Writing a century ago, Alfred Huidekoper tried to distinguish between "good" and "bad" land speculators. He made particular reference to the Holland Land Company, which had conducted its operations, in his opinion, in a most honorable manner. Perhaps he was just defending his father, Harm Jan Huidekoper, who had amassed a great fortune while serving for thirty years as the company's agent in Meadville. Maybe his father needed defending; maybe he did not.

The basis of Harm's wealth was land. With others he found the virgin forests and fields of Crawford County and the surrounding counties an exciting and potentially rich place for investment. Some like Harm became permanent settlers and helped build new communities. Others were only transients or absentee landholders whose singular purpose was to make huge profits from trafficking in the nation's most abundant commodity. Together these individuals comprised a class of land barons whose impact upon the early history of French Creek Valley warrants both approbation and regret. On the one hand, they contributed to the Valley's settlement, economic development and cultural growth. At the same time, however, they frustrated the democratization of its frontier society, accentuated its stratification and caused the political division of its people.

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LAND COMPANIES

It was a class bastardized by legislation that encouraged land grabbing by the wealthy, the reckless, and the foolhardy. No other economic issue created as much anxiety and turmoil in the settlement days of northwestern Pennsylvania as did land. And when politicized it also produced enough tension and hysteria to mar the very best intentions of community leaders.

In 1792 the Pennsylvania Land Act opened to sale all the unappropriated lands lying north of the Ohio River and west of the Allegheny River and Conewango Creek. The lands were to be sold only to persons who would "cultivate, improve and settle the same, or cause the same to be cultivated, improved and settled." Any person intending thus to settle was entitled, on application and payment, with a proper description of the land, to receive from the Land Office a warrant ordering a survey of a tract not exceeding 400 acres. The price was seven pounds ten shillings per 100 acres, with an allowance of six percent for roads and highways. Historian William McArthur later wrote that the settler would have ten years to pay off a mortgage that he could have at three percent on as many as 424 acres. The total cost would be about fifty dollars.²

Although some legislators from the western counties had hoped this new law would check speculation, in reality the ease with which warrants could be obtained produced the opposite effect. Foreign and eastern investors were quick to exploit the law's weaknesses. The limitation of 400 acres certainly did not prevent them from using "borrowed" names to acquire multiple tracts, an old colonial practice condoned by the Land Office.³ Hurriedly they procured their many warrants by employing extra clerks and lodged them in the hands of the deputy surveyor for execution. In this way some 1,400,000 acres in northwestern Pennsylvania were obtained by the Holland Land Company and the Pennsylvania Population Company.⁴

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². William McArthur, "Donation Lands," in Daily Tribune-Republican (Meadville), centennial edition, 12 May 1888, p. 89. McArthur was the son of William McArthur of Meadville, who was District Surveyor and helped lay out the town of Meadville. In 1800 he was elected Pennsylvania State Senator.

³. Pennsylvania Population Company Minute Books, 1792–1815, I, entry for 21 February 1795, p. 78. These are the original books of the company.

⁴. Under prior legislation 700,000 acres in this region had been surveyed and set apart as Donation Lands and given to Pennsylvania veterans of the Revolutionary
most people could locate places like Cussewago, Venango, LeBoeuf, and French Creek on a map, not only had hundreds of thousands of acres changed hands but some of the best lands had been claimed.

The 1792 Land Act may have been one of the most liberal laws ever passed in Pennsylvania or, for that matter, in the nation. It could have given the settler in the northwestern region of the state the freedom of opportunity which would have been in the true democratic tradition. But it did not; the speculators saw to this. If the law's original intent had been to help the poor and the person of limited means to begin a new life, then it failed. When many of the first arrivals learned that company surveyors, who knew the land, had preceded them and that little quality land remained, their dreams quickly melted into anger. These simple farmers who clung to ageless values as the only means to happiness and success became victims of monopolists and of a system they hardly understood. Consequently their faith in the democratic process waned. That some men would try to make loads of money in the land business was a truth which hardly required illumination. The settler could understand this. He might even be envious of those who speculated. What he could not see was a system that allowed more than a million acres of American soil to be given to foreign and eastern capitalists who then used the very same system to take advantage of the actual settler. This aspect of the free enterprise system he wanted explained to him.

The land companies also faced a problem. They had to find a way to hold their many tracts without complying with the law's requirements that evidence of actual settlement had to be made within two years time of issuance of warrant. Otherwise they would have to forfeit title. It seemed most unlikely that a settler could be placed upon each tract within the designated time. Realistically the companies knew that it would take more than two years and considerable sums of money just to make all the improvements necessary to attract prospective settlers.

War in lieu of pay; 12,000 acres had been set aside for the laying out of the towns of Waterford, Erie, Warren and Venango (Franklin). Thus a total of 2,112,000 acres, in addition to the lands taken by settlers before the 1792 law, including David Mead at Cussewago (Meadville), were excluded from the total land available. Unfortunately, much of what remained was of poor quality. Harm Huidekoper makes this observation on his first visit to the area in 1802. Harm Huidekoper, Diary (in French), Harm Huidekoper Papers, Huidekoper Collection.
What compounded the problem was a fresh outbreak of Indian hostilities in 1791. Just how severe was the danger posed an interesting question. At least the scare proved sufficient to drive David Mead and his group of jittery settlers from their Cussewago (Meadville) homes to the defenses of Fort Franklin at Venango. Real or unreal, the threat of the tomahawk freed the Valley of white inhabitants for several years. Not until Anthony Wayne's defeat of the western Indians at Fallen Timbers in 1794 did the Cussewago settlers feel safe enough to return permanently to their homes and fields. But while those who desired to acquire land by settlement and improvement under the 1792 act were prevented by the Indian scare, the capitalists, being near to the Land Office in Philadelphia, proceeded at once to procure their warrants. Hence the largest number of warrants were taken out in 1792.

The companies had their warrants but they did little. Substantial improvements on their part did not begin to appear until after the Treaty of Greenville had been concluded with the Indians in 1795. This became the first signal of safety for entry and settlement. By then a few adventurous souls had trickled into the Valley and had squatted upon company lands. In some cases these lands had been momentarily occupied by "warrantees," as the warrant holders were called, and then deserted due to the Indian. The "intruders" made minimal and crude improvements and then claimed, the result partly of legal advice, that the land belonged to them since the companies had defaulted. They cited the ninth section of the 1792 law that required actual settlement and improvement within two years from the date of the warrant. Had there been no Indian problem probably there would have been fewer adverse claimants to the same tracts.

Naturally the companies fought back. In defense they too referred to the controversial Section 9, which also stipulated that if any warrantee should "by force or arms of enemies of the United States be prevented from making such actual settlement" during the required

5. In January 1802 a convention of elected delegates from the northwestern counties was held in Meadville to take action against the companies. The delegates concluded that no proof existed of one single family being prevented by the Indians after 1792 from making a settlement. Testifying in a case involving Huidekoper and one of his lessees, David Mead agreed with the companies that it would have been unsafe for a family to remain in the area between 1793 and 1795 without military protection. But he added that the companies had made no improvements during that period, and if they had, he had no doubt that some settlements might have been made. David Mead Papers.
time, he would still be entitled to the land. Both arguments seemed valid. Thus the issue became a matter for the courts. What followed was a history pockmarked with different interpretations of Section 9, a nightmare of litigation, an orgy of ejections and total war between the companies and the actual settlers. The uncertainty of title and the tension this created prevailed so long in the Valley that natural development of that region was seriously delayed.6

The Holland Land Company carried its fight into the federal courts. It hoped to obtain, if possible, a final decision that would end the dispute either in favor of the warrantees or the actual settlers. An ejectment suit under the name, Huidekoper's Lessee v. Douglass, was started in the United States Circuit Court of Pennsylvania. But the two judges took opposite views and there was no decision. In order to test the question fully, the case went up to the Supreme Court of the United States. The opinion in the latter court was delivered by Chief Justice John Marshall in February 1805 and it favored the warrantees. Indian hostilities did excuse them from making improvements and settlements. The matter seemed settled. Yet some of the Pennsylvania judges did not feel bound by the Supreme Court ruling since they believed the question of land titles to be purely a state one. Other judges disagreed and the controversy continued, with more court cases and amendatory legislation.

But the companies believed they had won a decisive victory and proceeded to move against the intruders. Still, they did so without apparent malice or vindictiveness. Although armed with a favorable ruling by the nation's highest court, they pursued a cautious policy of compromise. After all, having a responsible settler already in residence was often better than trying to attract one. Strong efforts to negotiate with the squatters were therefore made and many agreements were reached. Whenever the actual settler shunned compromise, he could expect and generally received a speedy eviction. Some had to be forced off the land, but many more just left after learning

of the court's ruling, leaving behind property, improvements and shattered hopes. Obviously the companies could not do anything with the hopes but they benefited from the property and improvements of the trespassers. In the end, whether or not favorable agreements could be concluded, the vast majority of actual settlers were turned off by the courts, the companies and their agents.

SPECULATORS

One of the future agents for several of the companies was Meadville's John Reynolds. Speaking before a civic group in 1869, he lamented the fact that the first settlers had to suffer so much under a land system whose operators cause animosity and deceit. He decried the perpetrators as "unscrupulous and desperate" men who selfishly contended that all means which protected them and their property were morally right. What these men did, Reynolds went on, not only proved "very injurious to the prosperity of the country" but it retarded settlement as well.

Obviously Reynolds did not think of himself as one of the villains. Most likely he had in mind the two groups most frequently chastised by his contemporaries: the demagogic fringe of local speculators who incited the actual settlers against the warrantees and those investors who, independently or through the companies, tried to manipulate events in northwestern Pennsylvania from their strongholds in Philadelphia and Europe. The two groups were related through the local agents. Distantly removed from the center of action, the financiers had to employ people like Huidekoper and Reynolds to perform the task of selling the land and plenty of it for handsome profits. To assist them, these representatives often contracted

7. Writing to Judah Colt, agent for the Population Company, Huidekoper asked that he be informed about those settlers who had made improvements, so that when he ejected them he would recover the costs of suit! Harm Huidekoper to Judah Colt, 10 May 1805, copy in the Harm Huidekoper Letter Book, Huidekoper Collection.

8. John Reynolds, One Hundred Years Ago, unpublished essay, 1869, John Reynolds Papers. Although trained as an attorney, Reynolds practiced little law. In 1814 he married Jane Ellicott Kennedy, the rich widow of Dr. Thomas Kennedy. With the necessary capital he developed a land investment business and became quite successful. The Reynolds mansion (Baldwin-Reynolds house) still stands in Meadville.

9. The backers were promised big returns on their investments. The directors of the North American Land Company were blunt with their subscribers: "The profits will be great and certainly therefore the company can well afford to pay those who serve them." Plan of Association of the North American Land Company, John Reynolds
EARLY LAND BARONS

with subagents or “mediators” to negotiate directly with prospective or actual settlers and, in many cases, the warrantees themselves. It was a loose system. Acting alone, and sometimes without clear instructions, these middlemen played the game according to their own set of rules and values, far from the scrutiny of company officials.

If some of the financiers were embarrassed by the tactics of their field generals, others were discredited by their own misdoings. They maneuvered with as much reckless abandon as a child playing Monopoly. A few got in over their heads and had to back off in disgrace and ruin. Some of the earliest and biggest of these investors were easterners with political reputations. The wildcat schemes of John Nicholson, Robert Morris, and James Wilson have been recorded and are familiar to the historian. There is no intent in this paper to reopen the discussion of these three speculators. Suffice it to say that their bold adventurism alone encouraged other men to try their hand at what became the wildest game of chance in northwestern Pennsylvania. Some became big winners, while a few lost everything they had invested. Probably most failed to gain what they had hoped for from their entrepreneurial efforts.

A good case in point was the frustrating experience of federal judge William Griffith of New Jersey and Philadelphia attorney John B. Wallace. In 1810 these men contracted with Paul Busti of the Holland Company to buy out the company’s entire interest in land and debts west of the Allegheny River for $180,000, with $20,000 being due in five years. This represented about 1000 shares in the Population Company, in which Griffith and Wallace were managers. When that company folded in 1812 the lands purchased by the two men were put under the care of Huidekoper, who was to collect the money and to make the conveyances.

Papers. This company was established in 1795 and was scheduled to dispose of some 250,000 acres north and west of the Allegheny and Ohio rivers. Stephen Barlow became its Meadville agent. After his death, Arthur Cullum assumed the responsibility. Eventually he purchased the company’s lands in the district.

10. By a system of “artifice, duplicity and chicanery,” agents and their mediators often worked out, to their personal advantage and in violation of the law, articles of agreement between the warrantholders and the actual settlers. By accepting a compromise, the warrantholders would sometimes lose what was legally theirs. William McArthur to Samuel Cochran, Surveyor General, July, 1801, William McArthur Papers. By this time, McArthur estimated there were about 140 intruders challenging the warrantees.

To make the actual sales, the two promoters hired as agents, William S. Hart and Augustus Sacket. It proved to be a bad move. Huidekoper called Sacket a man "without principles, morals or talents," who surrounded himself with shifty speculators "equally destitute of principles and of means." In free swinging deals that were irresponsible and secretive, these agents and their subagents, in little more than a year, disposed of thousands of acres for more than $300,000. Ordinarily this kind of remarkable salesmanship would have opened the eyes of the most skeptical. But the sales were nothing more than paper transactions with little money involved. Without authorization these agents had sold large blocks of land, some of it of prime quality, to subagents at bargain prices, who in turn resold the land to unwary buyers. In many cases neither subagent nor subpurchaser had to put up any collateral or security. When many of them failed to meet their financial obligations the empire of Hart and Sacket began to topple.

Embarrassed and enraged, Griffith and Wallace in 1815 terminated the contract with their agents. That some year found them unable to meet their $20,000 note. When accrued interest started to exceed actual sales, Busti threatened to cancel the contract. Griffith panicked and pulled out while there was still a market for his lands. His interest went to William Meredith and John Day, assignees of Maurice Wurtz and William Wurtz of Philadelphia. This left Wallace with a cash flow problem and a pocket full of bills. The panic of 1819 did not make it any easier for him to reduce his debts. Even after he had moved to Meadville in 1823, hoping to be in a better position to control his investments, things did not improve. Hard times continued. In 1836, one year before Wallace’s death, Huidekoper arranged to pay the Holland Company $178,000 for the rights under the contract. This amount represented the unpaid principal of Griffith’s and Wallace’s contract. The company was closing

12. Harm Huidekoper, Autobiography, unpublished, 1840, Harm Huidekoper Papers, Huidekoper Collection. Huidekoper accused Sacket of selling large tracts of the more unsaleable land to fellow speculators who were short on capital. It was his intention to show that there was a large amount of money due him for his share in these pretended sales and then to sell out to some distant and unknowing buyer his supposed interest. In one case, he sold $67,000 worth of land to a speculator "not worth a dollar" and who had never seen a foot of the land for which he contracted. Furthermore, in violation of his contract with Griffith and Wallace, Sacket went to Utica, New York, and tried his swindling tactics there in behalf of persons in Crawford County.
out its interests in New York and Pennsylvania and recognized the deal with Huidekoper as probably the best that could be worked out. The number of acres transferred totalled about 58,300.\textsuperscript{13}

Two of Sacket's victims were Jared Shattuck and Gad Peck, a couple of Connecticut Yankees who were greenhorns in the western land business. In 1815 they purchased some 90,000 acres from Sacket's subagents. Although Wallace at first believed the buyers to be respectable men of means, he opposed the deal. He did not think that Sacket should have concluded an agreement of such magnitude unilaterally. The arrogance of his agent was one thing, but what really galled Wallace was the fact that many of the tracts sold were the rich "Cussewago lands" near Meadville. These lands had to be worth twice as much as the other tracts but they were sold at bargain prices. His letters to Huidekoper, who admitted he did not know everything that was happening, suggest grave concern over possible duplicity of his agents.\textsuperscript{14} Huidekoper came to share this feeling. Were Sacket and Hart selling quality land at discount rates in return for big commissions and favors? Wallace believed they were, and decided that he had no choice but to fire his agents and to cancel the contract with Shattuck and Peck. Later Huidekoper resold some of the land to Shattuck, who was still a good financial risk despite Wallace's charge that these "cunning" Yankees, Shattuck and Peck, had to be part of a plan "arranged from the beginning to get the best lands at an underprice."\textsuperscript{15}

In no time at all, Shattuck's sales soared to something like $100,000. But success was no more than an illusion. So destitute were the settlers who occupied his tracts that he could hardly collect enough from them to pay the taxes on his remaining tracts. When interest on his debts climbed to $56,240, he knew it was time to get out.\textsuperscript{16} Although he liquidated most of his holdings, Shattuck would continue to speculate on a smaller scale, buying choice acreage for tax arrearages. He also became a prominent businessman in Meadville, where he operated a distillery and a carding machine.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13] Ibid.
\item[14] J. B. Wallace to Harm Huidekoper, 6, 8 May 1815, Harm Huidekoper Papers, Huidekoper Collection.
\item[15] J. B. Wallace to Harm Huidekoper, 8 May 1815, ibid.
\item[16] Harm Huidekoper to Paul Rusti, ______ 1823, copy in the Harm Huidekoper Letter Book, ibid. From his office in Philadelphia Busti had entire charge of the operation under Huidekoper.
\end{footnotes}
Another Connecticut son who settled in Meadville was a Revolutionary veteran, Roger Alden, who preceded Huidekoper as agent to the Holland Company. This position, which he held for ten years, enabled him to bid upon some of the finest land available. By the time he was replaced by Huidekoper in 1804, Alden had acquired over 1000 acres plus thirty-one lots in Mead Township alone. And this was not all. The assessment records for the following year show that he and his partner, Dr. Thomas Kennedy, owned more than 130 town lots and out-lots and over 300 acres in the same township. A good portion of Meadville and the immediate vicinity belonged to them.

Fortune and social honors came to both men. But for Alden the glory gave way to financial misfortune. Despite his charm, ability and social activism, he lacked business acumen. He had over-extended himself and now found that he no longer could pay his debts and taxes. Only his friends and his public service made possible his escape from bankruptcy. When he left Meadville in 1825 to accept the position of Ordinance Storekeeper at the Military Academy at West Point, his finances had deteriorated so much that he was unable, until later, to take his family with him. On the other hand, Kennedy made the most from his investments. Early in his medical career he had discovered that caring for patients over a large stretch of northwestern Pennsylvania was neither physically nor financially rewarding. He therefore decided to turn his practice over to another young and promising physician, Daniel Bemus, so that he might devote full time to his various business interests, including large land investments. At the time of his death in 1813 Kennedy owned tracts in Crawford, Erie, Mercer, Venango, Chester and Warren counties. Furthermore, he had purchased early in his career some 3000 acres in western New York, where he went on to establish a lumber business. Some of his lumber was rafted downstream to markets in Pittsburgh and New Orleans. Incidentally, Dr. Bemus also looked beyond medicine for financial security. He dabbled in land, lumber and oil and died a very rich man.

When it came to owning land, however, no one came close to Harm Huidekoper—at least not in French Creek Valley, for no one took better advantage of the land system. Like Alden, he used his position

17. Stock Book (tax assessment) for 1804.
18. Thomas Kennedy's Papers.
as agent to acquire choice properties. This was not unusual. Company agents not only sold company lands but in most instances acquired and held legal title to some of the company's tracts. As grantors they conveyed tracts and parcels of tracts to purchasers. Patents for various tracts were often granted to them in trust for the company.

Huidekoper began his career as a land speculator about the time he settled in Meadville: "In June 1804 I purchased from the Holland Land Company about 22,000 acres of land north of Toby's Creek (Clarion River). This was the first of my land speculations and it proved, in the issue, a profitable one." Indeed it was. So were most of his other adventures. More than anyone else, this man symbolized both the good and the bad of the land system. An astute businessman of the first order, he combined an enterprising zest for individual gain with an incalculable penchant for society's betterment. He scorned his enemies and, with a touch of elitism and arrogance, he derided those whom he disliked. Their reciprocal resentment generally did not unnerve him. Besides, any bitterness toward him was easily overshadowed by the warmth and understanding of his friends, who looked upon him as a paragon of virtue and dedication. A dynamic personality such as his could only elicit both admiration and contempt.

CLASS

Several years prior to Huidekoper's arrival in Meadville, the first residents of French Creek Valley made up what was in essence a classless society—not unusual for the frontier. The earliest tax record (1798) strongly suggests this. Among the 374 taxpayers, David Mead must be judged the wealthiest property owner and the first significant landholder in the Valley. Obviously being the founder of the settlement had its advantages. His holdings in town lots were assessed at 1805 pounds. No other assessment exceeded 1000 pounds. Property

20. Biographical studies, to date, have been most complimentary to Huidekoper, praising him for his good work and Christian charity. See Nina M. and Francis Tiffany, Harm Jan Huidekoper, Cambridge, Riverside Press, 1904. Only after a thorough examination of his many papers and letters, for he was a prolific writer, do we see the other side of this agent, including his avarice, cunningness and prejudices.
listings and their assessments indicate instead a fairly even distribution of wealth, with nearly all the settlers having standard 400-acre tracts and one or two farm animals.

In ten years the situation remarkably changed. Writing to Paul Busti in 1807, Huidekoper commented that the Valley's inhabitants were divided between the rich and the poor. It sounds like an oversimplification but a profile of taxpayers in that year shows that the Hollander made a sound observation. Sharp delineation between the prosperous few and the poor majority emphasized the maldistribution of wealth. In Mead township, which included Meadville, the top ten percent had property valuations totalling $139,065, whereas the bottom thirty percent had a grand total of only $7241! This inequality can be underscored still another way to show the concentration of wealth in the township. A total of 111 men had taxable properties valued at $1000 or more, while in the remaining ten townships of Crawford County where poverty was more universal, only nine taxpayers could boast of property holdings in excess of $1000.

When Huidekoper referred to the rich, he was thinking of his friends and enemies who were merchants, lawyers, physicians and land speculators. Most of them lived in Mead township which had become the hub of settlement, commerce and land transactions in the Valley. Those who owned the most property ranked as the wealthiest among the upper layer of the economic heap: Roger Alden, Thomas Kennedy, David Mead, and Harm Huidekoper. Though small at first, during the next two decades this group within a group would expand with many newcomers to include John Reynolds, Jared Shattuck, Arthur Cullum, and Jacob Guy.

Together these families represented a status-seeking, civic-minded minority whose visibility, prominent life-style, and wealth reinforced and perpetuated the social stratification in the Valley. Similarities in origins and backgrounds formed the nucleus of a monolithic class with shared interests and beliefs. Its members intermarried, founded and supported churches and schools, including Allegheny College, and started libraries and many literary and scientific organizations. Their dedicated concern for the preservation of the arts, sciences and religion made them the self-appointed custodians of a cultural heritage. Through them the community's social and intellectual

planning attained a high level of excellence and sophistication. For some, social elegance and erudition were the only way to retain one's even temperament and perhaps reason in a drab wilderness impoverished and inhabited mostly by semi-literates.  

Gradually the class of wealthy landholders won respectability. For after 1820 speculating in land was no longer considered an unpardonable activity. Being bullish on the community implied the desire to invest in large chunks of real estate. Why this sudden change of attitude? One reason was that some who had prospered with their land deals were putting their profits into local transportation systems, banking and manufacturing in addition to various social and cultural institutions. This commitment to the community's overall development deserved and received praise and support from money groups and the educated. Secondly, the Crawford Weekly Messenger was no longer the angry watchdog. Its flamboyant editor, Thomas Atkinson, who earlier had rebuked Huidekoper and other company agents for their insensitive treatment of actual settlers, was now himself a land investor of some notoriety. Finally, and most important, land and the land company stopped being political issues.

A study of thirty years of reporting by the Crawford County Treasurer gives an idea of how popular speculating had become and how many persons played the real estate market. Although the number of participants in land sales is impressive, the big buying was still being done by only a few. The names which appear under Mead township (see Table 1) consistently appear under other townships as well. The methods of these men, however, varied. Jacob Guy, for example, would acquire a tract at public auction and then allow it to be resold for unpaid taxes if he could not sell it in two or three years. In contrast, John Reynolds would make long-term investments of the tracts he bought at public auction on the basis that land prices would eventually rise. Most of the time he was right and his holdings expanded. In 1838 he paid taxes on 12,000 acres in Crawford County alone. The asking price for these lands was about $40,000—far in excess of what he had paid for them.


While Reynolds and others like him were making money, the poor and the very poor at the other end of the socioeconomic scale were grubbing out a living under miserable conditions. For them a truly democratic society did not exist. Evidence of money power among the upper classes reminded them of the inequities they had left behind for a new beginning on Pennsylvania’s last frontier. Jeffersonian egalitarianism that stressed the right of adult males to participate equally in the political process did not close the gap between the wealthy and the economically depressed. Giving the ballot to more men did not lead to a more equitable distribution of the Valley’s material riches. Political and economic democracies just seemed to be moving in opposite directions while the rich and the poor continued to live in their respective worlds. They may have been equal before the law but they remained unequal in fact. By 1840 the masses could only look at a frightening situation—hundreds of farms going for unpaid taxes, falling land prices, shrinkage of farm acreage, low wages, twenty-three percent of all taxpayers without land, and a constant exodus of neighbors and friends to better opportunities out west. Their confidence and hope eroded, many Valley settlers just gave up and moved to Ohio, Minnesota, Iowa, and Kansas to begin a fresh life.26

26. Stock Book for 1840; Federal Census for 1840. The westward movement of people from the Valley had a negative effect upon the sale and price of land. J. and D. Dick to John Berryhill, 24 February 1846, Dick Family Papers.
The bad times cannot be blamed entirely on the money groups. They, too, suffered as a result of the above conditions, but their plight certainly never approached the poverty line. For them the good life continued, with plenty of money for business and cultural pursuits, vacations, European tours and the best education for their children. But there is no evidence to suggest that the accumulation of what wealth there was in the Valley was carried out in an antisocial fashion that precipitated recessions and countless other miseries. Here external forces played more than a casual role. The panics of 1819 and 1837 were national calamities which paralyzed the local economy. Community business leaders tried to restore life but their efforts generally failed.

A good example was the Northwestern Bank of Pennsylvania, which had been established in Meadville in 1814 to serve the people of Erie, Venango, Warren, Crawford and Mercer counties. Not surprisingly, some of its directors were the land giants—Alden, Mead, and Reynolds. They believed that the scarcity of money was the cause of most regional and local difficulties. So they responded the best way they could by making more money available. Their bank had good credit and it paid a six to eight percent dividend on its stock per annum. But the financial exigencies of 1819–1820 proved too much and the bank’s currency rapidly depreciated. In 1822 the Meadville institution had to close its doors.27

Two years earlier a number of community leaders, including Huidekoper, acknowledging the “general embarrassment and distress” the Valley faced, called for an organization of farmers and business people to promote the local economy. They attributed the lack of money to the excessive buying of foreign goods. To counter this they urged an austerity program, the purchase of American products only, and the intense development of regional agriculture and husbandry. The economics seemed uncomplicated. Area farmers would raise more than they needed and their surpluses would bring in desired cash.28

The plan was simple enough and yet there was at the heart of it a basic irony. Poor farmers who for more than two decades had suffered the brunt of the land system and who had stood alone in their

struggle for survival were now being asked to make sacrifices to help restore the economy. Huidekoper’s group, although admitting they were not “practical agriculturalists,” still believed it their duty to tell the farmer how and what to farm. Their textbook advice for raising bigger crops and breeding better stock met little resistance. But when these businessmen tried to encourage discriminating purchases, the community seemed more amused than impressed. By giving up tea and coffee, which “drain our country (Valley) annually of enormous sums—sums perhaps equal to the whole of the money now in circulation,” the group argued that the farmer would not be losing anything but a bad habit! Maybe so, but an examination of ledgers of two businessmen who dealt with both rich and poor indicates that only small quantities of tea and coffee were being consumed. Among the poorer classes little cash was used to buy anything. Barter was still the universal system. Huidekoper and his associates should have compared the outlay of cash for these beverages to what was paid by the wealthier classes for imported wines, brandies, and fabrics. The significant difference paid by their friends for luxury items would have embarrassed them.  

POLITICS

Equally ironic was the tendency among leading landowners to forgive their former political enemies and to work with them in the best interest of society. Responsible leadership no longer wished to see progress thwarted by political bickering. The economic changes which followed the presidency of Thomas Jefferson solidified community purpose and helped remove much of the sting of earlier politics from the party system. Economic cooperation therefore became commonplace. Few failed to see the need for improved transportation, a healthy banking system, and protection to home industry in an expanding economy. With this in mind, two old political antagonists, Huidekoper and Atkinson, resolved their differences and endorsed Henry Clay’s American System which promoted economic nationalism. Their combined efforts in the Auxiliary Improvement Society of Crawford County led to the construction of the feeder canal, which ran from French Creek through Meadville to the Beaver

and Erie Canal. This commercial waterway had a positive impact on the Valley. In similar fashion, courageous Jeffersonians Patrick Farrell and Henry Hurst joined old-line Federalists Roger Alden and John Reynolds to organize the Northwestern Bank of Pennsylvania.

This nonpartisan attitude resulted in part from the gradual elimination of the most vexing of all political issues which had fragmented the society from the beginning—land. That which had simplified political choice was not worked into the background of campaign rhetoric. During the first years of settlement, however, how one identified with the land issue and the companies usually determined one’s party affiliation. Those who defended the warrantees and the companies were generally Federalists while the most rabid opponents were the actual settlers and the Democratic Republicans. Again, referring to the wealthiest ten percent in Mead township in 1807, nearly all were Federalists; the two notable exceptions being David Mead and William Clark. The Federalists represented a conscious minority which naturally craved for political power but did not always get it. A disgruntled Huidekoper charged that local government belonged to the masses and their demagogic leaders, and any effort on the part of the wealthy to win the support of the many less fortunate was doomed to failure because of class differences.  

The bitter controversy over land titles polarized the Valley’s inhabitants socially as well as politically. And when the companies threatened evictions, the situation deteriorated to the point where men feared for their lives. Huidekoper was so sure the intruders were stockpiling powder and balls and organizing for an insurrection that he began to assess the retaliatory strength and support of the companies. As usual, editor Thomas Atkinson was in the middle of things. He accused the company agents of mistreating the actual settlers. Stories of a pregnant woman being evicted in the dead of winter and of a poor homesteader with an invalid wife being forced to sell his horses to pay for his land stunned the community. Friends of the companies called these stories deliberate lies and cancelled their subscriptions to the paper. Likewise Huidekoper cancelled his

31. Harm Huidekoper to Paul Busti, 5 June 1805, ibid. Federalist Hugh Allen accused David Mead and Henry Hurst of plotting to destroy the records of the Holland Land Company but he later admitted he had been in error. Crawford Weekly Messenger, 25 September 1806, 9 April 1807.
but he also took the editor to court for defamation of character. The whole affair became ludicrous and no one laughed louder than Atkinson, who continued to ridicule Huidekoper with such epithets as “Mein Herr” and “Harum Jarum.” By this time the land companies and their associates became, collectively, the grand ogre in the eyes of the poor.

The climax came with the “Burr Conspiracy.” In a letter to President Jefferson, Patrick Farrelly, Meadville attorney, described the politically bizarre situation in his town. He cited two of Aaron Burr’s agents who had come to the Valley and had recruited nine men—all Federalists—to join a western expedition whose purpose was still vague. In November 1806 the men departed in canoes for Beaver Creek, the place of rendezvous on the Ohio. Atkinson’s scathing editorials lampooned the guilty parties, especially Jabez Colt, agent for the Population Company, who had been extra friendly with one of Burr’s two emissaries. Burr, himself, had been an early backer and manager of that company and undoubtedly knew Colt. It was obvious to Atkinson that local Federalists were heavily involved in the conspiracy. The intrepid journalist could not have asked for a better lineup of traitors: Burr, Colt, the Population Company, and the local Federalists. By the time he was through, he had succeeded in rallying popular support against all of them.

In a public demonstration in Meadville on 4 March 1807, the Democratic Republicans listened to Patrick Farrelly condemn Burr and his cronies. Fortified with plenty of rye and ale against a raw winter wind, the crowd afterwards took to the streets, dragging in a sled a dummy that resembled Burr. With propriety and pomp they hanged the dummy in the town square and then adjourned to the local taverns to celebrate a job well done. David Mead, who had presided over the meeting, allegedly led the mob through the streets. A riot was narrowly avoided when the angry Federalists staged their own spectacle. First they dangled an effigy of Farrelly, with obscenities relating to his Irish ancestry, on a signpost in front of Henry Hurst’s tavern—the Republican headquarters. Then they carried it with drum and fife past the home of Farrelly. There, in the presence of Mrs. Farrelly, it was “attacked and beat in ruffian-like manner” by Peter Huidekoper, the high-strong and unpredictable brother of

32. Patrick Farrelly to Thomas Jefferson, no date, but most likely written either in late 1806 or early 1807, copy in the Patrick Farrelly Papers.
Harm's, who also worked for the Holland Company. General fighting broke out, but there were no serious injuries, although Peter Huidekoper had to receive medical attention for a number of cuts and bruises.  

By the close of the War of 1812 this kind of tension fortunately came to an end. Fissures remained in the political and social strata for a long time but they were less prominent. Company agents and speculators began to assume a low profile. At the same time, they explored ways to strengthen their political base by developing interesting alliances among the electorate. First as National Republicans, then later as Whigs and Republicans, they made a strong appeal both to the workingman and the poor farmer with a variety of promises which implied an expediency designed to assure the ascendency and domination of the elite. Campaign pledges covered everything from human rights to economic utopias. To the horror and chagrin of local Democrats, the plan worked. And what made it work was the double-barreled volley that vitiated Jacksonian Democracy. The local party's association with a national party of slavery was bad enough. But its inability to mitigate the regionally severe economic problems despite some forty years of majority rule in the Valley convinced many supporters that they should look to new prophets. By the time of Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, the Valley had become solidly Republican and would remain that way in decades to come.

Unfortunately, his political success with the poorer groups did not change the land baron's attitude toward them. Some of his harshness may have subsided but his respect for class barriers remained as strong as ever. It was not so much a case of blatant prejudice as it was a firm conviction on his part that the poor were a natural blemish on any community, especially one struggling on the edge of wilderness. Thus his social consciousness never lost its restrictive reserve. His philanthropic offerings to schools, churches and libraries went to enhance the quality of life for a limited few. They were given less in response to some democratic impulse than to an obligation to follow class dictates of self-improvement and social responsibility. His wealth was convincingly demonstrated through what the economist

34. "So embittered was the strife that social parties were always of one political creed." John Reynolds, unpublished Autobiography, loc. cit.
Thorstein Veblen once called "conspicuous consumption." Priorities were shewed to favor economic opportunities and the enrichment of personal life-styles. Spacious and beautiful mansions went up, some of which still stand, whereas the thought of starting a home for the poor in the Valley did not surface until shortly before the Civil War. The first hospital for a community that had already thousands of inhabitants was not organized in Meadville until after the war, and this was done not by the wealthy but by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

CONCLUSION

This consistently indifferent attitude toward the social needs of the poorer groups seemed to anticipate the hard position taken by many Social Darwinists a generation later. The land barons were capitalists who believed that all economic progress depended upon their actions. Public policies and philosophies that restrained the liberty of society's ablest members ran counter to the natural laws of society.

Like many American communities the early settlement in French Creek Valley had a strong economic identity, and for the Valley it was the large landholder who prevailed. During those first years his system, competitive and vicious, dominated nearly everything. As a result, other economic possibilities including manufacturing and commercial farming, suffered in the shadows. Their growth lagged until the speculator began to invest in them, and when he did, the economy became balanced and improved. Yet much of this was too late and too limited to help most people, and so the backdrop of misery and want remained. Regrettably, many of these belated developments benefited so few. One wonders what earlier strides the community might have taken to attract capital and settlers had the class of speculators spent less time using the land system for purposes of self-aggrandizement and more time promoting a comprehensive set of social objectives in the best interest of all the inhabitants.