either the presence or absence of fences since the streets were widened considerably in the early days of settlement.

Widening the streets was only the beginning of the changes affecting Sacramento's residential front yards. In 1910, there was a drive by the Sacramento Chamber of Commerce to remove all front yard fencing for the purpose of urban beautification. And later, in 1942, Governor Olsen ordered the removal of decorative iron fencing from the third floor of the Capitol Building as well as from around many of the state gardens. This action showed his support for the war effort, and he encouraged many residents of Sacramento owning wrought iron fences to do the patriotic thing and join him in his efforts.<sup>13</sup>

#### Front Yard Fencing in Sacramento's Contemporary Landscape

Our study of front yard fencing in modern Sacramento began with a photographic analysis. We then supplemented this general visual information with specific data gathered through interviews with local fence building companies. As the work progressed, it became evident that there seemed to be a direct correlation between fence types and factors such as age of neighborhood,



Figure 3



Figure 4

deterioration rates of particular areas, income, and even ethnicity.

Initially, front yard fencing is not common in the newer residential areas. This may be due to their location since new neighborhoods are primarily located in the suburbs where security is not usually perceived as a major issue. Where crime rates are highest, front yard fencing increases. Therefore, established older neighborhoods have more front yard fences in more varieties.<sup>14</sup> Types of fences vary from live hedges to low brick or stone walls. In these areas, deterioration rates vary and evidences of deterioration seem to correlate with the larger use of front yard fences.

Income levels also contribute to the distribution of fencing in particular areas of the study region. Lower income neighborhoods rely almost exclusively on front yard fences, especially chain link. In larger, more affluent areas, however, we observed little or no use of fences in front yards. This was particularly noticeable in neighborhoods such as Old Land Park, McKinley Park, and parts of Fair Oaks. Where front yard enclosures were observed in these older areas, their purpose seemed to be "for architectural or landscape enhancement", rather than as a purely status oriented statement.<sup>15</sup>

Neighborhood ethnicity plays a large part in the distribution and functions of fence types in Sacramento. In the small, older suburb of Bryte, for example, Russian immigrant houses are distinguishable from others by the always-present front yard hedge or fence (with a gate, usually locked, in the center of it). Italian and Portuguese owned homes in Bryte do not have front yard barriers as frequently. Perhaps Old World political conditions caused Russian immigrants to build from fear strong barriers around their property.<sup>16</sup> Cultural attitudes do seem to have an effect on fence types and functions. Architect Bud Sauble, journalist and author Joel Garreau, and Roy Crell, have all noted the importance of the Asian influence in North Pacific Coast fence styles. Screens and fence baffles that are commonly used in modern Sacramento in front yard gardens, atriums, and court yards all suggest this Asian influence.

The most obvious ethnic fence connection in our study area was based on early Spanish styles. Stucco walls are common throughout the city's residential areas, reflecting a fence building technique used throughout the Spanish world, both for outdoor and indoor privacy and protection.

### Summary and Conclusions

Through field observation, photography, interviews, and archival research, we drew some conclusions concerning fence types in Sacramento and their

functions. First, the West Coast obsession with redwood as a building material has gradually changed due to increased costs. An example of this change is the "Good Neighbor" fence popular in the 1950's. This style of heavy boarded redwood front yard fence has almost entirely disappeared in modern Sacramento residential areas. Additionally, redwood is almost never used in front yards in any style fence. According to a recent article in Sunset magazine, the use of solid board redwood fencing is no longer popular in West Coast cities mainly for aesthetic reasons. Streets would necessarily take on the appearance and flavor of back alleys; board fencing is simply too restrictive in a culture that values a feeling of open space in residential areas.<sup>17</sup> (Figure 5)

Chain link fencing was by far the dominant type of fence in our study. (Figure 6) We were astonished to find heavy use of chain fences in different parts of the city including older Victorian neighborhoods where small, twenty foot lots are very conducive to fencing; in rehabilitated, older neighborhoods; and even in block after block of middle income tract homes. Areas with a high percentage of minority groups were also included in this diverse group. The number one reason for the use of heavy fencing in these neighborhoods given by Sacramento fence companies was for security.<sup>18</sup> Heavy chain link fencing seems to make a strong "Do Not Enter" statement on the modern landscape, certainly indicative of the rising crime rates in the urban region. Cost is another factor to consider in the increasing use of chain link fences in Sacramento.

We expect to see a transition in middle and upper class neighborhoods, where crime prevention is desirable, from no fencing or live hedges to the use of ornamental iron fences.<sup>19</sup> Iron fences serve a function for security but are more aesthetically appealing than chain link. In Sacramento there are nearly as many iron work companies today as there were at the turn of the century. Modern iron fences are hollow rather than made of solid iron and compare more favorably in cost to chain link.

According to our research the demand for chain link fencing, as well as decorative iron fences, is increasing, and there appears to be no evidence that this will lessen in the near future. Most people will continue to build fences as high as building codes will allow it seems, and even will occasionally exceed Sacramento's three foot limit.

These local ordinances concerning the height of fencing in front yard areas emerged after World War II when California's urban areas exploded with growth. More stringent local ordinances were developed and implemented relating to the location and type of residential structures. Included in these



Figure 5



Figure 6

ordinances were strict guidelines concerning front yard fencing, and each city developed its own, individual height requirement. Sacramento was no exception, and the three foot limit was put into effect as tract developments spread throughout the urban area.<sup>20</sup>

The limitations inherent in these ordinances are well explained by Crell:

How you landscape the area between the street and your house is up to you--and it isn't. This is a special residential precinct, a privately owned space traditionally treated as public in character. Its development is controlled by local restrictions and by social expectation.<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion, local ordinances, social attitudes, ethnicity, income, and age of neighborhoods all contribute to the distribution of types of fences in the Sacramento urban area. The need to maintain some degree of privacy is also of prime importance in an urban area where properties are close together and diverse types of people co-exist. This last observation on privacy raises one final question for future research. Did the spatial closeness of neighborhoods in these crowded areas of Sacramento create a real need for fencing or simply a perceptual need? Did the earliest settlers, with their primarily European backgrounds, perceive a need for fencing because of some inherent, inborn cultural tradition? Did their heritage call for all property to be fenced as an integral aspect of the finished settlement product? Coming from a cultural background where order and organization are the accepted and ingrained norm, perhaps these early settlers and builders in Sacramento were simply acting on their cultural-historical values for spatial order and harmony.

Whatever the cause and function of fencing in urban Sacramento, a great variety of fence types exist in our study area. Unanswered research questions, such as the ideas posed above, certainly indicate a lack of data on fences in the Settlement Geography literature. We offer this research on the city of Sacramento as a beginning.

## NOTES

1. See Hans W. Ahlmann, "The Geographic Study of Settlement: Examples from Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Norway," Geographical Review, Vol. 18 (1928), pp. 93-128; Charles D. Collins, Settlement Geography of Stone County, Missouri, Thesis: University of Arkansas, 1971; A. B. Cozzens, "The Geographic Background of Some Mexican Housetypes," Annals, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 28 (1938), pp. 43-44; A. Demangeon, "L'habitation Rurale en France," Annals de Geographie, Vol. 8 (1920), pp. 352-375; L. Durand, "Dairy Barns in Southeast Wisconsin," Economic Geography, Vol. 19 (1943), pp. 37-44; Peter M. Ennals, "Nineteenth Century Barns in Southern Ontario," The Canadian Geographer, Vol. 26 (1972), pp. 256-270; R. Finley and E. M. Scott, "A Great Lakes to Gulf Profile of Dispersed Dwelling Types," Geographic Review, Vol. 30 (1940), pp. 412-419; Richard Jackson and R. Layton, "The Mormon Village; An Analysis of a Settlement Type," Professional Geographer, Vol. 28 (1976), pp. 136-141; Fred Kniffen, "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," Annals, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 55 (1965), pp. 549-577; David Lee, "Thoughts on Housing for the Humid Tropics," Geographical Review, Vol. 41 (1951), pp. 124-147; John Rickert, "House Facades of the Northeastern United States, A Tool for Geographic Analysis," Annals, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 57 (1967), pp. 211-238; Gabriele Schwarz, Allgemeine Siedlungsgeographie, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Company, 1961); J. E. Spencer, "House Types in Southern Utah," Geographical Review, Vol. 35 (1945), pp. 444-457.
2. Rural Settlement references include Isaiah Bowman, "The Scientific Study of Settlement," Geographical Review, Vol. 16 (1926), pp. 647-653; Isaiah Bowman, The Pioneer Fringe (New York: American Geographical Society, 1931); Isaiah Bowman, Limits of Land Settlement (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1937); R. B. Hall, "Some Rural Settlement Forms in Japan," Geographical Review, Vol. 21 (1931), pp. 93-123; W. L. Joerg, Pioneer Settlement (New York: American Geographical Society, 1932); David Lee, The Geography of Rural House Types in the Nile Valley of Northern Sudan, Thesis: UCLA, 1967; John Warkentin, "Mennonite Agricultural Settlements of Southern Manitoba," Geographical Review, Vol. 49 (1959), pp. 342-368.
3. Settlement research in urban areas include Daniel Doepper, "Globeville Neighborhood in Denver," Geographical Review, Vol. 57 (1967), pp. 206-222; Norman Humphrey, "The Migration and Settlement of Detroit Mexicans," Economic Geography, Vol. 19 (1943), pp. 358-361; S. Lieberman, Ethnic Patterns in American Cities (New York: The Free Press, 1963); Bryan Thompson, Cultural Ties as Determinants of Immigrant Settlement in Urban Areas: A Case Study of the Growth of an Italian Neighborhood in Worcester, Massachusetts, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Clark University, 1971.
4. Kirk Stone, "The Development of Focus for the Geography of Settlement," Economic Geography, Vol. 41 (1965), pp. 346-355.
5. Terry G. Jordan, "On the Nature of Settlement Geography," The Professional Geographer, Vol. 18 (1966), pp. 26-28.
6. Sociological researchers on this theme include Oscar Handlin, Suzanne Keller, and Stanley Lieberman; anthropologists include Stanford Gerber, Mark Leone, and Robert Schuyler.
7. These wrought iron fences typical of Victorian front yards were probably popular in Sacramento because of the iron foundry in the city and in nearby Sutter Creek; iron fencing also exposed the carefully pruned and well kept front yard of such a house.

8. Picket fences appear to have originated with German immigrants in Sacramento. This ethnic group constituted the majority of early Sacramento residents.
9. Interview with Paula Boghosian, local historian, March, 1981.
10. Interview with Dr. Joseph McGowan, Sacramento historian, March, 1981.
11. Paula Boghosian, (interview, March 18, 1981); Ms. Boghosian also suggested that artists usually did not include outhouses in their paintings of homes even though such structures were common on most Sacramento properties. Examining Thompson and West's History of Sacramento County reveals pictures of early homes with no outhouses and almost always fences!
12. Bartletts' Familiar Quotations by John Bartlett, p. 926, 19 . . . from Death of the Hired Man by Robert Frost.
13. Interview with Joseph McGowan, March, 1981.
14. Interviews with Sacramento lumber companies, May, 1981.
15. Roy Crell, "Between You and the Street," Sunset Magazine, Vol. 166, #4 (April, 1981), pp. 106-112.
16. Interview with Michael Lokteff, local first generation Russian from Bryte, December, 1978.
17. Interview with Roy Crell, landscape architect, May, 1981.
18. Interviews with Sacramento lumber companies, May, 1981.
19. Ibid.
20. Sacramento City Zoning Ordinance #4304 Revision as of January, 1982.
21. Roy Crell, "Between You and the Street," Sunset Magazine, Vol. 166, #4 (April, 1981), pp. 106-112.