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The American Compound

By K. Snowden and P. Beisel

What is a Compound?

Scarcely addressed in the literature, the compound has gained broad recognition in the American vernacular as a spatially separate and unique form of settlement. Although largely viewed as a fringe development, compounds have deep roots in the historical development of the American landscape.



The Future of the American Compound: An Enduring Tradition

Since the late 1990s counties in North Carolina, South Carolina, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, have considered or adopted zoning ordinances for the development of rural residential compounds. These compounds are identified as “traditional family settlements” that:

- Preserve and stabilize rural communities
- Respect cultural and historical settlement patterns
- Provide affordable housing for family members
- Minimize town maintenance, responsibility, and cost
- Create greater developmental flexibility for landowners with large tracts of land
- Create and preserve open spaces

Crowdsourcing

In 2013, we asked the general public via Facebook to answer the question “What is a compound?”

The following characteristics were identified:



- A fenced area.
- A family community where more than one generation of family (natural or created) lives.
- Enclosed multiple residences.
- Two or more buildings and associated elements.
- Multiple dwellings and other structures, may be walled, gated, and screened from view.
- Multiple residences with shared communal government, living system, and a shared ideology.

Historic Compounds and Communities

The roots of the American compound date to the 18th century. These early compounds were utopian settlements, focusing on a shared religious ideology. Typically these compounds included

- An emphasis on community
- Two or more buildings
- Multiple residences
- Shared communal government, living system, and ideology

In addition to utopian settlements, elite compounds are also a feature of the historic American landscape. For example, Camp Uncas, begun by William West Durant in the Adirondacks in 1890, was conceived as a self-sufficient enclave. It is a very complex compound containing 29 structures divided between living and service areas. Unlike early utopian compounds, this site is also surrounded by perimeter fence and has limited access.

Different Types of Compounds

Compound characteristics identified by crowdsourcing focused on spatial segregation, structures, and shared ideology. Drawing on these definitions, and the broader historical characteristics of the compound, we have identified three different types.

Residential

- Exurban or rural location, relatively isolated
- May or may not have a perimeter fence or wall
- Main house with secondary structures including secondary residences and outbuildings
- Multiple generations or extended family present
- Varying levels of self-sufficiency, usually seasonal
- Permanently occupied

Elite

- Exurban or rural location, relatively isolated
- Elite area
- May or may not have a perimeter fence
- Main house with secondary structures including secondary residences and outbuildings
- Recreational amenities
- Members of extended family
- Some permanent residents
- Seasonally occupied or for special occasions

Utopian

- Exurban or rural location, relatively isolated
- May have perimeter fence or wall with limited access
- Main house with secondary structures including secondary residences and outbuildings
- Includes religious and socio-political compounds
- Families and individuals
- Common social philosophy outside of mainstream
- New members must apply for admission
- Increasing levels of self-sufficiency
- Permanently occupied

