ARDEN, DELAWARE -
UTOPIAN EXPERIMENT IN SINGLE TAX
AND SUCCESS AS A PLANNED COMMUNITY

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Summary

1. Arden is an example of early garden city planning that predates Sunnyside Gardens and Radburn.

Planned in 1900 by architect Will Price, the cluster development principle was used in order to put about 45 percent of the town's 163 acres into open space, roads and paths, including two village greens. A high proportion of the lots back on woodlands or face greens with paths used to separate vehicles and pedestrians. Lots were laid out in varying sizes along curving streets. The same design concepts were used in Radburn in 1929, almost 30 years after the planning of Arden.

2. Arden has demonstrated in a small model the Single Tax theory of Henry George.

The fundamental ideas of the founders of Arden were Utopian. They wanted to show that a better society could be created by using the land theory of Henry George, the industrial theory of Kropotkin, and the art theory of William Morris. They demonstrated in a limited way that Single Tax can work. More important, they founded a community based on concepts that attracted diverse people interested in ideas, and showed that such people could create and maintain a living community of self-renewing vitality.

3. Arden remains a unique community—a viable alternative to the traditional suburb and a green beauty in an area of conventional, one-class subdivisions.

Arden has managed to become and to remain a true village with a deep sense of community among an extremely heterogeneous population. The village has built up and maintains an active community life, including a highly developed participatory democracy utilizing a town meeting form of government. It is a sought-after place to live where the test of the market place, as demonstrated by real estate values, proves its success as a community.

4. Arden is the only Village in the nation which is on the National Register of Historic Places as an entire Village. It was placed on the register February 6, 1973.
The object of the paper is to show that Arden, Delaware, the Single Tax village six miles northeast of Wilmington, belongs in the history of Utopian communities and in the annals of town planning. 1/ It has so far been largely overlooked for two reasons. First, it has been successful as a community and survives today as lively as ever, and historians probably don't look on it as history just yet, at age 73. Secondly, Arden's modest fame as a Single Tax experiment—an experiment that had extremely low chances of failure from the outset—has overshadowed other aspects of Arden's existence as a Utopian community and an example of town planning. Arden's location within the eastern urban corridor and within the Greater Wilmington area is shown on the maps on page 11.

We would like to start with the history of Arden, to show where the ideas behind it came from, and then to discuss the town as an example of garden city planning, and as the lively heterogeneous community it is today—a triumph of social and environmental planning that emerged from an attempt at an economic demonstration.

In 1895 disciples of Henry George, the philosopher and economist, adopted a strategy they hoped would put into effect throughout the nation George's idea of land taxation, known as the Single Tax. They reasoned that if they could get one state to adopt this idea, the benefits would be so obvious and compelling that other States and the federal government would follow. They selected little Delaware for their crusade.

It was virgin territory—there were few if any Single Taxers in Delaware, which had a total population in 1890 of only 168,493. There were only about 40,000 registered voters, of whom about one-third were in the city of Wilmington. The Single Taxers were modestly going to try to bite off a small segment before consuming the entire pie. It turned out to be a tough little bite.

The spectacular missionary effort started on June 15, 1895 when a dozen emissaries of the Philadelphia Single Tax Society, wearing uniforms, "invaded" Delaware, as they put it. That was the first of a series of weekend excursions to Delaware from Philadelphia. It was followed by visits by leading Single Taxers including George himself who came from all over the country to speak and work in the effort to convert Delaware. The object was to elect a governor and legislature pledged to apply the Georgist theory. The central idea was to enact a law requiring that all land be assessed at its "true rental value." The essence of George's theory, as expounded in his book, "Progress and Poverty,"2/ is the abolition of all taxes except a tax on the value of land exclusive of the value of improvements on the land. George did not wish to abolish private property in land. But he argued that landowners received the lion's share of the benefits of economic advance, and that putting the major weight of taxation on land would result in solution of most social problems. 3/ The tax, George argued, should be the rental value of the land, a value that would increase as population grew and development occurred.
The Delaware campaigners met resistance to change. Many were jailed. In the 1896 election, the Georgists got only a little over three percent of the vote. There was one legislative result of their crusade. When a new state constitution was adopted in 1897, it contained a clause preventing the legislature from adopting "a system of taxation the object of which is the confiscation of the land." That of course is a deliberate perversion of George's ideas.

George wrote in "Progress and Poverty": "The tax upon land values is the most just and equal of all taxes. It falls only upon those who receive from society a peculiar and valuable benefit, and upon them in proportion to the benefit they receive. It is the taking by the community, for the use of the community of that value which is the creation of the community. It is the application of the common property to common uses. When all rent is taken by taxation for the needs of the community, then will the equality ordained by nature be attained."2/

Among those idealistic campaigners of 1896 were Frank Stephens, sculptor, and Will Price, architect, both of Philadelphia. When the idea of setting up a statewide demonstration of George's economic theory failed, they decided to show that a town could be operated under the Single Tax system of land taxation. Nothing further was expected of the Single Tax experiment--just to show that the system would function at the town level.

However, Stephens admired the ideas of other philosophers, particularly Prince Peter A. Kropotkin, and William Morris, and he wanted to put all three together in one community. He managed to do that by founding Arden in 1900 with the help of Joseph Fels, wealthy Philadelphia soap manufacturer and active Georgist. In an address delivered at Oxford in 1923 Stephens reported how Arden was born:

"In the practice of the art for which I was trained, sculpture, I met a gifted and famous architect, Will Price, one of the wisest and finest of men, and had the good fortune to convert him to the religion of Henry George. We were both successful, speaking after the manner of men, in the practice of our arts, and both bitterly disappointed that the more success made that practice possible, the further we were from it, being merely employers of more and more people to do what we wanted to do ourselves. We had learned Morris's truth that nothing can be done for art till we have bridged the terrible gulf between the rich and the poor. We were so disgusted with civilization that we determined then and there to go out into the open and make a better one in which the land theory of Henry George should make the social basis for the industrial theory of Kropotkin and the
art theory of William Morris. So my wife and I searched out in northern Delaware an abandoned farm containing 162 acres of rolling hill country, like that of Warwickshire, beautiful woodlands, and the ugliest house in the United States. There the village was founded."

The tract of 162 acres was held in a trust, with three trustees. A village was planned by Price, with 85 acres in lots to be leased to anyone interested. The rest of the land was in two large tracts of woodland, one of which is along a stream valley, two village greens, pedestrian paths, roads and some additional open space. The plan has never been changed, and will be described later.

The 85 acres divided into lots of different sizes was rented on 99-year leases with the provision that the amount of rent is determined each year and is supposed to be "the full rental value of the land." No one is entirely certain what that is. However, the job of determining it is in the lap of a seven-member board of assessors, who always disagree, but who always have a majority with a recommendation. The residents of Arden—not just the leaseholders—may accept it or they may substitute different figures by a two-thirds vote at the September town meeting. If the town meeting votes for a different assessment, both go to a referendum among all residents.

In practice, the report of the assessors is accepted. The assessors are nominated at a town meeting and elected by referendum, using the Hare system of proportional representation. So, they do represent the residents. In their struggle to assess "the full rental value" rather than to reach the revenue the town needs to meet its budget, the assessors gather information on real estate sales in and near Arden to estimate the value of the land, and they consider current interest rates. The prevailing rationale for interpreting "the full rental value" is that the return to the trust should be based on the market value of the land, invested at current interest rates for government bonds. This leaves a lot of latitude for differences of opinion.

The assessors come up with a rate per 1,000 feet of leased land. In recent years they have been recommended a rate for the first 10,000 and a slightly lower rate for each 1,000 over 10. In addition, they add separate charges to the assessment of each lot that borders on woods or greens.

The town's revenue is used by the trustees to pay the town's expenses. The major expense is county and school taxes. In the fiscal year ended March 23, 1973, the town's income from land rents was $67,776 and the county and school taxes, including sewer bond charges, came to $52,307, leaving about $15,000 for village expenses.
The village of 162 acres has 580 residents including 428 voters, which means residents 18 years of age or over. In Arden you do not register to vote, you automatically become eligible when you reach 18 and have lived in the village six months. For this reason it is essential that the town's registration committee keep close track of who is living with whom and for how long. What might be considered gossip elsewhere is officially needed information in Arden, and the volunteer members of the registration committee have a happy time gathering their details for the voters' list. The density is only 3.5 persons per acre. No lot is supposed to be smaller than 10,000 square feet but there are a few exceptions. The largest leasehold is 64,600 square feet. All the available land is rented and has been for many years.

Before we leave the general subject of the Single Tax, let's consider how the experiment has worked out--what the effects of Arden's system of 99-year leases and annually fixed land rents have been. All that Stephens and Price wanted to show was that such a system will work. Looking at it in 1973, one wonders what doubt there could have been. Surely people would be eager to get possession of land without having to lay out capital for it if they felt they were not going to be charged too much rent. People took up the lots slowly at first, but they were all taken. Land rents have been shown to be a means of financing the operations of a small town--but there never could have been much doubt of that, once the lots were rented. Arden's founders believed that the Single Tax could abolish poverty if adopted nationally; they did not expect any miracles from a little enclave in the midst of a world of traditional taxation.

As the Single Tax works out in Arden, owners of big houses benefit from the fact that the community pays their property taxes while they pay the rent on the land regardless of what is on it. So far, residents of Arden do not seem to mind the fact that their system favors the wealthier residents, nor do they seem to be eager to take advantage of that situation by rushing to build additions to their houses. On the other hand, the Trustees of Arden, who own the leased land, are very conscious of that situation. They refuse to divide large leaseholds because creation of a new lot inevitably means construction of a new house. A house built today is going to cost the town something for real estate taxes without producing new revenue to the town. The land on which it would be built is already rented and won't produce more revenue to Arden if it is developed.

So the Single Tax has brought on a freeze in development by the present trustees. Without their intervention the Single Tax arrangement would operate to encourage development. Lots would be subdivided, additional housing would be built, and the density of population would increase. One of the characteristics of Arden's appearance--relatively large lots for the kinds of houses--would gradually disappear.
The existence of a Single Tax Community in Delaware has had no visible impact on the land taxation practices of other cities and towns. Also, the fact that Arden has a land tenure arrangement designed as an experiment in Single Tax has failed to convert many residents of Arden to George's ideas. Georgists do conduct courses in the Single Tax, but they are a small fraction of Arden's residents.

It must be assumed that people came to Arden through the years for reasons other than the Single Tax, and indeed they still do. Actually many of the earliest leaseholders were not Single Taxers. Some were acquaintances of Frank Stephens who were fellow members of the Ethical Cultural Society in Philadelphia. Some of these were Socialists. Like Stephens, they were interested in Utopia. If his Utopia was different from theirs, the fact is his was real and offered an opportunity to participate, to debate, to spend time with congenial people interested in ideas.

Now let's turn from Henry George to William Morris, whose ideas have had a major impact on Arden. Stephens and Price wanted to build a very pleasant place where people could both live and work—and their idea of suitable work was largely arts and crafts work. Stephens built a shop where he had his studio. A forge was operated there. It turned out lamps, lanterns, door latches and hinges, fireplace tools and other products known as "Arden Irons." The designs are still in use and many of the items are still being made, but not in Arden. Other craftsmen were weavers, pottery makers, stained glass craftsmen, and furniture makers. Among the ideas of William Morris the founders tried to follow was his appraisal of work. Morris said: It is "right and necessary that all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do, and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious." 5/

Stephens and Price succeeded in attracting artists, writers and craftsmen to Arden, and in developing a tradition in the town of respect for, and enjoyment of, the arts and crafts, even though few of the residents are able to make a living in those fields today. They attracted people interested in ideas, people who were individuals and not stereotypes. Building on Morris' ideas, they created a beautiful place to live and work and an atmosphere in which life was to be enjoyed with a maximum of participation in events of the community's own making, particularly theatre, folk dancing and outdoor sports. An open air theatre was built before any houses were built.

Stephens and Price never asked any questions about religion or race or political beliefs of people interested in leasing land. Everyone was welcome. They started a tradition of openness and an atmosphere of unquestioned individual freedom which have continued to the present. As an example, the Arden School voluntarily integrated two years before the Supreme Court decision and was the first to do so in Delaware.
Arden is sought out as a place where people can live as they please, with an unusual amount of privacy, despite the quiet work of the omniscient registration committee, which knows, but never lifts an eyebrow.

Now we turn to the physical plan, illustrated on the map on page 12. Two large areas of woodlands, the Sherwood Forest and the Arden Forest insulate the village on two sides from surrounding development, but Marsh Road, the boundary on the northeast side, is a heavily trafficked artery. So is Harvey (or Grubb) Road, which goes through Arden to a nearby interchange on Interstate 95. Over the years Arden has resisted all efforts of the state to widen Harvey Road, a two-lane country road with ditches and no shoulders, beautifully lined with Arden's dogwood trees, and carrying an average daily traffic of 8,580 vehicles.

On the fourth boundary of Arden is the similar village of Ardentown, founded in 1922. A third Single Tax enclave adjoining the other two, and called Ardencroft, was founded in 1950. We are dealing with Arden—the original town whose ideas were spread to the other two by Stephens and his son Donald and their friends.

There are two greens—the Arden or Village Green, and the Sherwood or School Green. A third area, once known as Meadow Green, is called the Memorial Garden now, and is used as Arden's cemetery.

In laying out building lots covering only 85.02 out of 162 acres, Price used only 52 percent of the land for development, reserving 48 percent for roads, paths, forests, greens and other community uses. This was done in 1900. Today we would call it cluster development, and worry about who is going to maintain the community facilities. But no homeowners association or other device was needed; the trustees owned the land and the town took care of it. All the community land was referred to as "commons." The two wide borders of forest constitute a greenbelt, an essential of a garden city, more than 30 years before Sunnyside Gardens was established in New York.

Price used a mixture of straight and curved lines in laying out the street pattern, and was not determined to make all lots rectangular. He made wide use of pedestrian paths. These are about six feet wide and are bordered by hedges. On the map they show as the Grocery Path, Milky Way, Stile Path, Pump Path and Clubhouse Path.

Some of the ideas later used in the planning of Radburn by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright are visible in the Arden plan. First, many of the lots face on open space—greens or woods. Second, the pedestrian is separated from the automobile to a large extent, through the use of pedestrian paths. Third, the
characteristic rectangular block used slavishly in developments of the time, and for years after, was thrown out by Price, who used winding roads and odd shapes.

A fourth feature of Radburn is the use of park land as backbone of the neighborhood. Arden pioneered this feature on a small scale and it has been repeated successfully in Radburn and Greenbelt and many other contemporary planned communities.

A fifth feature is the use of cul-de-sacs. In Arden they seemed a natural way to get access to lots on the woods or stream, and were an outgrowth of the enormous amount of open space preserved for the community.

At the start there was no zoning in Arden and none in its county, New Castle County. When zoning came to the county, Arden was pretty much left to do as it pleased. The result is a heterogeneous community. There are apartments, detached dwellings, a few stores, no industry, a few self-employed artists and two craftsmen, engaged in what the zoning people would call customary home occupations. The people are also heterogeneous as to race, religion, and income level. This is a major difference between Arden and the surrounding developments which are generally all one-class subdivisions, both economically and racially.

Another difference between Arden and the surrounding subdivisions is that Arden has an active community life. Part of this stems from the fact that Arden is an incorporated village and is self-governing. But that is a small factor as compared with the tradition of making your own entertainment and enjoying life established by the founders and early settlers. Physical facilities for that purpose were established early. The outdoor theatre has been mentioned. That is still in use—for occasional plays, and also for weddings.

Next came the creation of a community hall—a place for dances, meetings, parties, indoor theatre and music. The original farm contained a farmhouse—the one Stephens said was the ugliest house in the United States—and also a barn. The barn was converted into a community hall. It has been improved and enlarged over the years and is now the headquarters of the Arden Club, a private club open to all, complete with a suburban type swimming pool. Like many other buildings in Arden, the Gild Hall, as it is called, is half timbered in Elizabethan style, with field stone walls. What was formerly the ugliest house is similarly half timbered now and has become a thing of beauty. Stephens liked the Elizabethan style and it shows up in a group of houses he built, but there is no one architectural style that pervades Arden. With one exception there are no two houses alike in Arden. Many of the houses started as summer places used by weekend residents, and were gradually improved and winterized and expanded. Some are very modest and some are rather large and expensive.
The early settler planted trees and shrubs. Now at age 73, all of Arden is a green area enjoying a wealth of mature flowering trees and shrubs. No tree may be cut down without permission of the trustees.

Community life is rich and varied. There is folk dancing every Wednesday throughout the year at the Gild Hall and everyone is welcome. There are community suppers every Saturday, fall through spring. There are dances, plays, operettas, concerts. Neighboring Ardentown has a dinner theatre, an art gallery and restaurant.

Arden is so widely admired as a desirable place to live that values in Arden tend to be higher than in the nearby suburbs. One real estate broker estimated that the same house and grounds in Arden brings 20 percent more than it does outside Arden, despite the fact the homeowner will not own the land, and will pay land rent that is bound to exceed county and school taxes.

The government is another feature of Arden's community life. In 1967 the town was incorporated and the existing town meeting was formalized into the legislative body of the village. It has all the power any municipal government in Delaware may have. The Town Assembly as it is called meets at least four times a year. It enacts ordinances and elects the committees that carry on the town functions. The town has two part-time employees and otherwise operates with volunteer committee members. Meetings of the Town Assembly are well attended and issues are well debated.

On February 6, 1973 the Village of Arden was added to the National Register of Historic Places. It is believed to be the only complete village on the register. The reasons advanced for preserving Arden through placement on the register echo the preceding story and are summarized below:

- First, because it is one of the few Utopian communities to survive with its original ideas still in use.
- Second, because it is a pioneering example of successful town planning.
- Third, because the town is unique for its highly developed participatory democracy based on the town meeting.
- Fourth, because Arden is a beautiful place that is a cultural center for the areas.
- Fifth, because Arden has built and preserved a sense of community which sets it apart and has demonstrated that a heterogeneous village with a heterogeneous population can be a good place to live, in sharp contrast with the usual product of suburban sprawl.
Sixth, because the fundamental significance of the Arden experience is that a community founded on ideas attracts diverse people interested in ideas, and such people—even though individuals and families change over the years—continue to build and maintain a living community of self-renewing vitality.
FOOTNOTES

1/ Some material for this paper is based on "The Arden Book," a guidebook to Arden being prepared by the Arden Community Planning Committee, and written by Carolyn P. Liberman and others.

2/ "Progress and Poverty" by Henry George, Walter S. Black, New York - 1942


4/ Speech by Frank Stephens at Oxford - 1923