

# Urban Grime and Rural Grace:

## House in the Fields and Constructions of Purity in Industrial Hartford

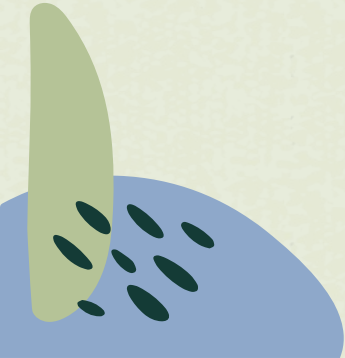

Melanie Rayl

Center for Leadership and Justice (CLJ) /  
GHIAA Archival Research

April 2026

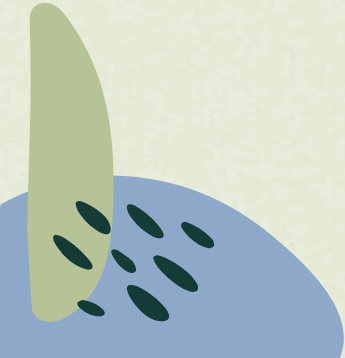

# Introduction to CLJ & This Project



- Center for Leadership and Justice (CLJ)
    - Faith-based advocacy for justice in Greater Hartford
    - Archival project: House in the Fields (1914-1960)
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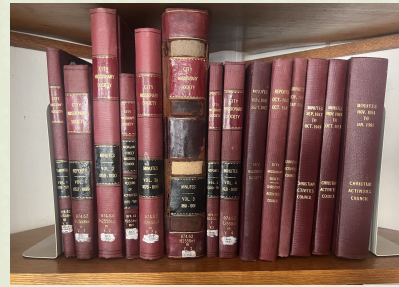
# Archival Methods



- **Primary Sources – CLJ Archives**
    - City Missionary Society minutes & reports (1852–1961)
    - Archival scrapbooks (1944–1946)
    - Key secondary sources (Donahue, Decker)
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# Archival Methods

- **Fall 2025 Inventory Project**
  - Created full TOC spreadsheet
  - Reorganized shelves & flagged repairs



Left: photo of chronologized top shelf of archives; right: photo of TOC spreadsheet for top shelf

Title	Author(s)	Date(s)	Folder(s)	Physical Description (rough size, color, materials included)	Key Terms to give rough sense of content (and if environmental)
Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford May 1815 to June 1819	John D. Gibson (ed.)	1815-1819	1815-1819	Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford May 1815 to June 1819	
Vol. 1st Report of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1820-1821	John D. Gibson (ed.)	1820-1821	1820-1821	Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1820-1821	
Vol. II of Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1822-1823	John D. Gibson (ed.)	1822-1823	1822-1823	Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1822-1823	
Report of the Act of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1824-1825	John D. Gibson (ed.)	1824-1825	1824-1825	Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1824-1825	
Vol. III of Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1826-1827	John D. Gibson (ed.)	1826-1827	1826-1827	Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1826-1827	
Vol. IV of Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1828-1829	John D. Gibson (ed.)	1828-1829	1828-1829	Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1828-1829	
Vol. V of Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1830-1831	John D. Gibson (ed.)	1830-1831	1830-1831	Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford 1830-1831	
Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford Nov. 1832 to Sept. 1842	John D. Gibson (ed.)	1832-1842	1832-1842	Minutes of the City, Ministry, Society of Hartford Nov. 1832 to Sept. 1842	
Minutes of the Christian Aetion-Council, Nov. 1843 to Oct. 1843	John D. Gibson (ed.)	1843-1843	1843-1843	Minutes of the Christian Aetion-Council, Nov. 1843 to Oct. 1843	
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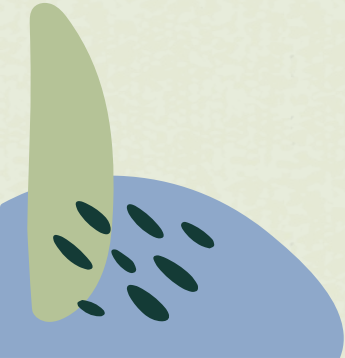
Left: photo of chronologized bottom shelf of archives; right: photo of TOC spreadsheet for bottom shelf

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# Research Question:



How did the fresh-air camp “House in the Fields” (1914–1960) reflect historical Protestant attitudes toward urban and non-urban environmental spaces?



# Progressive Era & National Fresh Air Movement

- Late 19th century: emergence of “urban ills”
  - Pollution, poverty, overcrowding (“City Life in the Late 19th Century”)
- 1877: Fresh Air Fund begins – city kids to country homes  
(Guarneri 2012, 27)
- Core belief:



## City

Place of moral & physical decay

## Country

Place of physical and spiritual purification



# Literature Review: Faith & Moralism

## Moral Geography:

Urban = vice & disorder

Rural = order & purity

(Orsi 1999; Lears 1981; Ribovich 2020; etc.)

## Anthropologist Mary Douglas

“Dirt” as matter out of place

(Douglas 1966)

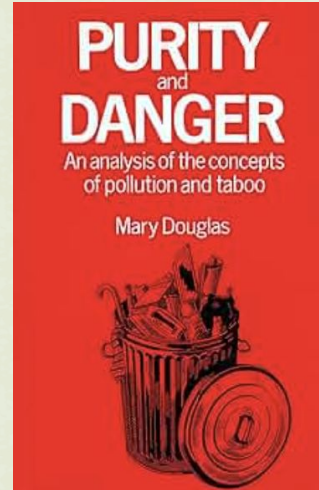
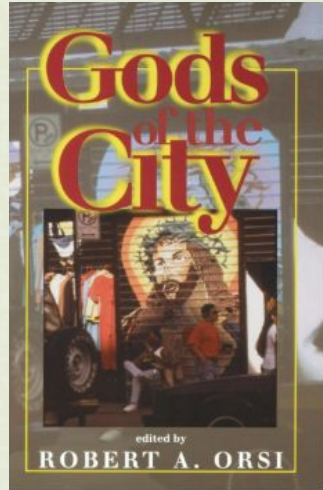
## Protestant Reformers:

Nature as moral and  
spiritual restoration

(Orsi 1999; Lears 1981; Ribovich 2020; etc.)

Cities as “crowded, noisy,  
polluted... breeding  
grounds for sin and vice”

(Orsi 1999, 10)



Emergence of “aggressive  
Protestant reform  
campaigns—all dedicated to  
eradicating the criminal threat  
and moral contagion of the  
cities” (Orsi 1999, 12)

# Hartford: Fresh-Air Fund & Beginnings of the House in the Fields

**1876:** Virginia Thrall Smith launches Fresh-Air Fund trips (Decker 1987, 54)

**1885–1903:** Day trips and short country vacations continue & programs expand (Decker 1987, 76-79)

**September 1914:** House in the Fields opens in West Avon, CT as permanent “child-saving station” (Decker 1987, 80)



Portrait of Virginia Thrall Smith



Image of Hartford tenements

*“The Fresh Air work carried on during a part of the summer gave opportunity for a large number of children and some adults to experience the pleasure of a day in the country.”*

— Caroline E. Bartlett (City Missionary Society), December 14th, 1902

(Bartlett 1902, Vol. II of Reports of the City Missionary Society of Hartford: 1900-1919)

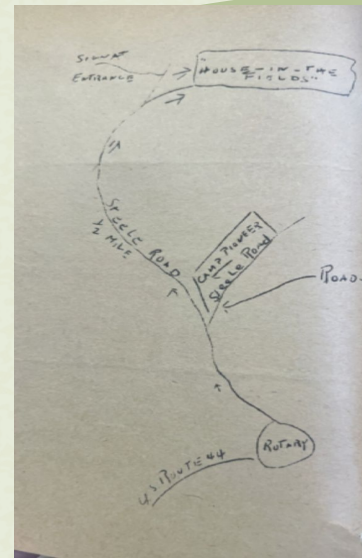


Image of Hartford children

# House in the Fields: Operations & Expansion



Image of the New House in the Fields in  
New Hartford, CT



Sketched Map of New House in the Fields

**1914-1928:** “child-saving station” (Decker

1987, 76)

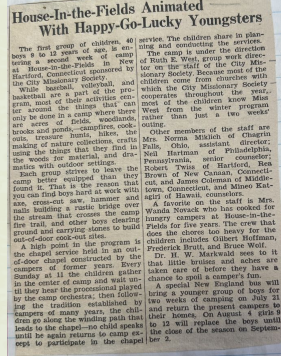
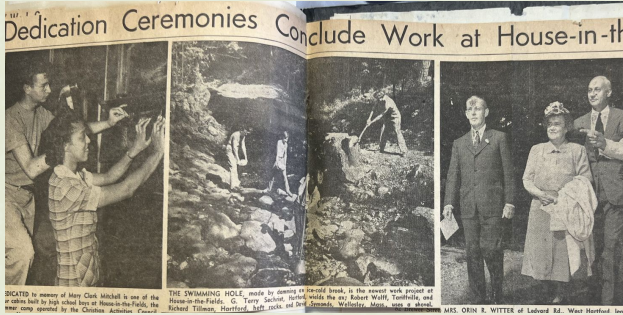
**1928:** House in the Fields relocates to  
larger, 50-acre farm in New Hartford

(Decker 1987, 82)

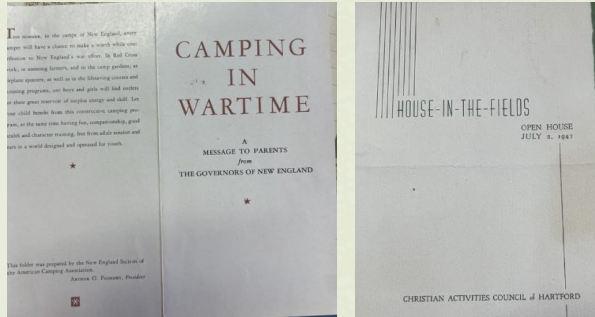
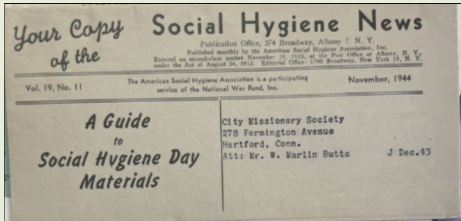
*“I do not think that you all are aware of the **importance** and the **rare opportunity** given to  
teach the child the value of right living in our country home the  
**House-in-the-Fields.**”*

— Vol. II of Reports of the City Missionary Society of Hartford: 1900-1919, 1915

# House in the Fields: Archival Images



## Newspaper Clippings Following the New House in the Fields



## Pamphlets Circulated At/About the House in the Fields

## Children Enjoying the Swimming Hole & other activities at the New House in the Fields

# House in the Fields: Peak, War Years, & Closure

**1930s-40s:** House in the Fields at its peak:

- Hundreds of children each summer, new programs, renovation projects, etc. (Decker 1987, 83-84)

**1945-50s:** Post-war difficulties & changing priorities

**1960:** Camp closes due to competition & shifting needs

→ **New CAC Mission: improve life *within* the city**



# Shifting Focus

*“Fresh-air work had begun in 1885 and continued over the years because the City Missionary Society tried to meet a need. In doing so a fine recreational center existed by World War II. Unfortunately, the postwar period saw the end of that need as far as the Christian Activities Council was concerned, and as it has done in the past, it had to change direction to meet new needs and dispose of the camp. A long and important activity of the Council came to an end in 1960, when House in the Fields ceased to exist”*

—Robert Owen Decker

(Decker 1987, 91)

# Fresh Air Today

## National Fresh Air Fund:

Still active since 1877

Now focuses on leadership & youth development



Image of contemporary Fresh-Air Fund camp

## Camp Courant:

Hartford's oldest free day camp

Recreation & enrichment in Farmington



Recent image of Camp Courant

# CLJ Today

## Center for Leadership & Justice

### From House in the Fields to **Freedom Schools**

(Center for Leadership and Justice. "Freedom Schools.")

### **Today:** Systemic urban justice *inside* Hartford

- Environmental justice campaigns – MIRA incinerator

(Center for Leadership and Justice. "Advancing Equity in CT.")

- Healthy Homes, urban gardens, affordable housing

(Christian Activities Council, Annual Awards Dinner Program 2012)



# Conclusion

- House in the Fields used rural space as moral salvation
- Archival research reveals real urban crises + elite perceptions of moral pollution
- CLJ's legacy: From rural rescue → systemic urban justice



# Citations

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