A Pennsylvania Land Sale Project

By Maurice Kelly

Among the numerous schemes for the sale of American land to European emigrants and for the establishment of ideal communities in the late eighteenth century was that of the radical philosopher and scientist Joseph Priestley, his intimate friend Thomas Cooper, and a number of their associates. Of this project, biographers of both Cooper and Priestley have written in general terms; but, lacking detailed information, they were unable to deal specifically with the undertaking. The complete plans, however, exist in a rare pamphlet, which the present writer has unearthed in the Bibliotheque Nationale, and are of interest because they comprise a new document for future biographers of Cooper and Priestley and for the historian of American land sale schemes.

The idea of promoting a settlement in America seems to have originated in Priestley’s and Cooper’s minds in 1793, when they, like many of their radical contemporaries, began to distrust the English government and its attitude toward their political opinions. With such a project in view, Cooper and Joseph Priestley, Jr., made a brief trip to America and inspected various parts of the country. On their return, Cooper, who seems to have been the publicity manager for the scheme, printed his Some Information Respecting America, in which he recommended central Pennsylvania as the logical place for European settlers. Although Cooper stated, in the conventional eighteenth century fashion, that the many requests of his friends induced him to publish, one suspects the volume a piece of propaganda for the land project, for about this time appeared the Plan de Vente, outlining Priestley’s and Cooper’s plan for a settlement on the Susquehanna.

An ambitious financial venture was this project: it involved the organization of thirty sales-offices in the leading cities of central Europe, and sought to establish a town in Pennsylvania and to sell three hundred thousand acres of adjoining land in the counties of Huntingdon and Northumberland. This vast expanse was divided into seven hundred fifty farms of four hundred acres each, and four of the farms were divided into twenty-five acre plots for
The price of each of the seven hundred forty-six farms was two hundred livres sterling at the rate of exchange on the day of the transaction, and all money was to be paid before July 1, 1795. Should the proprietors fail to deliver the deeds before August 1, the purchasers might demand the return of their money. To encourage the purchasers, the promoters divided the deeds into six series, and distributed one hundred twenty premiums of eight hundred ninety dollars each among these six series. Choice of land was given to the first arrivals. The purchaser could either come to America, or by a series of coupons attached to the deed, could send as many as four tenants to till his land. In quite as definite detail was the town organized, and cooperation between the landowners and the village was assured by giving the rural proprietors pieces of urban real estate. The promoters furnished funds for a foundry, a mill, and other necessary industries, and sought to attract certain artisans and professional men by cash subsidies and generous grants of land. The pamphlet included forms of deeds and of affidavits for procuring subsidies, and the promoters sought to gain the confidence of the purchasers by carefully phrasing the whole in legal terminology.

Although Priestley and Cooper were avowed Perfect-abilians, they endeavored to establish no Utopia: in a business-like manner, they sought to sell Pennsylvania land. Notwithstanding their careful planning, the project failed for want of purchasers. The promoters, however, deemed this failure fortunate, as already their scheme had drawn some abuse, and more was in prospect. Shortly after, Priestley and Cooper settled in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, where Priestley died ten years later. Cooper, however, remained in the state for almost three decades, attained some fame in intellectual circles and no small notoriety in politics, and then went to South Carolina, where he became an inciting force in the early nullification movement of that state.

NOTES
1. For a discussion of some of these schemes vide J. C. Rosenberg, French Colonists and Exiles in the United States, London, 1907, pp. 125-145 and 151-182; and H. M. Jones, America...
and French Culture, London, 1927, p. 120. ff.
3. Plan de Vente de Trois Cent Mille Acres de Terres Situées dans les Comtes de Northumberland et de Huntingdon dans l'Etat de Pennsylvanie, Divises en Sept Cent Cinquante Lots de Quatre Cents Acres, et Formant Sept Cent Cinquante Actions Proposées par Souscription par une Société Citoyens des Etats-Unis de l'Amerique, a Philadelphia, 1794.. 64 pp. At the bottom of the title page of the copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale, someone has written, "Par Mr. Cooper pour Sa Compagnie avec le Dr. Priestley." I am unable to say whether Cooper wrote this pamphlet. During the French Revolution, he had only a poor speaking knowledge of French. (E. A. Duyckinck, Cyclopedia of American Literature, New York, 1866, II, 332) Later in life, however, he reviewed French Literature. (Southern Review, III, 417; and V, 179.) That the pamphlet refers to him in the third person does not argue against his authorship, as he does this in his own work. (Memoirs of Joseph Priestley, London, 1806, appendix III.)
4. For a suggested influence of this scheme on Coleridge's and Southey's Pantocracy, Vide an article by the present writer in a forthcoming number of Modern Language Notes.
6. Editions were published in London and Dublin, 1794, and a French translation in Paris, 1795. Certain parts were reprinted in Extract of a Letter on the Subject of Emigration, (no date).
7. Such an accusation, written in contemporary handwriting, appears in the copy of the Extract in Harvard library.
8. In dealing with the movements of Cooper and Priestley to America, the Dictionary of National Biography (XII, 152) seems at error in the statement that "he [Cooper] went to America, to which country his friend Priestly had already emigrated." Cooper had been in America some time before Priestly arrived. (Ellis, op. cit, p. 42.)
9. Plan de Vente, p. 17. In the Pennsylvania Archives, I have been unable to find that Priestley or Cooper had title to such a tract of land.
10. Ibid., pp. 27-28.
11. Ibid., p. 28.
12. Ibid., p. 18.
13. Ibid., p. 23.
15. Ibid., p. 22. The town was to be named Bramatown, The name was composed "du mot italien Brama, qui signifie Souhait, et de town qui signifie ville en anglais." (p. 17.) It was to be located eight leagues from Aaronsberg, ten or twelve from Huntingdon, and about the same distance from Lewistown.
17. Dumas Malone, "Thomas Cooper in América, (1794-1801)," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXII, 139-156.