In the 1880s in Massachusetts and Maine two women who shared a household were each at work on a book. Annie Adams Fields, cultural hostess, poet and founder/director of the Associated Charities of Boston, was setting down her prescription for a reformed version of charitable assistance. This successful manual, *How to Help the Poor*, was published in 1883. Meanwhile, Fields’ companion, Sarah Orne Jewett, was writing her third novel, *A Country Doctor* (published in 1884). This narrative about a young woman growing up in rural Maine and eventually starting to train as a doctor would consolidate the focus of Jewett’s fiction, in particular the life of postbellum communities of rural, seaport and factory-town Maine.¹

On the face of it, these two works have nothing in common. Fields writes of a system of helping the poorest of the urban poor, the city’s desperate and near-destitute, who were almost never the subject of Jewett’s fictions despite her part-time residence in Boston over nearly three decades. True, Jewett’s novel does begin with a widowed, homeless, suicidal young woman, returning to die in her mother’s

¹ Like many of Jewett’s readers, I am deeply indebted to Terry Heller, whose authoritative website, The Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project (http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/sj/index.htm), has made freely available all known Jewett writings, including many periodical items never reprinted, plus much of Fields’ work. Without it this essay would not have happened. The Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project is used here for all citations of Jewett’s and Fields’ texts, and in most cases page numbers will not be cited. The Project’s website does not provide paginations for the texts it holds on-line, so I have adopted the expedient of providing chapter references for such texts. Thanks also to Tess Cosselett and Charlene Avalone, my fellow editors, and to the British Academy, which funded my paper on this topic for the Society for the Study of American Women Writers international conference, Philadelphia, 2006.
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farmhouse. The tale, however, then charts the fostering of her child in this rural community, her growth to young adulthood, and her subsequent encounter with her father’s upper-class family. The novel thus moves within and across a set of overlapping socio-economic worlds: agricultural neighborhoods apparently little touched by industrialization, except when farmers’ children leave to work in factories and shops; the gentry’s houses in the country and seaport with their wealth, power, and high culture; and the life of the professional classes serving all levels of society and having wider connections to a metropolitan, indeed international world of knowledge. It is through the narrative device of visiting – all kinds of visiting, neighborly, medical, friendly, familial and helping – that Jewett explores complex cross-class interactions such as these. She deployed this trope, her commonest narrative device, in at least thirty-seven of her tales and novels.

Judith A. Roman has observed that Fields’ charitable work was the one unshared thing in her life with Jewett, her companion from 1881 until Jewett’s death in 1909. I want, however, to demonstrate how reading the subject of visiting across the work of both these women allows us to see the connections between social and charitable visiting, to understand what visiting involved for diverse groups of women as an act of moving into and within spaces that were deemed public despite their home-based setting, and to consider what re-envisioning of the “public” might be going on for these authors. This was a major period of transition, when America was consolidating into an advanced capitalist industrial economy, engendering permanent class divisions and, among many other things, changing possibilities, good and bad, for women of different classes and ethnicities. In particular, for my present purposes, these wider developments altered both attitudes to social rituals of association, already well established mid-century, and the patterns of charitable visiting that had existed earlier in the century. Fields (born 1834) and Jewett (born 1849) lived through this transition, demonstrating how earlier expectations and values were brought to bear on a radically changing America and were themselves changed.

However, in exploring shifting boundaries between public and private in various kinds of visiting in the Gilded Age, I do not intend

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