In an episode from *Out of Town* (1866), American humorist Robert Barry Coffin’s mid-century account of suburban domestic life outside New York City, Barry Gray (Coffin’s pseudonym and the book’s narrator) persuades his wife to have a group of his “artist friends” over for dinner. The prospect throws his wife into a state of nervous excitement as she contemplates what she should serve to the group of “ten hungry men” arriving from the city, knowing that they will not be satisfied with her traditional Saturday meal of “simple salt codfish and potatoes” (50). At the same moment that she exclaims her unwillingness to perform the task of hostess for such an occasion, an express-wagon filled with twelve hampers of food and drink arrives at their doorstep. The arrival of these provisions, ordered ahead of time by Mr. Gray, sets the stage for a banquet orchestrated by a man for his male companions. The delivery even attracts the attention of the local paper, and a journalist is sent to observe the party through a window. The published report (which Mr. Gray shares with his readers) focuses on the meal’s extravagance and wild nature, from the description of the “immense game-pie, composed of ducks, woodcocks, quails, and grouse” at the center of the table to the “jugged hare,” “boned turkey,” and “boiled ham, a round of beef, broiled spring chickens, ducks stuffed with olives, boned sardines, and other appetizing relishes”
that surround it (59). Both the article and Mr. Gray’s account characterize the event as a success, and the descriptions of food and drink emphasize the writer’s control over his domestic environment—his wife disappears from view as he orchestrates a bachelor feast organized around masculine aesthetic sensibilities. In suburban Fordham, Mr. Gray is able to enjoy marriage without having to relinquish the pleasures of single life, and the fruits of his table reflect the benefits of living a country life within city reach. He has room to grow mint for mint juleps, neighbors who provide fresh eggs and milk for the eggnog with strawberries and cream that he enjoys while reading, and plenty of space to store barrels of ale for impromptu celebrations. At the same time, he doesn’t have to abandon the amenities of New York City: the oyster soup, ice cream, brandy-peaches, turkey, venison, raisins, almonds, and cakes that he loves can appear at a moment’s notice. His physical location allows him to experience the best of both culinary worlds.

This essay considers representations of food and scenes of eating in writings by Robert Barry Coffin as a window into suburban masculine domesticity in mid-nineteenth-century American literature. Commenting on the ways in which written representations of food reflect other developments and desires, Carolyn Korsmeyer remarks in *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (1999) that “[o]ne of the most significant roles of food is social: eating is part of the rituals, ceremonies, and practices that knit together communities” (9). Because the act of eating is by nature temporal, she continues, “the temporality of a narrative, whether written, dramatic, or cinematic, permits extended reflection upon the ways eating serves (or severs) communities” (9). In the 1850s and 1860s, a number of popular male authors published semi-autobiographical accounts of domestic life on the edges of American cities, popularizing the suburbs as cheaper, healthier, accessible alternatives to urban areas. Food plays an important role in the idealization of home in these texts, which critics now classify under the genre of the country book. Even though most country books from the mid-nineteenth-century depict the lives of married men, women do not figure prominently within the narratives. Instead, men are represented as the connoisseurs of the table, making decisions about the garden, the cook, the arrangement of the kitchen, guest lists at parties, acceptable drinks, and the types of food eaten. The male authors and narrators of country books used culinary aesthetics and practices to assert control over their homes and wives as well as to create a sense of community among men and between author and reader. Their accounts of the produce they grew,