

CHAPTER VI
LAND, THE INDISPENSABLE BASIS
OF ALL HUMAN ACTIVITY AND LIFE

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth". Genesis

Peoples' dissatisfaction with conditions of working and living, often due to governmental, ecclesiastical, economic or military tyranny, or to overcrowding, famines, or the crushing exactions of landlordism, or to smaller considerations, have been common all through history.

Migration, the deliberate act of leaving a home, a town, or a country, has frequently been the result of peoples' determination to escape unhappy situations in search of a better life. Obviously this requires that there actually be some place, some spot or area of the earth's surface, to which it is possible to move where there is room and opportunity to establish new homes, communities, and countries.

There have been migrations of varying degrees of magnitude and importance, but those of most direct concern to this study were of people to, and subsequently within, this continent, resulting in the founding of a new nation.

Peoples' coming to America has already been described in the first chapter. Settling along the Atlantic seaboard they attained enough relief from old oppression to be satisfied for a time.

But the growth of population and fresh discoveries made a new, inland migration natural and inevitable. However, this development was retarded for many years by continual warfare. The colonists were caught in the new-world echoes of the wars between old empires, such wars, raids and massacres being rendered most hideous by Indians who were used by both the British and the French in their rivalries for the continent. These wars never ceased until 1760, being at last ended by the British victories of Jeffrey Amherst at Crown Point and at Ticonderoga, and of James Wolf at Quebec, and by the horrible exploit of Captain Robert Rogers and his Rangers who wiped out the Indian village of St. Francis, on the St. Lawrence River, to which nearly all the tattered remnants of the tribes in New England had gathered. Yet no sense of safety could have been felt by inland settlers for another three years. But peace was finally assured by the Treaty of Paris in 1763. *

I am most familiar only with that part of the new inland migration, consisting of people from the old "Bay Colony" and from Connecticut, that came northerly up into the royal province of New Hampshire and into the "New Hampshire Grants," as that territory, lying west of the Connecticut River and later to be

*Correction: Only largely assured. There was an Indian raid, worse in Vermont, October 16, 1780, on Royalton. There may have been o

named Vermont, was first called. We can presume that this group of settlers, moving in from the increasingly-populated seacoast, was typical of all.

Ethan Allen, later joined by his brother Ira, was among the most illustrious explorers and leaders in this period and place. Leaving home in Cornwall, Connecticut, in the spring of 1768, he rode north on horseback, up into the "Grants." He ranged widely from Lake Champlain to the Connecticut River, even traveling to Portsmouth, where he bought from Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire a tract of land in the "Grants" for himself. All through the new territory, he noted what a fine place it was for settlement. There was timber; there were many fine water-power sites for grist and saw mills; there were flat areas suited for clearing, and even some intervalles of virgin grass lands; there was an abundance of game and fish -- perhaps trout in the Battin-kill then as now! In the fall and winter, back home in Cornwall, he told his neighbors of all he had seen, stimulating the northward migration. He saw the beginnings of a great struggle on the "Grants," between relatively modest settlers seeking land on which to live and work, having bargain-rate grants from Governor Wentworth, against the great speculators from New York conniving, with their successive governors, in attempting to establish on the "Grants" the manorial system of landholding. Allen at once allied himself with the former, organized and lead the Green Mountain Boys, and defeated the "Yorkers" and their "infernal projections."

Mill Hollow, where I live, in New Hampshire, was once a busy little hamlet, first established by Bay Colony and Connecticut people who brought with them their architectural, agricultural, and mechanical traditions. From the window by which I write I can look down over the unbroken snow at a natural feature of terrain that originally determined settlement and long economic activity here. Out of the area of open water and swamp of the "Great Pond" flowed a small brook, level for a little way, then down over ledges and through a winding gorge. Here was power! Settlement, farming and industry followed the establishment on this brook of the town's first grist mill in 1767, on the site of my present mill. Just below that came its second saw mill in 1770; then a starch and rake factory; next a blacksmith shop with "triphammer," and last a tiny spinning mill. The year-round power at all five sites was greatly improved after 1771 when they raised the "Pond" eight feet by a stone dam with regulating gate at its outlet, creating a fine reservoir. Such mill sites, each with an opportunity to use some "fall" of the brook, provided by Nature, were so valuable during our first century and a half here, and their economic nature was so well understood, that in old deeds and documents they were commonly designated as "mill privileges." Carding and fulling machines were soon set up here, aiding still further the agricultural pursuits and household industries and success of the community that grew up here.

Elsewhere in our town had happily been found one of the virgin grass intervalles that made possible the feeding of cattle the first winter, Nature's first offering to her patrons, in 1752.

Mica was discovered in 1810 and with feldspar has supported economic activity ever since. I lived as a boy in a house of bricks made of clay dug up only a mile and a half away. The smallest water wheel, an antique, now in use in my mill, is of "bog iron" dug only fifteen miles away.

These are a few examples showing how Nature's creations, substances and forces have aided men in their first efforts to get and maintain a foothold in any new region, and to live there.

It is important to realize just how people would have contemplated the move to a new region beyond the frontier for a new life and fresh opportunity, and what economic concerns they would have had.

When Ethan Allen returned home to Cornwall, like any other explorer back from the interior, he would have been surrounded by friends and neighbors all anxious to hear of his adventures and of what he had seen. Winter evenings, around the blazing fireplace fire, long pipes would have been smoked; the "flowing bowl" of hard cider, flip, or "madeira rum diluted with whiskey" would have been passed around many times, as Allen told of all the good things about the "Grants" favorable to new settlement. He wanted to promote settlement; they wanted to try it. And they would have asked him many questions, all about what it was like up there. Is it at all conceivable that anyone asked him, as we might today, what the employment situation was? Whether wages were high or low? Or about the tax rates? Of course not! Such men had been pioneers once or were full of the stories of how their fathers and mothers had been. They knew what the basic requirements were to make a place suitable for settlement -- land for crops and pasture; timber for building; power sites for mills and shops; fish and game; minerals, like stone for building, clay for bricks, "bog ore" for iron, and other natural resources. Allen said the "Grants" had them all.

The whole territory "belonged" to the King, represented by his provincial governor. How could one get a tract of land up in the "Grants?" Ethan could have reported that that situation was favorable, as Governor Wentworth, like Henry Ford of a later age, saw the advantages of mass transactions at low prices and had an interest in there being large numbers of successful pioneers. Hundreds of families took up the challenge of fresh opportunity. On horseback, in canoes, on foot, leading their stock, lugging their few essential possessions, northward they headed up into the now-safe, waiting, freshly explored wilderness. Putting first things first, they opened clearings, put up cabins, dug into the soil, applying their labor to the land, doing the most urgent, simple tasks required for a bare existence, aided by capital in the elemental form of such hand tools as they would have brought with them -- axes, shovels, picks, bars, hammers, saws, chisels,

augers, forks, scythes, hoes, etc., and all the domestic, household utensils.

Modern man, never himself having "pioneered," and being steeped in the narrow concepts of economic terms used loosely today, and with perspective limited by our habits of narrow specialization, might naturally wonder just how economic society could have gotten its start in a new land.

How about employment?

All the offerings of Nature were available. The needs of the man himself and his family would require every bit of time and energy of them all!

How about wages?

Their entire production of building construction, food, clothing and fuel would be theirs to keep, as their wages.

How would industry really get going, or economic progress be made by which something better than just a bare living could be had? What about any amenities in life, schools, churches, doctors, artisans, neighbors, communications? As anyone then would have known, all these would have come in due time after a few had gotten a foothold on the land.

When some of the first urgent needs were met, then some steps could be taken toward progress. With hand tools and methods, using what lay at hand, the more extensive capital equipment could be made. The first saw mill in Newbury, on the "Grants," was made of stone and timber and odds and ends gathered locally, only the iron crank having to be brought in from Manchester, fetched back eighty-five miles cross-country over the snow on a handsled by several men on foot. The mills and shops eased the labor of meeting local needs for feed, lumber, iron parts and utensils, cloth, and other things in ever-increasing multiplicity, and created a surplus exchangeable for products from afar. Horseback trails were widened and cleared for wagons and sleds, allowing the growth of economic exchange. Combined interest and resources created churches and schools.

Progress consisted in ever-increasing refinements of these economic and social facilities, guarded by government properly extended in scope only as far as deemed necessary by a self-reliant people grounded in reality. Life became easier, fuller, and safer.

Again, as this chapter is to emphasize, everything depended on access to land, this being the real object to be gained by migration and re-settlement. If it be claimed that settlers had intangible objectives in mind, such as religious or bodily freedom -- still, personal access to land was what made possible the escape from old, oppressive conditions.

Our ancestors understood all this perfectly, even instinctively.

But is it understood today? Or is it true? Do people need or use land today? I venture to say that most people have never given it a thought, but if asked would say, at first anyhow, that No, they did not have any need for land.

Such a belief is perhaps not surprising, considering how most of us live.

Probably more than half of Americans live in an urban setup or environment, owning of land, if any, only a lot sufficient for house and garage, perhaps a few trees and flower beds. The lot will have no bearing whatever on the economic activity of the owner, his work being elsewhere. He may appreciate his city, or the road leading past the house to the city, but these values he will usually think of as advantages of the house, not of the lot of land. A large proportion live in rented apartments, in large buildings, tier on tier. For the rent paid, the tenants see they have many advantages, the security of roof, floor, walls, heat, light, elevator, plumbing and appliances, with no worries about repairs or snow removal. The location, convenient to work, stores, entertainment, transportation, and so on, will be appreciated but will be thought of as an attribute of the apartment, not of the land on which the building stands.

Most people work for an employer who will have bought the land site and put up the building, who gets the orders, lays out the work, furnishes the materials, recruits and pays the help, and undertakes the sale of the products or services. Does a woman running a sewing machine, drill-press or typewriter think her work depends on land? No; the cloth, sheet metal or paper are brought to her, she does her part on them, is paid every week and goes home every night. Does a man running a turret lathe think that land is important to his work? Hardly! He may hope there will be no shut-downs in the mills where the bar-stock that he machines is smelted and rolled, but, if he ever heard of it, he would leave it to others to worry about the ownership or depletion of the mines in the Messabi Range. Less than 10% of our population actually themselves engage in farming, the very most obvious use of land.

No, the average person seldom owns or directly uses land, and therefore seldom gives it a thought. But try to imagine a hypothetical combination of circumstances like this: all farmers evicted from the land; all miners locked out of the mines; all fishermen driven off the sea; all oil well drilling and pumping stopped; all lumbermen ordered out of the woods -- in short, all "extractive" industries, those taking wealth directly from land, brought to a dead halt. Bankers and economists immediately, and

all other people eventually, would realize that if this condition continued a few weeks or months, it would be serious. In a year there would be panic and chaos. Relief through "unemployment compensation" and others of our highly touted safeguards would be short-lived, for soon there would be nothing to buy with the money doled out. But even assuming an early and happy ending of this basic work stoppage, people might at least have caught a fleeting glimpse of society's utter dependence on land. I almost wish such a thing could be staged for the value of the lesson to this modern age!

With only a little reflection it becomes obvious that modern society, just as significantly as earlier societies, is utterly dependent for its residence and its work on the areas, forces, and substances of Nature -- the attributes of land as defined in economics.

It may appear at first that it is not necessary that all men apply themselves personally to land, but that it is only necessary that all be members of a unified society practicing specialization and exchange on a permanent business basis, in which a sufficient number engage in the activities that apply labor and capital directly to land to supply society's needs for housing and for the raw products of land.

That is perfectly true as far as it goes, but it leaves out much of what must be considered in any study of political economy, namely,

THE LAND QUESTION: On what terms, if any, can people own and use land?

Failure to recognize and deal with this question has created and maintained a division of society into a land-owning class and a landless class; it has interfered with the production of wealth and with its just distribution; it has tended toward an unnatural concentration of people in cities.

When people are landless and able to contribute to the productive processes only their labor, and when possessed of no special skill or education, they are almost completely vulnerable to exploitation in the labor market, shorn of the real bargaining power which independent access to land should give them.

When the English people, during the early stages of the industrial revolution, were forced off the agricultural countryside of their native land through the division of the "commons" into great landed estates, they congregated in superabundant numbers in the slums of growing industrial cities, competing against each other in the "workhouses" and factories, driving wages down to a level of bare subsistence, if not lower. Growth of land monopoly

throughout the country, and, no doubt, the deterioration of old ways and arrangements, precluded the possibility of a return to old ways or a retreat from exploitation and evil living conditions in the cities. Those that migrated to America and to Australia, where land was easy to get, largely escaped that fate.

The same thing took place in the days of ancient Rome, where the creation of "latifundia," the large estates of the wealthy, were carved out of the public lands, leading to the depopulation of the countryside and the decay of agriculture, as displaced peasantry and yeomen crowded into Rome, forming an idle, lawless mob, their lot unmitigated by any industrial revolution. This rise of a landless, idle, destitute class was one cause of the fall of the Empire.

Every study -- even those made or reported by Americans -- of the economic conditions in the poorest countries, such as those in South America or in south and southeast Asia, reveals the recognition of the land question and of the need of land Reform. The basis of the problem in those places is rightly seen to lie in the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a rich, aristocratic, dominating few; wide distribution of land among the serf-like millions is recognized as an urgent need. But "reform" there seems not to be based on any effective change of concept of public and private rights, as is to be outlined in Chapter VIII; mostly it is merely the mitigation of the extreme irregularities and cruel abuses of continued land monopoly. Where large estates are divided among numerous "workers", the former owners are thought entitled to compensation at public expense, their "free ride" on society thus continuing undisturbed. Yet the need of land reform of some sort, at least, is clearly seen.

It is strange that people who make apparently objective studies of such foreign conditions never apply themselves to the same needs here. Perhaps they think, since, as they say, "We are now predominantly an industrial rather than an agricultural nation," that the land question is of little or no moment to us, or that in some way we have progressed beyond the need of considering land in the economy.

Actually, Americans are being crowded off the land just as effectively and tragically as were Englishmen, as heretofore mentioned. Some historians, of course, have written that what was formerly thought of as "free land" beyond our western frontier, which acted as an outlet or safety-valve for our growing population, is now gone. More accurately they should say that it is no longer freely available. They seem to give little thought to whether it is gone practically, or legally, or physically, or to what extent it is now all in actual use.

The important fact is that there is plenty of land, in large amounts and small, with all manner of varied natural endowments, suitable for all uses from agriculture to residence to commerce, widely distributed throughout the country from coast to coast and north to south, and not in use. If so located as to confer to users any competitive advantages -- in the path of modern use and progress -- it is available today only at speculative prices.

Before white settlers came to America, no acre of it could confer any special advantage to anyone, and so no owner could have commanded any price for it. The whole of Manhattan Island was bought from the Indians by the Dutch in 1626 for \$24.00 worth of beads and other trinkets (a price practically equal to zero) but would now be valued in the billions. The pasture and woodland around Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire now sells for \$60.00 a foot along the shore. Much of the best farm land in Iowa sells for \$600.00 an acre. The growth of our population to nearly 200,000,000 has created these values and prices.

I am not forgetting to "Render unto God" all credit due Him as the Creator of the earth and all that in it is, but it is Man who has given rise to exchange value, or price.

The following chapter will describe our system of land tenure, with its good and its evil phases.