



## Bexley Small Town America

### Historical Context and Overview

In the years following World War I, the United States experienced an economic boom and period of rapid social change, often referred to as the Roaring Twenties. The success of the automobile industry—led by Henry Ford's Model T—contributed greatly to the prosperity of the era. Mass production of cars on the assembly line made them affordable to average citizens, not just the wealthy. Between 1921 and 1929, car sales increased from 1.5 million to 5 million in the United States. By the end of the decade, there was an average of one car for every five people in the United States.

Widespread automobile ownership in the 1920s spurred the growth of paved roads and suburbs. Suburbs are often defined by the mode of transportation used to commute there from downtown or the commercial center of the city. The earliest suburbs were just a few blocks from downtown, accessible by horse and buggy. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, streetcar lines reached a few miles beyond the city core, creating the first streetcar suburbs (such as Neil Avenue and the Old Towne East neighborhood in Columbus). Suburbs that developed in the 1920s became known as automobile suburbs.

Bexley is one example of a typical automobile suburb that grew during the 1920s. In this quintessential small town, the population increased to more than 7,000 in the 1920s, a four-fold increase. Although many 1920s suburbs were highly-planned by developers, Bexley's homes were typically constructed one house at a time. Many of the homes and buildings associated with Bexley today were built in the 1920s. New public and private schools were built in the 1920s. The drug store at Drexel and Main was opened 1925 and lasted 64 years.

Main Street became the commercial and cultural hub of Bexley, lined with shops, restaurants, the library, the Drexel Theater, churches, and Capital University. Main Street was essential to building a sense of community in Bexley. Today, it remains a common denominator that brings people to and through Bexley on the National Road.

### Standards Alignment

#### Ohio's Learning Standards: Social Studies

##### Grade 3

Content Statement 3. Local communities change over time.

Content Statement 7. Systems of transportation and communication move people, products and ideas from place to place.

##### Grade 4

Content Statement 14. Ohio's location and its transportation systems continue to influence the movement of people, products and ideas in the United States.

##### Grade 8

Content Statement 23. The Industrial Revolution fundamentally changed the means of production as a result of improvements in technology, use of new power resources, the advent of interchangeable parts and the shift from craftwork to factory work.

#### High School American History

Content Statement 18. An improved standard of living for many, combined with technological innovations in communication, transportation and industry, resulted in social and cultural changes and tensions.

## Learning Objectives

- Explain the relationship between the growth of the automobile industry and the development of suburbs.
- Describe the typical growth patterns of institutions and businesses in automobile suburbs of the 1920s.
- Discuss the role of commercial and cultural centers of cities in providing economic stability and social cohesion.
- Explain how shared common values can bring together people in diverse communities.

## Discussion Questions

1. What characteristics of Bexley identify it as a quintessential small town?
2. What is the relationship between the growth of the automobile industry and the development of suburbs? Why is Bexley considered an automobile suburb?
3. What new institutions and businesses were built in Bexley in the 1920s? How does this growth reflect typical patterns of growth in the Roaring Twenties across the nation?
4. Why was Main Street so important to Bexley? What economic and social benefits does Main Street provide to Bexley?
5. What factors do you think contribute to differences in wealth within various parts of a city or suburb? Describe the patterns of wealth distribution in Bexley. How do the wealth differences influence the way of life in each part of Bexley?
6. Despite differences in income, race and religion, Mayor Kessler believes the people of Bexley have shared common values. What values does he cite as being shared among the diverse people of Bexley?

## Extension Activities

- Have students research the rise of the automobile in the 1920s and create an advertisement for a specific make and model.
- Have students draw or create a model suburb for the 1920s. Students should consider the questions: what institutions and business are important to include? What is the best layout of homes, schools, churches, and businesses?

## Additional Resources

- Automobiles and Early Suburbanization in Old Towne East – <http://columbusneighborhoods.org/neighborhood/olde-towne-east/olde-towne-east-lesson-plan/automobiles-and-early-suburbanization/>
- Rise of Automobiles and American City Planning – <http://www.c-span.org/video/?317148-1/rise-automobiles-american-city-planning>