

The Search for Eden: Paper Towns That Never Were

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The pursuit of happiness as an issue in planning for towns in trans-Appalachian America was a prime requisite. It is the intent of this paper to illustrate that, while many of the towns were paper towns that were never actualised, they acted as a catalyst for immigrants seeking to escape the oppression of Europe. Visualised as a new Eden, and promising land ownership with liberty, they were an opiate so strong that even with numerous instances of fraud and deceit the settlers came. Their belief that they had indeed arrived at Eden was so strong that it transcended any and all difficulties. This belief has influenced the planning and development of towns in America up to and including modern times. As long as people believe that their living situation is what is meant for them, their pursuit of happiness is satisfied. They have found their Eden.

... the mild breezes of a summer's eve, playing upon the enraptured senses, softens the heart to love and friendship. Heavens! What charms are there in liberty (Imlay, 1793).

KEY WORDS

Planning
Settlement
Ownership
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PLANNING FOR TOWNS throughout the Christian world historically has developed one universal theme, to provide intended dwellers with a place to pursue their aspirations of happiness – an earthly Eden. At the dawning of the newly created United States of America, after the 1783 Treaty of Paris, the search began in earnest for “paradisiacal locations and evidence to support social theories to support paradisiacal myth” (Moore, 1963). Thomas Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, espoused the concept of “the pursuit of Happiness” as the basis for settlement. Individuals and families, religious groups and entire villages, especially English, speculators and knaves all began the search that was guaranteed to lead to Eden. Towns were platted, plots were advertised, land was sold. Immigrants came with the belief that owning land, a first for them, would rid them of the baggage of repressive Europe and allow the establishment of settlements that would provide the *Utopia* of Sir Thomas More (Turner, 1956). The Ohio River valley, especially in the vicinity of Kentucky, was the location where much of the early paradisiacal search was centred because the Ohio River was the main arterial into the wilderness west of the Appalachians.

The social and environmental consequences of this utopian theme, as it applies to the planning of towns and luring of prospective dwellers, provides the basis upon which trans-Appalachian America was conceptualised. Many were fraudulent paper towns that were never built. Even in cases where they were actualised, the results were far from the idyllic image portrayed by land agents who scoured Europe for willing participants. Filson (1793), stated in *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present*

State of Kentucky, which was widely circulated in England and France, that he wanted to “inform the world of the happy climate, and plentiful soil of this favoured region”. Imlay (1793) assured his English readers that he was merely “contrasting the simple manners, and rational life of the Americas, in these back settlements, with the distorted and unnatural habits of the Europeans ...”. To lend credence to these claims, they were accompanied by beautifully articulated plans. Would-be immigrants were shown plans of towns that rivalled any seen or experienced in Europe, with the irresistible carrot being the promise of individual land ownership and liberty. But, of course, documents of this ilk reported rather more than was observed. Faults were smoothed over while virtues were magnified. Lystra, Ohiopiomino, Franklinville, Kentucky City, Hygeia, Queen City and Couverden, among others lost in time, were designed and sold by London promoters, each as a new Eden. While more than a few investors were defrauded of their savings, the prospect of land ownership continued to feed the settlement frenzy. Reports contradictory to Filson and Imlay had little effect on those who wanted to believe. In the 1819 *Journal of Doctor Simpleton’s Tour of Ohio*, Dr Simpleton reported that the “... disillusioned emigrant had looked in vain for the much advertised town of his destination. He found the place infested by mosquitoes and swamp flies” (Havinghurst, 1956, p 168). Even Charles Dickens (Cardwell, 1982) in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, bitterly complained that, “... vaunted in England as a mine of Golden Hope, and speculated in on faith of monstrous representations, to many people’s ruin”. His graphic depiction of the mythical town of Eden, drawn by Phiz, (see Figure 1) illustrates what was expected as opposed to what was actually found.

The elements necessary for each ‘new Eden’ were incorporated in the plans. A church and public buildings were primary. A school was included along with open space for a park and even a cemetery. House lots and farm lots were laid out in proximity to the town centre and all was connected. Without a doubt it was Eden! Perhaps Kirk (1860) in *Wooing and Warring in the Wilderness* best connects the philosophy to the belief, “Their destiny is one of peace ... to plant flowers and reap harvests, and create home and happiness”.

With living conditions in Europe nearly intolerable under the social system of the time and with European governments anxious to rid themselves of undesirable populations, there was a great incentive to leave for a place that promised more. The immigrants, if they could go to a new place and obtain a piece of land, were convinced that it would set them free of the oppression under which they had always lived. Melish, 1909–1911, compared the land situation of Scotland where “the lands are nearly all entailed on the great families and the lords of the soil are the lords of the law” with that of America (Havinghurst, 1956, p 201). In America, the farmer could cultivate his own soil. By hard work and with a little help from ‘above’, the settler could truly state that “This ground is mine” (Havinghurst, 1956, p 201). The promise was assured by advertisements that proposed the land as a new found Eden. *Western Monthly Magazine* (1836) portrayed the area as “the focus ... where light shall emanate to other parts of the world”. The people, after all, wanted

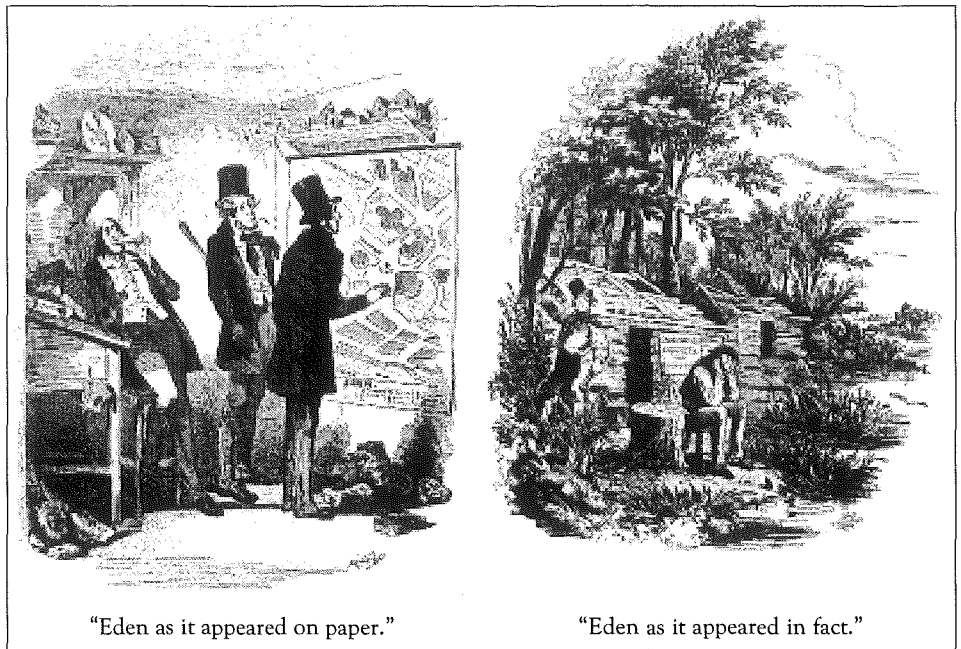


Figure 1: The mythical town of Eden from Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*, drawn by Phiz, 1843 (Havinghurst, 1956).

to believe and belief is a powerful force. So with the paper towns. Paper towns promised a new life. Paper towns promised freedom, and belief can be like an opiate. It can create an urge. It can control. It can lead to doom. Some arrived, found the intolerable conditions or the fraud and gave up. Some few returned to Europe. Some went back over the Appalachians to the developed coastal cities. Some died. Many stayed.

Those who stayed persevered and built the towns, albeit not the magnificent paper towns of the speculators and advertisements, but the towns that became America. Their perseverance and the search for Eden was pervasive and their belief that certain supernatural powers protected their efforts was heartfelt and real. This is what established the attitude and rationale for the planning of communities throughout the history of the United States of America. The development of New Harmony, Riverside, the Green Belt towns, Radburn, Levittown, Reston, Columbia, Sea Ranch and Celebration to name a few, each, at different times, was promoted to be special with specific answers as to how the residents could achieve their earthly Eden. While these towns are extant, they are in fact paper towns that promised somewhat more than they were capable of delivering. People, because of the advertisements or maybe in spite of them, came. Like the early immigrants, they transformed the towns to suit their perception of what Eden should be. Why? Because they wanted to believe. They wanted to believe that this 'piece of the rock' was Eden, after all, it was theirs and it was good. So what do people want? They want to believe that the situation they find themselves in is their Eden. That is what it is meant to be. What begins as a romantic description is transformed into a prophesy and prophesy became reality. The trans-Appalachian wilderness, with all its problems and dangers was transformed into the sublime utopian towns of Paradise, Mount

Zion, Shilo, Mount Tabor, Bethlehem and Climax. The power of advertising is manifest for those whose inclination it is to believe, and paper towns are, in fact, made real.

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