

## The Single Taxers' 'Invasion' of Delaware

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**ABSTRACT.** In 1895 a group of Single Taxers—members of the ethical democratic social reform movement founded by the American journalist, Henry George—'invaded' Delaware in an attempt, by concentrating their efforts, to achieve a demonstration of the efficacy of their theories by putting them into practice. The campaign won adherents but it failed to win adoption of the program because the idealists were not political realists and so they were unaware that Delaware in the mid-90s was a very unlikely place for a third-party movement.

APPALLED AT THE MISERY he saw in a nation of vast wealth, Henry George sought a way for all Americans to share the benefits of the industrial boom of the late 19th century. In his search for a solution to this tragic juxtaposition of suffering and affluence he began with the assumption that the true basis of wealth was the application of labor to the land which God had provided for all men. From this premise he reasoned that it would be as unfair to hoard land as to hoard air. Yet, land speculators were draining off huge profits merely by holding title to plots whose value would increase because of community development. This had the double disadvantage of rewarding idleness and stifling enterprise by withholding land from productive use.

George believed that this inequitable arrangement could be rectified by designing a tax system based on site value alone. No longer would a man be penalized by a higher tax rate because of his efforts to improve his property. Nor, since such a tax revision would necessarily mean a higher rate for unimproved land, would it be profitable for speculators to retain idle land. Arguing that a site tax would be sufficient by itself, George accepted the term Single Tax as a label for his program. This simplified tax system would obviate the usual array of tax gatherers and, inasmuch as land could not be hidden, tend to limit venality and deception. George explained his theory in *Progress and Poverty*. Within twenty-five years of its first publication in 1879, two million copies were sold.

Dedicated adherents of George's Single Tax theories labored to gain acceptance of his program. In 1896 the Philadelphia Single Tax Society

\* The writer acknowledges with thanks the aid of the late Donald Stephens (son of Frank Stephens, one of the leaders of the Delaware campaign) and of the late Dr. Henry George 3rd, grandson of the author of *Progress and Poverty*, who reviewed an earlier version of the paper.

chose to concentrate its political efforts by backing candidates in the state of Delaware who were convinced of the cogency of George's analysis. To them the political situation in Delaware looked promising. Superficially it appeared that the Republican Party had a strong hold on the state government; Republicans had managed to elect their candidates for governor and congressman and were able to control the legislature on joint ballot. The party was split into two factions, however, as the result of a disputed election for United States Senator. With the major party thus weakened, the Single Taxers thought they could hope for victory.

## I

ON JUNE 15, 1895, the state of Delaware was 'invaded' by an army of determined men. Wearing Union Army uniforms, waving banners and singing lustily, they marched from town to town (1). Their purpose was to convince Delawareans to cast their ballots in the 1896 elections for men who would see to it that the Single Tax system advocated by Henry George would be put into effect in Delaware. The campaign, spearheaded by the Philadelphia Single Tax Society, was admirably planned and energetically executed. Nevertheless, the election results showed small returns for their efforts.

The question of why the drive failed has several possible answers. The structure of the campaign, the nature of the Single Tax theory and its advocates, and the political situation all played a part in determining the outcome of the 1896 election. Examination of these factors can provide clues to the cause for failure, but any conclusions must remain conjectural in the absence of full historical record.

Contemporary sources of information concerning the Single Tax campaign in Delaware are sadly one-sided. The explosive issues of the 1896 national elections crowded the pages of the local newspapers, sharing the spotlight with the mounting crisis in Cuba. The *Delaware Daily Republican* took scant notice of the Single Tax campaign; the editor ventured his opinion, soon after the campaign started, that the Single Tax theory was the "greatest humbug of the day" (2). It seems safe to infer from this that the entrenched Republicans of New Castle County did not consider the Single Taxers a serious threat to their position. The Single Taxers, however, took a different view. Their journal, *Justice*, reported that "perhaps the best measure of progress made is the slight opposition which is arising and the 'conspiracy of silence' on the part of the newspapers" (3).

The *Wilmington Morning News* gave even less space to news of the

Single Tax efforts. It did, however, include a sample ballot for the Single Tax Party in the issue just before the election. A Democratic newspaper, the *Sunday Star*, gave better coverage and, in fact, published an editorial inviting a fuller explanation of the theory. Letters of exposition dutifully poured in and were printed, but several months later the editor complained that the Single Taxers were merely "dealing out fog and mud" and solicited further elucidation. The most complete account of the drive appeared in the pages of *Justice*. Published weekly, at first in Philadelphia and then in Wilmington, *Justice* gave minute, though naturally biased, coverage of the campaign.

Both the time and place for the political thrust had been carefully selected. A concentration of propaganda efforts on a small area had long been considered by the Single Tax society. Delaware was chosen as the trial point because of its size and because the majority of voters were concentrated in one city, Wilmington, making it easy to gather them into meetings. Furthermore, the Delaware constitution contained nothing inimical to the establishment of a Single Tax system (4). George's followers hoped that the Single Tax would make Delaware so dramatically prosperous that other states would be inspired to follow suit.

The Single Taxers thought the time propitious for a local focus for two reasons. There was general unrest in the state on the subject of taxation. Delaware, in 1895, depended on a hodge-podge of sources for its financial support. The state revenue came from "interest on the state investment in bank stock and railroad bonds, from taxes on railroads and other corporations and businesses, and from numerous licenses. When the revenue increased sufficiently, the taxes and poll taxes for state purposes were abolished, leaving these sources of revenue to the counties" (5). Aware of dissatisfaction with this system, the legislature in 1893 appointed a commission to develop recommendations for improvements. The commissioners found that there was insufficient uniformity in assessments for purposes of local and county taxes, and their recommendation was that the law should be "so changed to make property of equal value equally liable" (6).

A second reason impelling Single Taxers to concentrate on a local program was that they despaired of making themselves heard on a national level in the tumult of the Presidential contest. An editorial in *Justice* concluded that "the present is, therefore, a particularly opportune time for a strong concerted effort along the line of local or state reform in taxation, which, while in no wise interfering with the partisan proclivities

of Single Taxers, would serve to keep all our forces intact, active, and enthusiastic" (7).

## II

THE TOWNSPEOPLE of Hockessin, Delaware, must have been surprised to see a group of uniformed soldiers coming down the main street on a fine June morning in 1895. A closer look would have assured them that this was not a military unit, for on blue arm bands the words Single Tax were printed in silver. One of the marchers was a boy of six who covered the entire distance on foot and enjoyed the effort apparently as much as his elders (8). The boy's father, Frank Stephens, one of the planners of the Delaware campaign, carried a five-string piccolo banjo on which he provided accompaniment for the Single Tax songs, many of which he had written himself. This opening skirmish of the Single Tax 'invasion' sent speakers to Hockessin, Rising Sun, Newark, and Wilmington. They were well received; there was, in these early meetings, no intimation of the persecutions that would follow.

"Concentrate! Agitate! Nominate! Then, the Single Tax" (9). This was the slogan under which the 'army' of Single Taxers moved, and their message had two basic tenets—that the land was provided by God for the use of all men equally, and that a tax based on the value of the land alone was the only equitable tax. The platform was published in *Justice*.

We assert as our fundamental principle, that all men are equally entitled to the use of the earth. Therefore, no one should be permitted to hold land without paying to the community the value of the privilege thus accorded, and from the fund so raised all expenses of government should be paid. We would therefore abolish all taxation, except a tax upon the value of land exclusive of improvements. This tax should be collected by the local government and a certain proportion be paid to the state government (10).

Judging by the letters to the editor which filled the columns of the *Sunday Star*, it appears that the point which Delawareans found hardest to comprehend was the necessity for the removal of the tax on improvements. Patiently the Single Taxers explained time and again their belief that each man was entitled to the full product of his own creativity and labor and that these should not be taxed. The things which a man made belonged exclusively to him in contradistinction to the land which belonged to the community as a whole. When a man bought a piece of land, he owed the rental value of it to the community. Georgists had a particular animus against land speculators, calling them parasites who profited from the labor of others (11).

The idea of community rights in land brought up another thorny question. Who was to decide the value of a particular piece of land? The Single Taxers' answer to this was that, although it might be impossible to adjudge the value of a plot in absolute terms, it was possible to determine a relative value (12).

Harold Sudell, a Delawarean and a leader in the campaign, spelled out precisely the effect that a Single Tax system would have in Delaware.

What we would do in Delaware is this—we would abolish all our city and county taxes that fall on buildings and improvements; would do away with poll taxes, stock taxes, license and occupation taxes. We would take off the taxes now levied on railroad and express companies, etc., and in place of all of these, would increase the tax that now falls on the bare land value until it would yield sufficient revenue for all city, county and state purposes. In making his assessment, the assessor would not take into consideration the value of the buildings or improvements, on or in the land—he would simply try to get at the value of the land itself (13).

### III

IF CAREFUL PLANNING ALONE could have brought success, the Single Tax campaign in Delaware would surely have triumphed. Once the drive was underway the headquarters was moved from Philadelphia to the McVey Building at 8th and Market Streets in Wilmington (14). Above the offices were rooms for meetings and sleeping accommodations for enervated marchers. In these rooms plans were made to "turn every spellbinder loose" on the state of Delaware. Furthermore, they arranged to "bring up Longstreet from Texas with his tent; bring in Hawkins and Cummings with the red van; send down Frost with his stereopticon, Post with his charts, and Hand with his diagrams; send down Billy Radcliffe with his banjo and blackboard. Run a cart-tail camp wherever possible" (15).

In addition, the Single Taxers prepared a petition to the legislature advocating the Single Tax, contacted the local newspapers, and distributed innumerable copies of *Justice*. Financial backing did not seem to have been a problem. Money came in from private donations and from contributions solicited by the various Single Tax Clubs. In all, around \$25,000 was spent on the Delaware drive (16).

The record of meetings held is impressive. Beginning a full year before the election, 469 meetings were held in a space of four months. At these gatherings 76 speakers made 1,060 addresses. The attendance was estimated at more than 90,000 (17). Frank Stephens estimated that he himself had spoken to over 25,000 people (18). The pace was

kept up, meetings being held out of doors during the summer and inside in the winter. (19). The roster of local speakers was buttressed by Single Tax orators from all over the country. Henry George, Louis F. Post, Lawson Purdy, J. G. Maguire, Edward McGlynn, Thomas G. Shearman, and William Lloyd Garrison all took turns at proselytizing in Delaware (20).

The oratorical abilities of the campaigners was enhanced by the activities of the Philadelphia Single Tax Society. At their meetings the intricacies and implications of Georgist thought were debated. "Following the method by which George had solved the problem of Rent and Wages, that is, by the exact definition of terms, the challenging of all accepted authorities and the appealing of every question to the strictest test of ethical right, they sought to carry George's philosophy into the solution of questions he had not answered fully to their satisfaction, the problem of economic and commercial interest, of money, of rail-roading, and of the personal relations of men and women" (21).

To polish the delivery of the speakers a Shakespeare Club was formed as a training school (22). The effectiveness of the speeches was attested to not so much by the number of converts claimed by the movement—by February of 1896 the Single Taxers were listing 10,000 out of 36,000 voters—as by the fact that the opposition objected to their meetings. "The new fashion which the speakers have set in vogue of inviting questions from the audience is playing havoc with the peace of mind of the politicians" (23).

#### IV

MORE SERIOUS PROTEST against the movement, in the form of arrests, occurred sporadically, especially in the two lower counties of Kent and Sussex. The farmers of lower Delaware feared that a Single Tax system, based on land value alone, would have the effect of raising their taxes. Also, this was the area of Democratic strength and if it were true, as the Single Taxers claimed, that most of their converts were drawn from Democratic ranks, it would logically follow that Kent and Sussex politicians would make the most energetic opposition to the campaign.

The local newspapers carried reports of arrests of Single Tax speakers all through the campaign, the first arrest coming within a month of the opening. A typical scene, apparently, was one reported in *Justice*. Under the headline "Speaker Durand Becomes 'Victim Durand,'" the article said that the speaker mounted the box and began his talk. "Friends and fellow citizens. . . . I want to speak to you on a matter

of great importance'—But they [the authorities] thought it was a matter of no importance at all and arrested him forthwith." (24).

There was no legitimate charge on which these speakers could be arrested, so trumped up accusations of "noisy assemblage" or of "impeding the thoroughfare" were used. The effect of official opposition was diluted, if not neutralized, by the fact that everyone involved knew that it was a move of pique rather than justice. The Single Taxers themselves capitalized on it. To accentuate the ridiculousness of the charges and to bring more attention to their cause they insisted on serving their time in jail instead of paying the fines. Dover Jail, in particular, played host to many a Single Taxer, and the released campaigners formed the "Dover Jail Single Tax Club." One Single Tax wit wrote a letter to Mayor Fisher of Dover praising him for helping the Single Tax cause, saying that he had "done more for our cause in appearing to oppose it than any or all of those plain surface workers whom you seemed to persecute" (25).

Those who took part in this campaign seem to have been actuated by more than a rational conviction; there was an evangelical fervor. Frank Stephens called them "men and women aflame with the enthusiasm of the new crusade" (26). Some of them sacrificed their personal fortunes in their Single Tax efforts, and all of them were willing to put in endless hours to further the campaign. The hope of personal gain could hardly have been the driving force since most of them were not Delawareans and could not have hoped to profit from a new system of taxation or from political spoils.

To some extent, at least, it was a religious crusade. God's gift of the land to all men was being monopolized by a few and Georgists believed that their program could rectify this wrong. "So soon as a man understands it [Single Tax] he can't rest until he goes out and make[s] some other man understand it. . . . It is a religion with us. . . . If you believe in God, you can't help being a Single Taxer" (27). *Justice* referred to three speakers who had been arrested as martyrs, and the *Sunday Star* called the campaigners missionaries (28). Even the titles of many of the talks were religious. The *Sunday Star* reported that Henry George's speech would be on "'Thy Kingdom Come,' which will no doubt refer chiefly to the Single Tax Theory" (29).

Closely allied to the religious nature of the campaign was the fact that it was a platform of social rectification as well as an economic doctrine. Single Taxers believed that not only was their system the only equitable tax structure but that it would prove to be a panacea for all social ills

as well, thereby doing away with the "corruption of gross inequality inseparable from our present tax system, and [would] relieve the farmer, workman, and the manufacturer from those taxes by which they are now unjustly burdened" (30). An added dividend of the system was that it would no longer be profitable for speculators to hold land idle, and unlimited opportunities for employment of labor and capital would therefore be opened.

As election day—November 3, 1896—approached, the question of whether the Single Taxers should support those Delaware candidates on the Democratic and Republican tickets who favored the Single Tax or whether they should nominate their own slate of candidates caused an internecine struggle. The issue remained undecided until September, 1896, at which time the Single Tax Party of Delaware was formed and a convention called for September 17 in Dover. According to *Justice* this was a serious, sober convention, an instructive contrast to those of the dominant parties which exhibited the "silliest and sorriest of bar-room buffoonery" (31).

The Single Taxers' support in the Presidential campaign was given to William Jennings Bryan and Arthur Sewall. For some local offices they endorsed Democratic or Republican candidates who had pledged themselves to support Single Tax. To head their state ticket they nominated Dr. Lewis N. Slaughter for Governor. The 1896 election in Delaware was a heyday for the scandalmongers, and some of the mud was aimed at Slaughter. There were reports that he had been bought out by John Edward Addicks, a nabob of the Delaware Republican party, who had tried for many years to buy himself a seat in the U.S. Senate (32).

## V

IN COLD NUMBERS of election returns the Single Tax campaign in Delaware was an unequivocal failure. Their polling of nearly 2,000 votes represented only a little over 3 per cent of the 38,000 votes cast in the state (33). Still undaunted, the Single Tax paper headlined the story of election results "Success for the Single Tax," and charged that the vote count had been fraudulent. Three Single Taxers in one precinct had voted a straight ticket, but the returns showed no vote at all for Slaughter in that precinct, said the article (34). These charges could not be proved and the Single Taxers had to accept electoral defeat.

Defeat did not mean the end of the campaign, however. Heartened by the response to their ideas, the Single Tax Society of Philadelphia persevered through 1897 in an effort to win Delaware. This new Single

Tax campaign, reported *Justice*, drew "even larger and more animated crowds." The Delaware Legislature put an effective stop to their efforts with the new state constitution of 1897; it directed that in all assessments of real estate, both land values and improvements, must be assessed (35).

The value of the drive was an issue much debated among the Single Taxers. Some believed it was actually a victory, the chief gain having been the "conversion and confirmation of Single Taxers, who as long as they live will continue to propagate, in every town and hamlet and hundred of the state, the truth that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living and the dead should not control it" (36). Frank Stephens noted a further beneficial result. He felt that the Delaware campaign had been an indirect cause of the establishment of a Single Tax village at Arden, Delaware (37). Other Single Taxers, Charles Fillebrown among them, believed that it had not been worth the effort and that it had done more harm than good.

The leaders of the Single Tax movement selected Delaware as a proving ground for political action for reasons which seemed good. Yet, the choice of Delaware revealed a lack of political realism on the part of the Single Tax society. A less likely time and place than Delaware in 1895 and 1896 for a successful third party movement would be difficult to imagine. Delaware had two powerful political parties with statewide organizations and strong financial backing, and, what was more important, these two major parties dictated the editorial policies of four of the five major newspapers in the state. The Single Tax movement in Delaware thus suffered from a dearth of local leadership and local journalistic support. Furthermore, 1896 saw the culmination in Delaware of the bitter political battle between Republicans and Democrats generated by the efforts of Addicks to become a United States Senator by turning the Democrats' pet poll tax law of 1873 against them.

Partisan sentiments were running high and both parties were lining up the faithful and unfaithful, Black and White, to troop them to the polls. In this struggle between political titans the idealistic crusade of the Single Tax Society of Philadelphia, though doomed to fail, succeeded in increasing Single Tax support in Delaware.

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1. For examples of the songs composed for the Single Tax campaigns, see *Frank Stephens' Songs and Tributes from Old Friends* (Media, Pennsylvania: Roberts Press, 1959).

2. *Delaware Daily Republican*, Wilmington, Del., August 1, 1895.

3. *Justice*, July 13, 1895.

4. Arthur Nichols Young, *The Single Tax Movement in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1916), p. 148.
5. H. C. Reed, ed., *Delaware: A History of the First State* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1947), Vol. I, p. 304.
6. *Report of the Undersigned Members of the Delaware Tax Commission to the General Assembly: 1893* (Wilmington, Del.: Diamond Printing Company, 1893), p. 15.
7. *Justice*, June 15, 1896.
8. *Justice*, June 22, 1895.
9. *Justice*, June 15, 1895.
10. *Justice*, July 18, 1896.
11. There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that Joseph Fels, the soapmaker-philanthropist, bought a plot of land in Philadelphia and put a large sign on it which said, "Merely by holding this land, I'm making a profit."
12. For an explanation of this system (the Somers system), see Robert Widener Wynn, *The Full Rental Value: A Study of the Tax Rate in Arden Using Single Tax Theory*. Unpublished thesis at the University of Delaware, 1965.
13. *Sunday Star*, Wilmington, Del., August 25, 1895.
14. A chronological list of important events in the campaign appeared in the December 5, 1896, issue of *Justice*.
15. *Justice*, June 15, 1895.
16. Harold Sudell, "The Story of the Delaware Campaign," *Single Tax Review*, 4 (October 15, 1904), p. 10. Sudell added that as people came to feel that the results had not justified the expense, contributions to the Single Tax Society fell off. The *Morning News*, after the campaign was over, estimated that \$20,000 had been spent, which would figure out to about \$25 per vote, "the current market price in Kent and Sussex." *Morning News*, Wilmington, Del., November 4, 1896.
17. *Justice*, October 26, 1895.
18. This statement appeared on page three of a typescript autobiography written by Frank Stephens. The autobiography is among his personal papers, held by his family.
19. Notices in the newspapers announcing forthcoming meetings thoughtfully assured the public that there would be parquet seats for the ladies.
20. Young, *Single Tax*, p. 149.
21. Stephens, *Autobiography*, p. 2.
22. It was the interest thus fostered in Shakespeare which led to the naming of the Single Tax community in Arden, Delaware. Stephens, *Autobiography*, p. 3.
23. *Justice*, September 7, 1895.
24. *Justice*, July 25, 1896.
25. *Justice*, September 12, 1896.
26. Stephens, *Autobiography*, 2.
27. *Justice*, September 26, 1896.
28. *Justice*, July 13, 1895.
29. *Sunday Star*, November 3, 1895.
30. *Justice*, September 19, 1896.
31. *Justice*, September 19, 1896.
32. It was also rumored that witnesses in the Addicks divorce case had been bribed.
33. Young, *Single Tax*, p. 151.
34. *Justice*, November 7, 1896.
35. Sudell, "Delaware Campaign," p. 10.
36. *Justice*, November 7, 1896.
37. Stephens, *Autobiography*, p. 3.