

A Little Republic in a Landlordless Arcady

Rapid Growth and Abundant Prosperity Have Favored Arden, Del., a Single Tax Community, Where There Are No Laws and the Residents Never Lock Their Doors

by Bolton Hall | 1911-04-30 *The New York Herald*

“Delaware! Twenty miles south of Philadelphia, in that flat country, and only four trains a day? You couldn’t get a woodchuck to live there!”

“But we have beautiful woods and a nice stream and – and a good plan.”

“Plan? Any one can make a ‘plan!’ Is it near the railroads? Is it cool there in the summer? Do you have mosquitoes?”

“Well, it’s half a mile from a railroad and it’s not exactly cool, and there are some mosquitoes, but we’ve got Will Price, the architect. We’ll succeed.”

That prophecy was nine years ago, when Frank Stephens, a Philadelphia sculptor, got off at a fat telegraph pole that marked a milk station and started to do the impossible – to get the people back to the land, where the land is hardly worth cultivating.

But he says he never proposed to get the people back to the land; he proposed to get the land back to the people.

“How?”

“By buying out the landlord.”

“But lots of people have done that.”

“Yes, but they have done it either for themselves or in order to create other little landlords. This plan is different; it’s Henry George’s idea put in practice on a small scale – just for an object lesson.

The land is held by three trustees. Their title deed requires them to lease out as much land as you want to pay rent for to whoever wants it and forever.

Three assessors, chosen by the tenants, fix the rents every year, and the tenants collect those rents themselves. First, they are spent for the State and county taxes on all land, buildings, possessions and what not there and the balance for roads and other public improvements.

They just pay to themselves the value they have created instead of handing it over to a landlord. Then they spend it for themselves. Simple, isn’t it? And the leases run in perpetuity.

So more than seventy families have built homes there on the only land that really “shall not be sold forever,” and where you can live “as you like it.” Successes that he can’t imitate are rather discouraging to “the man in

the street.” But here is a success within the reach of all. You need only to apply to get a share; but there is no speculation in it, no “profits” – and Arden has nothing to sell you.

On the turnpike is a rustic arch which bears the inscription “You are welcome hither.” It makes no exception of rich men or poor men, “good” or “bad” men. As the great single taxer said of himself, so Arden proclaims “I am for men.” All sorts have come, artists, mechanics, authors, the workers and “the leisure class” men and women. There are no special privileges, and no laws either, except that if you shoot any of the brethren, feathered or otherwise, or make yourself such a general nuisance that a majority of your fellow leaseholders vote you out, then the trustees may cancel your lease, if they think best. But such things do not occur. These people are as honest as communists – they never lock their doors. The rents of that hundred acres of abandoned farm amount now to more than \$1,500 a year.

That neck of woods on the Brandywine Brook is now dotted with picturesque dwellings of varied types, some of frame, others of rock and still others of concrete or hollow brick, proving that buildings under a co-operative commonwealth would not all be of the same architecture, and eyesores at that. On the driveway stands the club house, and adjoining are the dancing hall and the ice cream parlor; a short distance away is the rural inn. The Wanderlust will lead you down the crushed stone paths toward a tempting wood, which brings you to the principal cottages. On the left stands Frank Stephens’ own beautiful home, with its quaint inscription from William Morris, “Tomorrow is a new day,” in carved old English letters. Further along is the bungalow of Professor Scott Nearing, of the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, and in the other directions stand a dozen tents of those who have not yet built homes.

And there are some houses whose cost is reckoned in thousands, but not many as yet. We have been only six years a building.

One stops to read the weekly bill of amusements on the wall of the club house. The typewritten notice gives a list of events held nightly, and on the programme we find that every pleasant Sunday evening a camp fire is held on the public ground, at which time there are singing, recitations and music. Other evenings are devoted to other amusements, such as a lecture on economics on one evening and a literary discussion another night, besides the monthly town meeting. For those who wish it classes and club tables in Esperanto help out the intellectual menu. French and German will come as a dessert.

Baseball, basketball, tennis and an open air theatre all find ample space on the village green, which is open to all the children of men.

If you want to know more they publish a monthly paper down there – Arden Leaves. Oh, it’s a going concern; it has even “got there” already. It has shown that only monopoly prevents people from getting for themselves land and a living. And there are other single tax towns whose object is to “make good theories work,” which is the village motto down at Fairhope, Ala. While they are working for this ideal they get happiness. Fun is expensive, but happiness doesn’t cost a cent.

Their theory also is that all men are equally entitled to the use of the earth, and that since all men have that right to use the earth those who want the exclusive use of any part of it should pay to the rest the value of the land they take. In order that all may get the benefit of the value or sum for which the land would rent, the community takes it as a tax for public purposes in place of all other taxes, so it is called the single tax.

To make a beginning in the dim distance of fifteen years ago and to show how much better half a load if than no bread, a dozen of the prophets and martyrs started Fairhope, with a bank account of \$250 and an unlimited fund of faith. In order to build up a colony that should live upon its land values they had to go twenty miles

across the bag from Mobile to a place where there were no land values, and they have been engaged ever since in bringing the land values there.

They live just as people do elsewhere, with no colony or communal system. The only little difference – but it's a big little difference – is that instead of having to buy land for a farm or home the Fairhoper leases it from the corporation – and the corporation is the Fairhoppers themselves. This trifling difference, then, is that elsewhere when you take land on a lease or when you buy it, the owners gets the difference between what you pay and what he paid, which may be very great.

Now, the Fairhope corporation is organized for the distinct purpose of taking and using this difference, the increased value that comes because the people go there, for the benefit of the people that do go there. It leases the land to whoever desires it, subject to an annual rental which shall “convert into the treasury of the corporation for the common benefit of its lessees every value attaching to such land, exclusive of improvements thereon.”

Every year the tenants fix their rent anew so as to keep up with the times, just as the landlord would fix the rent if the tenants did not rent from themselves. Usually these rents increase as they do in all growing communities, but there is no monopoly or speculative value, for the Fairhope plan cuts out the land speculator.

But even the Fairhoppers cannot make a profit by speculating in their land, for the leases provided that no part of the rents shall be appropriated as interest, dividends or profits in any form whatever, and that all lessees shall be treated with strict equality.

That's where the plan differs from leases that owners make, which are made for their own profit and charge all the traffic will bear, without any regard to the lessee.

Well, how does it work? Eleven of the first settlers are there still, and about six hundred besides, which would seem to answer that question. A handful of poor men, encumbered by inexperience, misrepresentation and prejudice, have sent Fairhope ahead of all other towns in the surrounding country and expect to do so some more. They have done it with what they call “their little single tax, that gets the landlord off their backs.”

Beginning with 250 acres, with a doubtful title, the corporation now owns nearly four thousand acres, but it is managed the same as before, by the Council of five, elected annually by the votes of resident members. In fact, Fairhope has practically had the commission form of government for fifteen years. It was a pioneer in that also, and it has resulted among other things in giving its lessees telephone service for \$6 a year which would cost outsiders \$18.

You will ask next, “How do Fairhoppers make a living?” Just like other people – by various industries that naturally arise in any community – and by farming, generally or intensively. People often go to a new social plan with the idea that they are going to live on Easy street without working. I have never found such a street as that, and none of our colonies promise one. All we can do is to remove the artificial restrictions that so often keep even hard work from bringing success. We try to encourage men to save and to improve by offering them the chance to do these things instead of requiring them to pay the greater part of what they own for a bit of land upon which to build their houses or to make their improvements, as they must do elsewhere.

One of the blessings of Fairhope is the bay, on the highest land on the southern coast, where there is always the joy of bathing in the clear, unappropriated salt water, and fishing, sailing and rowing. They draw good

money out of the great sea – fish, crabs, shrimps – and every day there is a picturesque line of visitors fishing for fun or for food. And if you would rather go swimming instead of catching swimmers there are free bath houses put up by the corporation, and it is a cold day when they are not filled.

Some six or seven hundred inhabitants! One does not expect to find much more than ordinary educational facilities in a place that size, but Fairhope has a library of about four thousand volumes, and they are not offcasts of summer visitors either, but well selected economic books, some of which are of great value. Beside all that Fairhope has six hundred yards of wharf, with good warehouses at each end and a steel track between them; passenger and freight cars run on that long wharf.

There are one drug store, two good hotels, three beneficent society lodges, four general stores, five societies, a village improvement club, an ice and creamery plant, a brick plant, saw and planing mills, livery stable, churches and all the modern improvements, including a couple of doctors, who have to use automobiles because the Fairhope people don't fall ill often enough to keep the doctors alive, although an income so small it would mean squalid surroundings and a poor living in a city insures a good living and comfort in Fairhope.

This is not to say that food and clothing cost materially less than elsewhere, but the style of living is less expensive and one may lease a lot big enough for a house, garden and chickens for \$3 or \$4 or so a year within half a mile of the Post Office, where he may have a comfortable home and enjoy the quiet of the country and yet be close to neighbors and every other convenience.

And if he wants more land he can have it, all he can pay for, but if he expects to get rich subletting it he will find that the good theory does work, because none would pay him any more than they would have to pay for similar land from the corporation, and when one can rent direct from the corporation he won't pay any more to anybody else. That is the way the land speculator's graft is prevented instead of being punished. The Council fixes the rate on rentals, which is about four percent of about the same sort of sites in neighboring communities. For instance, residence sites in the best part of the town rent at the rate of about \$25 an acre, business sites about \$75 an acre, according to the situation; farm land half a mile from the centre of the town from \$1.50 to \$3, and from that down to 60 cents an acre two and a half miles away.

The success has led to others besides Arden in Delaware. New communities are now being organized in West Brook, Me., in Harvard Village, Mass., and our own little neighbor Free Acres, at Berkeley Heights, N. J., and there is no reason why you, my gentle reader, should not start a little Single Tax society of your own, or at least join one of ours.

The faith that can move mountains finds it easier to get the land back to the people where they live than to get the people back to land where they can't live.

When we lay the founders of these towns to rest beneath the sod that they have loved we will write over each of them the words of Themistocles:—

“I cannot play upon any stringed instrument, but I can show you how to take a little village and make it a great city.”