



INTRODUCTION

Placing Weeds in History

The memorials for George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln in Washington, D.C., constitute what historian Alan Havig has called “the nation’s most significant garden of honor.” Abundant granite, limestone, and marble sustain this flowering of American ideals year-round. The ribbons and rings of concrete and asphalt leading to the structures are traveled by millions of people each year. Swaths of grass, small groves of trees, and shrubs decorate this inorganic splendor, but they offer little sense of nature in Washington. However, a mile and a half northwest of the Lincoln Memorial is Lock 3 of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Water whishes through the lock gates, and vehicles’ worn struts thump when meeting 30th Street’s gentle rise. Chickweed, dandelions, grasses, Indian strawberries, kidneyleaf buttercups, pimpernel, purslanes, white clover, and yellow wood sorrel—plants that have colored the District’s landscape for decades—border a bronze marker identifying Georgetown as a Registered National Historic Landmark (RNHL). A few feet away, under the shade of a basswood tree, a bronze bust of Supreme Court Justice William Douglas gazes west.¹

These modest memorials recognize efforts to shape and regulate Georgetown’s environment. Installed in 1977, the bust of Douglas celebrates his leadership in



Figure 1.1. Looking west from 30th Street NW, Georgetown, Washington, D.C., 2010. Photograph by Nicole Reading.

protecting the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, which had become a National Historical Park in 1971. The RNHL marker certifying Georgetown as a site possessing “exceptional value in commemorating and illustrating the history of the United States” dates from 1967. In 1954, Douglas helped turn public opinion against a plan to construct a highway next to the canal by leading naturalists, sportsmen, and newspaper editors on a 170-mile hike along the canal from western Maryland into Georgetown. He imagined the corridor to be like “a wilderness area . . . a place not yet marred by the roar of wheels and the sound of horns,” right outside the “Capitol’s back door.” Congress had earlier passed the Old Georgetown Act in 1950 to establish the “Georgetown Historic District” in order “to preserve and protect” the neighborhood’s historic sites, array of architectural styles, and compact urban form. Indeed, efforts to retain Georgetown’s historic amenities began before World War II. The National Park Service restored the canal from Georgetown to Seneca to create “a recreational waterway” and opened it in 1940. In 1924, Georgetown civic leaders persuaded the District’s zoning commission to limit the height of new structures in Georgetown’s residential areas to forty feet. They worried that the construction of large apartment buildings would increase population density and automobile congestion. But while the bronze and brick on this parcel attest to the surrounding environment’s historical significance, they leave the lot’s environmental history unacknowledged.²



Figure 1.2. Looking west from C&O Canal Lock 3 in Georgetown, circa 1939. Photograph courtesy of Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park.

The grand landscape symbolized by the Douglas bust and the historic charm proclaimed by the RNHL marker rest on ground that for many decades lacked “exceptional value” and seemed detrimental to Georgetown. The parcel on which the RNHL marker sits belatedly realized substantial monetary value in 1957, when the federal government acquired it for the National Capital Parks System. In condemnation proceedings, the government paid \$42,500 for 3,449 square feet of land assessed at \$2,587. Twelve years beforehand, Georgetown Citizens Association members had claimed that “very unsanitary” housing in the area caused “trouble to the authorities and the community.” Houses on 30th Street from M Street south to K Street, where many African Americans lived, lacked electricity and plumbing. Some properties had “yard toilets”; others sent wastewater into the canal. When a proposal was made to turn the canal into a “high-speed roadway” in the mid-1930s, the canal bed was a mix of crumbled canal wall, vegetation, and pools of pollution. Grasses and herbs grew between leaning fence planks and the canal’s edge. Ailanthus trees shaded wooden sheds. Automobile owners parked next to the canal, which had ceased operating in 1924. As the canal’s economy had deteriorated, older, wealthier residents came to believe a slum was emerging. In the first years of the twentieth century, the land around the RNHL marker was earth

perennially home to whatever plants happened to be growing there. Happenstance plants had probably been there for much of the preceding century as well. From the division of John Southgate's property into the canal corridor and a somewhat trapezoidal parcel in 1829, until that parcel's remainder was purchased by the government in 1957, the property's various owners never built on it.³

Although the lot seemed to lack enough space to be useful, Washingtonians did make use of it to reject ordinary plants as weeds that did not belong in the nation's capital. Shortly after real estate broker Galen Green acquired the land in May 1906 for ten dollars, his management of it ensnared him in court. Perhaps too busy speculating in land in and around the District and luring would-be home buyers into the sparsely populated Brightwood neighborhood, Green had not tended the small patch, and in September, officials determined the plants on this ground violated the District's weed law. The condition of Green's land, however, was common. Although from 1870 to 1900 Washington's population increased from sixty thousand to three hundred thousand people, and its developed area increased from three to ten square miles, undeveloped land inhabited by happenstance plants such as those on Green's parcel stretched from the center of the city to its edges and beyond. Fleabane, moth mullein, and bull thistle lived on the grounds of Georgetown College. Chicory and ragweed sprouted annually where buildings had not. Carpetweed, false daisies, and yellow clover reached up from unpaved streets. Such fortuitous flora demonstrated that Washington and nature were not so far apart. However, the head of the District's commissioners labeled such plants "a menace to the public comfort and safety," and the *Evening Star* listed weed removal, like smoke prevention and building height regulations, among the local laws passed in 1899 that would promote the city's "grandeur and beauty." After Green's challenge to the law was defeated in March 1907, Washingtonians could hope that weeds would not mar their city in the future.⁴

The District's 1899 weed law arbitrarily prohibited plants "4 or more inches in height" and did not identify particular plants as weeds. This crude definition was a biologically determined aesthetic assessment. However, plants' biologies and people's judgments do not necessarily or neatly intersect. Today, some scientists decide whether plants are weeds on the basis of biological characteristics, such as the abilities to germinate in diverse environments, to grow rapidly, and to produce high volumes of seed continuously. People's complaints about unsightly or useless plants are aesthetic impressions that often form when unsightly or useless plants abound. How a plant functions and how people perceive a plant are potentially conflicting rather than reinforcing aspects of what makes a plant a weed. Plants that grow rapidly are not necessarily useless. Plants that are considered unsightly may not germinate in diverse environments. That any plant can be a weed and that no plant is always a weed mean that plants are only thought to be weeds at

particular times and in particular places. For this reason, plants called weeds are best understood with a historical perspective. This book is about such plants in twentieth-century American cities.⁵



Plants maligned as useless and worse by past city dwellers, rather than being organisms that require no study, can be used to understand the evolving relationship of city people and the natural world. Ceaseless changes have made happenstance plants natural vegetation in cities. The details of when and where urban Americans believed that such plants were “out of place”—weeds—present opportunities to examine the nature of urban growth. Since these plants endured the twentieth century, investigating their history helps characterize ecology in cities. As they arrived, thrived, and died, just plants contributed to the development of metropolitan landscapes by contributing to how cities felt, looked, smelled, and sounded. They influenced how people experienced growing, changing, and deteriorating cities. Moreover, the ecological dynamics created by hostility toward them continue to shape urban environments and places beyond.⁶

Ecological processes occurring across municipal borders and throughout metropolitan areas integrated cities with the natural world even as urban life influenced the workings of the natural world. Growing cities were entangled with ecological processes, and they altered the ecologies of organisms living in and around them. Understanding the ecology in and the ecology of American cities requires an encompassing sense of the distant bounds of American urban life. *Urban* is not a mere synonym or euphemism for central business districts or slums. Cities extend beyond the densest creations of asphalt, concrete, glass, and steel. Cities consist of towers and tunnels, gardens and parks, residential neighborhoods and industrial sites, filled-in sinkholes and restored streams, dry streambeds and steep hillsides. Cities are linked by power, communication, and transportation technologies. Happenstance plants do not recognize the borders between cities, suburbs, countryside, and wilderness areas. Ubiquitous just plants sprouting in and moving around cities in ecological time have long blurred the edges of urban places, metropolitan areas, and the environments surrounding them.⁷

Throughout the twentieth century, the relationships of people and plants in cities changed as ecological processes were interrupted, neglected, and encouraged. Evolving environments made plants charming or dangerous, even as plants also made environments desirable or chaotic. Metropolitan photosynthesizers inhabited landscapes of change, from the forgotten pockets of old neighborhoods to the newest fringes. Making cities cleaner, healthier, and safer by combating weeds improved and expanded urban life. Yet progress in eradicating weeds most often resulted from developing an area fully, which altered local economies and landscapes, produced newly vacant land, and promoted additional growth of

happenstance plants. In areas perceived to be in decline, weeds seemed to damage buildings, sidewalks, parking lots, and roads. In environments of despair, weeds sometimes intensified poverty and danger. Weed-dominated spaces that deflected investment could reinforce and provoke changes elsewhere in metropolitan areas. Some weeds that created problems for urban Americans grew well beyond where these people lived and where concrete and asphalt sealed much of the ground, and control of such weeds generated tensions with surrounding environs. The perpetual growth of urban herbs and people's frequent attacks on them were a recurring pattern, an ecology of cities that shaped vegetation. Discontent with weeds, like other city dwellers' dissatisfactions, compelled outward urban growth. Failing to accept or appreciate these plants, condemning them instead, alienated people from ecological time.⁸

While cities may seem less natural and be less full of nature than lightly settled places, their disturbance dynamics are important to study because these dynamics rework land across the globe. Urban environmental historians often examine what alternately fascinates some scholars about the lives of people and others about the lives of different creatures in the same spaces. Integrating such knowledge requires working carefully with ecological ideas to detect how patterns in nature shaped the past and where nature is an outcome of history. This work is paralleled by the interests of scientists who research "human-dominated" ecosystems to learn how the ways in which people live within cities alter and respond to changes in ecological systems. When skillfully fused, history and ecology advance our understanding of how past urban landscapes became the places where we now live and where people around the world will someday live.⁹

Since twentieth-century cities contained only an iota of past forests, prairies, croplands, and pastures, and since cities allowed people to move to rhythms other than those of the sun, many scientific and sentimental Americans believed that cities, in the words of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, had a great "distance from nature." However, cities remained embedded in the natural world; ecological time flowed through them with the operation of biochemical cycles and the repetition of the seasons. Over ecological time, the order imposed by destruction—whether a tornado ripping up the ground or a city block being razed—faded as plant and animal populations appeared, disappeared, and sustained an ever-changing rhythm of life. The building, destruction, reconstruction, neglect, refinement, and preservation of cities frequently interrupted and impeded this time, but did not terminate it. Ecological time quietly advanced, especially in spaces that home owners, real estate agents, and municipal officials labeled abandoned, empty, neglected, undeveloped, or vacant. Where this time was halted or undone, nature may have seemed absent. People's "distance from nature" in cities was not just spatial, then,

but temporal, and this temporal distance intensified and increased as city dwellers interfered with and tried to undo the flow of ecological time. The frequent collisions of nature, culture, ecology, economy, and society in urban environments scrambled time. Happenstance plants from myriad places and via many movements shaped spaces and influenced how city dwellers experienced the world around them.¹⁰



The persistence of happenstance plants, which makes them useful for studying the nature of cities, derives from their long coexistence with people. In 1952, botanist Edgar Anderson wrote that “the history of weeds is the history of man.” Although Anderson was skeptical of using historical periodizations such as the Classical Era to comprehend weeds, peoples’ relationships with the plants do provide insights into different periods. Historian Alfred Crosby’s statement that “weeds thrive on radical changes, not stability,” conveys ecologists’ concept of ruderal plants—plants adapted to settle or survive in disturbed places and drastically transformed spaces. Taken together, these remarks suggest that the plants are recurring markers of and participants in times and places of change. The plants inhabited land during the emergence and transformation of the United States, from Europeans’ colonization of the Americas, through Americans’ creation of farms across the continent, to the ongoing city-building process. For more than three centuries, people living in America have commented on the weeds around them. Weeds seemed to make environments inhospitable to colonizers and settlers; they have occupied war-torn landscapes and complicated agriculture. Americans’ familiarity with weeds has also enabled them to use the ubiquitous plants to talk about their times and their social and cultural worlds, as when some frustrated and alarmed Americans have compared people with weeds.¹¹

The colonizers of America did not find or create a weed-free land. Virginia Company leaders considered “idle and wicked” immigrants among “the weed and rankness of this land.” In 1621, members of Parliament debating the importation of tobacco referred to the colony’s key export as a “vile weed.” *Datura stramonium*, which contains the alkaloids hyoscyamine and scopolamine, sickened British troops who ate the plant during Bacon’s rebellion. After rebels burned Jamestown, the plant also supposedly grew from the ruins. This landscape change, folklorist Charles Skinner later wrote, was why a plant Europeans called thorn-apple became known to Americans as Jamestown or jimson weed. In New England, Thomas Hooker sowed biblical imagery by comparing sinners to “wildernesses overgrown with weeds.” John Cotton, who emigrated from England to Massachusetts in 1633, wrote in 1620 that those who seized “vacant soyle” and cultivated it won the “Right” to it. Colonists eager to cultivate “vacant” land may

have been eager to identify it by finding weed-covered ground. Such an outlook may explain in part why they observed weeds among the Native American women's polyculture plantings. Francis Pastorius, who emigrated from Frankfurt in the 1680s and established Germantown outside of Philadelphia, compared the area to other places in the world where "Thorns, Thistles, Tares and noisom Weeds abound." By the end of the seventeenth century, colonists' fields and roads were home to ordinary European plants such as dandelion, henbane, wormwood, and mayweed.¹²

While revolutionaries likened traditional English politics to weeds in a field, after the Revolutionary War, Americans employed the word *weeds* to criticize democratic culture and politics as well as social trends. In July 1776, congressional delegate Benjamin Rush wrote, "The republican soil is broke up—but we have still many monarchical & aristocratical weeds to pluck up from it." In 1800, Federalist Joseph Dennie, writing as "an Enemy of Innovation," dismissed the American neologisms that Noah Webster intended to include in his dictionary as "noxious weeds." Dennie's *Gazette of the United States* compared Webster to "a Maniac gardener, who, instead of endeavouring to clear his garden of weeds, in opposing to reason, entwines them with his flowers!" These remarks exaggerated Webster's unconventionalness. The *American Dictionary* conveyed his respect for authority and passion for social control. He defined "to weed" not only as "to free from noxious plants" but also as "to root out vice." A New York newspaper ridiculed Jeffersonian ideals as impractical by printing a poem that lampooned a gentleman farmer who thought, "To root up weeds their [*sic*] is not reason, Against the *rights of plants* 'tis treason. Each has an equal right to live." When Thomas Benton criticized the Senate's censure of President Andrew Jackson for his policies toward the Second Bank, Benton dismissed claims that Jackson had ruined the economy and turned "the streets of populous cities to grass and weeds." In emerging Ohio River Valley cities, educated citizens voiced concern about the children of wage earners who were "growing up like weeds, without benefit of cultivation." Such vituperations may have helped the three-quarters of all Americans who lived on farms understand when people were objects of contempt.¹³

As seventeen new states joined the nation and new territories were established in the first six decades of the nineteenth century, even more plants became weeds. George Perkins Marsh worried that New England's deforestation produced "barren" hillsides covered with "noxious weeds" whose seeds were washed into valley farm fields. Americans moving west encountered unfamiliar plants and spread old ones as they turned forests and grasslands into fields of corn, wheat, and cotton. The *Farmer's Cabinet* urged readers to wage "a war of extermination, against weeds of every name and nature." War against every weed, however, may not have been necessary. William Darlington, an amateur botanist who wrote about

agriculture, pointed out that there were different kinds of weeds. Farmers considered weeds to be “intrusive and unwelcome individuals that will persist in growing where they are not wanted.” Such harmful plants differed from plants that people did not “respect” because they were “homely” or lacking “medicinal or other useful qualities.” Darlington concluded that an “old” definition of a weed—“a plant out of place”—was the best one. Yet once a plant became known as an “out-of-place” weed because it was “out of place” in a field, that same plant was likely seen as an out-of-place weed regardless of what environment it was seen in. Such entrenched impressions could deter reassessing weeds despite ongoing environmental and historical change.¹⁴

Northern religious leaders and abolitionists identified a variety of people as weeds when discussing the conflicts leading up to the Civil War. Theodore Parker described “the national soil” as “dreadfully cumbered with weeds of two kinds . . . Whig-weed and Democrat-weed.” George Cheever warned that God would harshly judge those who cherished liberty but voted “to make their fellow-creatures . . . weeds, by fastening the chains of a perpetual slavery upon them.” In a fictionalized slave narrative, a narrator described her “utterly neglected” companion as “a complete human weed.” On Thanksgiving Day in 1861, Henry Ward Beecher compared the South to “an immense field of nettles . . . overrun with the pestilent heresies of State rights.” During and after the war, Northerners also found weeds overtaking Southern land. A soldier from Massachusetts reported that “high, coarse weeds and rank grass” covered Manassas, Virginia’s rolling plains. Republican leader Carl Schurz encountered fields “wildly overgrown by weeds” and deserted planters’ houses with broken windows and “yards and gardens covered with a rank growth of grass and weeds” in his postwar travels.¹⁵

After the war, scientists and naturalists wrote about Old and New World weeds and expressed trepidation about the disappearance of the distinctions between these worlds. Botanist Asa Gray wondered why so many weeds were Old World “foreigners.” Naturalist John Burroughs claimed that most farm and garden “outlaws” came “from over seas.” Eurasian plants had “pugnacity” because farmers’ battles with them meant that “their struggle for existence has been sharp and protracted.” In contrast, “native weeds” were “shy” and “harmless.” Burroughs was not worried by either; he wrote, “Ours is a weedy country because it is a roomy country. . . . By and by we shall clean them out.” English science writer Grant Allen doubted such an inevitability, reporting in 1886 that “European weeds and wild flowers” had become widespread in the United States. He remarked, “All the dusty, noisome and malodorous pests of all the world seem here to revel in one grand congenial democratic orgy.” Allen, who was disturbed by the predominance of southern and eastern European weeds, predicted that “in the cosmopolitan world of the next century the cosmopolitan weed will have things all its

own way.” Allen envisioned a future when “the whole earth will be one big dead-level America . . . a single uniform landscape of assorted European, Asiatic, American, African, and Australian weeds” and the plain architecture of crematoriums, Salvation Army barracks, and drainage works. Allen’s view conditioned how some Americans saw their country. To counter such criticisms, journalist Henry Mann wrote that America’s motley but energetic people consisted of a lower “percentage of human weeds and refuse than any other nation on the globe.” Other Americans, however, agreed with Allen. California herbarium curator Alice Eastwood thought the “cosmopolitan” nature of civilization worked to reduce people and plants “to one dead level.” Willis Blatchley, an Indiana scientist uncomfortable with immigration, added to Allen’s “democratic orgy” assessment by contending that America’s “soil seems to suit exactly those weeds which are the offscourings and refuse of civilization in all countries.”¹⁶

The persistence of weeds sustained interest in what weeds were and what plants were weeds. Ralph Waldo Emerson challenged traditional views by redefining weeds as plants whose “virtues have not yet been discovered” and by dreaming that innovators would use “the infinite applicability” of the plants to increase “our modern wealth.” However, since weeds seemed to reduce wealth—\$17 million in crop losses were attributed to them in 1896—their depredations continued to be declared. Botanist Byron Halsted wrote that “pestiferous,” “vile,” “execrable,” and “miserable” weeds asserted “their inborn rights above all others” and fought people “for the possession of the earth.” According to Samuel Schmucker, weeds “had learned to take care of” themselves, and accordingly, children should be taught “to wage war upon them.” Gerald McCarthy realized that so many plants were called weeds because “distinguishing of plants as weeds and not weeds is purely human and artificial.” He proposed focusing scientific research on the “obnoxious” ones with “national reputation[s].” Elmer Campbell rejected defining weeds as “out of place” because “human caprice” alone could “instantly” turn “any plant in the universe” into a weed. Like McCarthy, Campbell thought weeds should be defined only as plants that were “persistently obnoxious on cultivation areas.” Orin Stevens resisted this revisionism. He believed that weeds were plants “detrimental to man’s interests, displeasing to the eye or of no evident value.” Weeds were, indeed, “out of place.” *Science* reported that botanical research indicated that “the dandelion can literally be called the king of the weeds.” In 1939, botanist Edgar Anderson attempted to change the nature of this debate by emphasizing the importance of plants’ “spreading” capacities. Weeds—“plants unintentionally grown by man”—were “peregrinators,” along with “cultivated” plants, plants living in “man-created habitats . . . though not actually cultivated,” and plants that spread quickly “even when not associated with man.” However, the scientific quest to comprehend the nature of weeds continued. In 1966, for example, Oklahoma State

University botanist Jan de Wet concluded that “true weeds” were plants that had “become adapted to the permanently disturbed man-made habitat[s].”¹⁷

Scientists’ definitions of and ideas about the plants did not preclude the employment of the word *weeds* in debates over foreign policy and wars, present and past, as well as economic corruption and crises. In promoting pesticide use to increase garden yields during World War I, American Civic Association president J. Horace McFarland condemned the “human weeds of Germanic nations” fighting “to take all the space they want.” During the 1920 Palmer Raids against anarchists and communists, former Michigan governor Chase Osborn advocated internment rather than deportation “to solve our human weed problems.” Looking back at the American Civil War, William Wood, a colonel in Canada’s military, concluded that immigrants who had formed peace parties in the North had been “human weeds, clogging the springs of action everywhere.” Theodore Bassett, the Communist Party’s education director in Harlem, identified some of the most troublesome Americans as the “anti-Negro, anti-democratic terrorist gangs [that] breed like weeds in the dank soil of intolerance created by the wanton disregard of the Bill of Rights.” In 1933, lawyer Arthur Wickwire indicted speculative pools as financially corrupt “weeds” that choked financial markets and inflicted “untold losses upon innocent people.” In his 1934 State of the Union Address, Franklin Roosevelt listed excess industrial production, exploitation of consumers, and child labor as weeds that had to be prevented in the future by denying them “soil in which” to grow. Herbert Hoover emphasized that the nation’s problems had less to do with capitalism than with individuals who abused the system, telling Stanford University’s class of 1935 that “weeds of abuse will always grow among the fine blossoms of free initiative and free enterprise.” Hoover argued that it was preferable to engage in “unceasing labor” to dig out such “evil” weeds, rather than to permit “the blights . . . of governmental tyrannies” to kill “blossoms.” When Hoover recalled the challenges he had faced when entering office in 1929, he restated this view: “We had our share of thistles and many sprouting weeds.”¹⁸

During the Cold War, Americans denounced communism as an invading foreign ideology and expressed disdain for their antagonists in domestic politics by abstracting both ideas and people as weeds. The University of Notre Dame’s Gerald Phelan argued that “Christian verities” could protect the nation’s democracy from “the weeds of atheistic communism and agnostic liberalism.” Labor leader Philip Murray argued that the involvement of government and trade unions in a “healthy, balanced economy” created “an environment [in which] the weeds of Communism find scant encouragement.” The belligerent *New York Daily News* often printed the Cold Warrior’s creed: “The only good communist is a dead communist.” This expression updated Frank Mann’s 1913 declaration in “the Farmer’s Creed” that “the only good weed is a dead weed,” which itself was based on the

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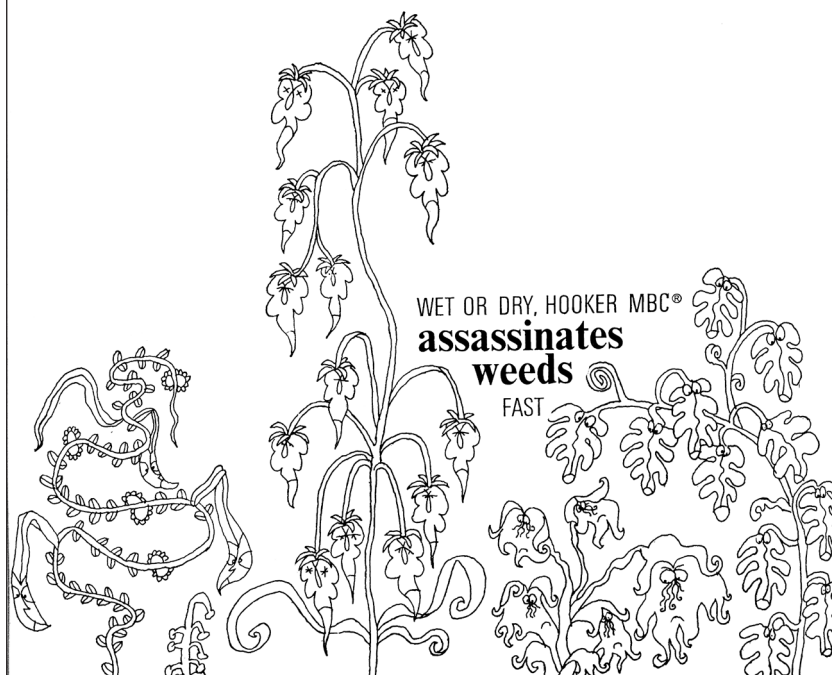


Figure 1.3. By the time this advertisement ran in *Public Works* in 1967, Hooker had already buried tons of chemical by-products in land in Niagara Falls and sold the land to the city's school board, which a decade later generated the Love Canal environmental controversy. Printed with permission.

frontier expression, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” Conservative newspaper columnist Morrie Ryskind ridiculed the inaccuracy of presidential primary polling by opining, “Noah erred when he allowed the progenitors of the pollster, a human weed, to come aboard.”¹⁹

Weeds, when they were not irritating people working or managing land, helped some Americans grasp and express the problems of modern life, including its environmental and social challenges. As the fifth Earth Day approached, *Pasadena Star-News* editors proposed renaming this education effort “Earth People Week.” Although they acknowledged protecting the earth from atomic bombs, criminals, “desecrated nature,” and smog was important, the editorial writers contended that environmentalists needed to do more to clean up “the minds and hearts of some of the humans who clutter the landscape” because some of “the most obnoxious features of our environment are . . . people.” The *Star-News* stance was a response to the announcement in early April 1974 that the kidnapped granddaughter of media mogul William Hearst was joining her abductors, the Symbionese Liberation Army. To the paper’s editors, “humans who are like thorny weeds in our Garden of Eden” were greater dangers than smog and polluted water. Less harmful than Hearst’s tormentors were the “human weeds” who created “pollution and do other things which make our earth a less healthful and pleasant place to live.” The tumult of the times convinced these Californians that improving “the quality of human beings” was a necessity, even if they were uncertain of the best means. Decades of retributive justice had been a failure; the editors wrote: “We have tried eliminating [the vicious human nettles that mar our garden] in the gas chamber; we have tried terms of various lengths in prison, but as a few are removed too many more grow in their places.” According to the *Star-News*, young environmentalists could do much to help out the world by shifting their energies from stewarding the earth to helping reform “unproductive” young people “likely to become criminals,” since it was “possible to change what might become a weed” when a person was still young. Even as the *Star-News* editors blended the social and the natural in their use of the human weed metaphor, they conceived of social and environmental problems as distinct rather than interrelated problems.²⁰

From America’s colonization through the nation’s modernization and beyond, environmental, cultural, economic, political, and social changes made Americans aware of all kinds of weeds. On the ground, weeds changed environments. In print, weeds informed cultural and social life. Changes in cities made the plants part of urban life as well. The fortuitous flora that grew where natural and built environments converged in and around cities were often perceived as weeds that undermined health, safety, social order, beauty, and efficiency. Weeds annoyed, inconvenienced, intimidated, poisoned, and weakened people. City dwellers believed

that weeds spread infectious disease, permitted pest propagation, caused allergies, and encouraged illegal dumping. They feared weeds made cities unsafe by attracting and sheltering vagrants, drug dealers and users, and violent criminals. They saw them as blight that marred landscape aesthetics, clashed with neatly tended land, lowered property values, and degraded nature. They argued that weeds interfered with urban infrastructure. Yet some Americans were impressed and soothed by happenstance plants.

Understanding the ecology of fortuitous flora requires examining the ideas and actions of botanists, ecologists, environmentalists, gardeners, ordinary people, plant enthusiasts, public officials, and urban weed-control advocates. People who despised weeds included home owners and apartment renters; neighborhood groups, journalists, and social reformers; municipal, state, and federal government officials; and scientists, chemical manufacturers, and businesspeople. Their recurring efforts to destroy weeds are part of the historical record. City dwellers who admired, appreciated, and utilized—even defended and disseminated—these plants were less numerous and less powerful. Some urban Americans probably never noticed, thought about, or touched happenstance plants, but their unintentional inattention also contributed to the development of vegetation. Municipal, state, and federal officials' correspondence, publications, and reports, along with court cases and newspaper accounts, provide evidence regarding where and how these plants grew. The papers of scientists, ecologists, and their professional organizations, as well as academic journals and trade publications, document local landscapes, environmental change, and American environmental thought. Americans' relationships with urban herbs inspired laws, essays, work relief, scientific experiments, art, and free speech, all revealing how cities grew and changed. While cities such as Buffalo, Chicago, Lincoln, New York, St. Louis, Washington, D.C., and some of their neighboring municipalities are the focus of this study, examples from other cities, from Boston to Los Angeles, demonstrate that concern with these plants were national in nature.

Throughout the century, urban herbs were in cities as they grew outward, remained in them as their growth intensified, and continued to grow as Americans lamented their cities' declines. In the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, cities were unable to seize command of the ecological processes shaping urban vegetation. With the acceleration of the United States' industrial economy after the Civil War and through the strains of the Great Depression, fearful city dwellers decided that improving cities involved controlling weeds, as well as controlling the people they thought of as human weeds. Although the nation prevailed overseas in world wars, battles at home against weeds that refused to surrender informed midcentury environmental politics. As metropolitan

landscapes diversified in postwar America, happenstance plants proliferated, contempt for weeds remained, and Americans sensitized to the plight of nature admired just plants in cities. People who worked to improve the livability of their cities—to make them more tolerable, humane, and beautiful—were among those who struggled to get rid of weeds, live with just plants, or win admiration for happenstance plants. Their thinking about and handling of the plants was influenced by and has contributed to the evolution and permutations of American environmentalism and the nation's nature.