GEORGE RAPP DISCOVERS THE WABASH

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WHEN George Rapp first came to America looking for a suitable location in which his Suabian communists could settle, his able assistant and later adopted son, Frederick Reichert, suggested to him that colonist-hungry America would in a short time be able to get twenty thousand emigrants from Württemberg alone to settle on new lands, if the American government would offer some assistance. Thousands of people were at that time determined to leave Württemberg to escape the unhappy conditions caused by Napoleonic ambitions, and thousands did leave to settle in such distant areas as the Caucasus or in the United States. George Rapp did what he could to carry out Frederick Reichert’s suggestions. In 1804, shortly after the arrival in Baltimore of the first boat load of his followers, Rapp got up a petition to Thomas Jefferson in which he and his people requested that the President guarantee his claim to forty thousand acres of land “on Sandy Creek of Muskingum River,” where George Rapp had “pitched,” and that this land be sold to them at the usual price but with an extension of time for payment. At the same time the memorial called attention to the plight of Württembergers who desired to emigrate and suggested that some governmental support for their emigration would provide unsettled American lands with hard-working and dependable settlers who would not fail to square their debts later. Jefferson had some difficulty explaining to Rapp that these matters rested with Congress alone, but he did write to Albert Gallatin asking him to do what he could to keep others from buying up the lands which Rapp wanted for his people, who were coming over in great numbers and were being expected any time. Gallatin’s reply to Jefferson, dated July 18, 1804, stated that it was rather embarrassing to give advice in this case since the officers of the government could do nothing to prevent the prior occupations of lands.

1 Except for the Jefferson-Gallatin correspondence, all source material used here is taken from the Harmony Society Archives at Ambridge, Pennsylvania. The original letters, except where otherwise indicated, are in German, and the translations here are the author’s own.
Since cash was not available in sufficient quantities and because Rapp's people could not await action of Congress before obtaining some lands for a settlement, they bought four thousand five hundred acres in Butler County, Pennsylvania, for a sort of temporary settlement. When Congress met, George Rapp and his people presented a memorial requesting an extension of time in payment for lands they wished to purchase. This memorial also called attention to a great many "members of his Society" who were prevented financially from migrating to the States and for whom the society could not advance traveling expenses but for whom they would be glad "to be bound to the United States for any advance it may judge right to make them." This memorial was recast as a bill "empowering George Rapp to buy certain government lands desired in the Indiana territory" and granting him terms similar to those allowed previously to John James Dufour. The bill passed the Senate and tied in the House after considerable debate in which the point was often made by English-Americans that they did not favor a German-speaking area but would prefer to break up the group. Because the speaker of the house decided the tie in the negative the Harmony Society was at this time, 1806, prevented from moving to Indiana by one vote, that of Speaker Nathaniel Macon, who had spoken against the bill in nativistic terms.

In view of the fact that this one vote, deciding a tie of 46 to 46, actually made it impossible for the Harmonists to buy land in the Indiana Territory in 1806, they decided to remain in Butler County and there to make and save the money necessary to enable them to act without the vote of Congress. After ten years of hard communal work and saving, the funds were ready to buy the larger areas of land they had wanted in the first place, where the other members of the Society still in Württemberg might join them.

In April of the year 1814 three Harmonists, George Rapp, John L. Baker, and Ludwig Schreiber were sent out to find a new location for

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2 Dufour was a Swiss vine grower who had come to America in 1796, organized a vineyard association at Lexington, Kentucky, in 1798, and purchased a tract of 630 acres, called the First Vineyard, on the Kentucky River about twenty-five miles from Lexington, where a little band of relatives and friends from Switzerland joined him in 1801.
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the Harmony Society. In the first letter written back home, from Lime-
stone, Ohio, on April 20, 1814, Rapp told of some of the land they had
seen, and his pleasure over the reception they were given everywhere. In
every inn the Harmony Society was known and respected. He would not
rest, he added, until he had seen the Wabash: “according to all appear-
ances our place will be found there.” The other two companions added a
note assuring the Harmonists that they would find a place which would
be worthy of their “extraordinary industry.”

On April 26, 1814, another report was sent from Jeffersonville, In-
diana. It shows that they were looking for land located along a navigable
stream, one that would be open all the year and one that would be suit-
able for a mill site as well. It is evident from these remarks that water
power and mild climate were two of the things lacking in Butler County.
The land in Butler County was not fertile enough either, as was stated in
another letter. To this letter Rapp added a note stating that he had been
advised to burn all the houses in Butler County and to start over again
elsewhere because within a year all the loss would be regained. While this
suggestion probably was an overstatement, Rapp did add the suggestion
that Frederick begin turning everything he could into money, since he,
Rapp, would not return without having found a new location for them.
In all his searching he felt that God’s angel was ever present in the form
of good people who helped them. Since they were traveling by horseback
he felt the strain of the journey and asked his people to pray for him,
because the spirit in this way supported the body.

On May 10, 1814, Rapp wrote from Vincennes stating that they had
found the best land along the Wabash and that they had already pur-
chased a large section and were arranging for the purchase of more.
Several squatters were very angry about this decision and were giving
much trouble, but Schreiber and Baker did not want to leave the spot.
Rapp agreed that it was a magnificent location and said he would be
willing to spend the rest of his days there. One point bothered him and
kept him from being completely satisfied: the fact that there was not
much of a drop in the water level and that the water-driven works would
be a mile and a half from town, where they would be constructed with much difficulty. For this reason, he informed Frederick that it would be the latter's first duty to get a steam engine for the factories. Coal would be available along the White River and could be transported by water, and enough wood was around. He liked the size of the Wabash and the fact that it provided year-round navigation to New Orleans. He then gave this interesting description showing how many things he had considered in the purchase of this land:

The place is 25 miles from the mouth of the Wabash and 12 miles from the place where the Ohio makes its first curve from the mouth. The city will be located about around the canal, a quarter mile from the river on a plain as level as the floor of a room, about a quarter mile from the hill, which is well suited for a vineyard. The hill is worth more than the land because it contains many stones for building, and otherwise one cannot find one fifty miles around. The river is full of fish and when the water falls many barrels full are caught by people who know the places and who come from a distance of forty to fifty miles. In short, the place has all the advantages which a man could wish for if a steam-engine takes the place of the defects.

Providence, he reported further, had guided them wisely to the right spot. Neighbors reported that an acre produced eighty bushels of Indian corn or thirty to forty bushels of wheat. There were fine springs, and good wells could be dug without running into stones. They were well pleased with their find and expected to be back at Harmony early in June.

A new location had then been found in which greater expansion was possible and where markets would be more easily accessible for a growing industry. And so it came about that a rather unusual advertisement began to appear in the leading newspapers of Pittsburgh and other cities offering an entire town for sale. This notice was the Harmonists' own description and inventory of the property they had developed out of the wilderness in the space of ten years. It occupied a full column in the Pittsburgh Mercury and the Pittsburgh Gazette from which the following is reprinted:

THE TOWN OF
HARMONY,
With all its Improvements, and about 9000 Acres of LAND adjoining—on
which are THREE VILLAGES, in the tenure of GEORGE RAPP AND ASSOCIATES

IS OFFERED FOR SALE.

HARMONY—Is situated on either banks of the Conaquenessing, Butler County, Pennsylvania, 25 miles west of north from Pittsburgh, and 11 miles from the Ohio river, and contains about 130 buildings and lots of ground, a number of which are brick, some frame, and the rest log. The principal buildings are, the tavern house, of stone and brick, 54 by 32 feet, containing 12 convenient apartments, with kitchen, cellar, garden, and good stabling; a store house of brick 42 by 32 feet, with an arched cellar; a brick house for spinning and weaving, 56 by 40 feet, with a cellar under the whole; a brick house opposite the Tavern, 44 by 33 feet, with an arched Cellar—a Brick House on the adjoining Lot, 45 by 30 feet, with a Cellar—a Brick House opposite the Store, 44 by 30 feet, a cellar under the whole—a Brick House for Carding and Spinning, 50 by 40 feet, with a Cellar—a large commodious Brick House for shearing and finishing Cloth—a Brick House calculated in the best manner for Dying—two Brick Houses, 40 by 30 feet each—a Dwelling House, Brick and Frame, 50 by 30 feet, a Brick Church, 75 by 45 feet. Besides several other Brick and frame dwelling Houses, there are a number of Buildings for different uses.

A Frame Granary, 80 by 40 feet, with 4 floors and machinery, well adapted to the design of the building.

Two Distilleries, one Brick, the other Stone, each calculated to distill by steam 18 bushels grain per day.

Two Grist Mills, one first rate, on Big Conaquenessing, with one set of burrs, the other a pair of common stones—a Fulling Mill, and convenient rooms for two sets of Wool Carding Machines, attached to it. The other Grist Mill is situated on a run with two pair of common stones—an Oil Mill on Little Conaquenessing, together with a Fulling and Hemp Mill, and one set of cotton carding machines—Two saw mills—a large convenient Tanyard, with suitable improvements,—a Brickyard—Potash Factory—Rope Walk—Brewery—a Smith Shop with 4 hearths—a Nail Factory—Buildings suited to almost every branch of Mechanism, and the Town well supplied with water, having 10 Wells with Pumps, besides 3 springs.

There is in the Town of Harmony 4 large Barns with Stables underneath, and on the Premises 7 large Sheep Stables, that will hold 3000 Sheep.

Adjacent to Harmony, and on the Premises, are Three Villages. The first is Ramsdale, half a mile north, containing about 20 Log Buildings, with convenient Barns and Stables. The second is Edenau, one mile and an half east, containing about the same number of Houses, Barns and Stables. The third is Oilbronn, two miles north, 8 or 10 houses with Barns and Stables besides several other single Farms with necessary Buildings and very handsome Improvements.
There is of the whole quantity of Land about 3000 acres remarkably well improved, and durably fenced; at least 500 acres of which are Meadow, and of the first quality.

There are two principal Orchards, containing about 2000 bearing Apple Trees, besides small ones in different parts of the farms.

Two vineyards, one of 10, the other of 5 acres, have given sufficient proof of the successes in the cultivation of vines; they are made after the European manner, at a vast expense of labor, with parapet walls and stone steps conducting to an eminence overlooking the town of Harmony and its surrounding Improvements.

There has been supported from the improvements and produce of Harmony annually 3000 sheep, 600 horned cattle and a number of horses, besides the grain to feed the distilleries, and still affording large supplies to the country.

There are quarries of good Limestone, building stone and stone coal, and good timber for building and other uses abounding throughout the improved land.

The Soil—the most extensive part of it is of the first quality, on which are a number of good sugar camps, the situation level and rounding so as to form an agreeable variety of surface.

The man of capital who may wish to purchase will, upon viewing Harmony and its improvements, at once discover that he cannot be better suited for the purpose of farming, manufacturing and every branch of mechanism.

Should no person or persons be inclined to purchase the whole property on or before the 1st day of October next, it will be then divided and sold in such lots and parcels as may suit purchasers.

The titles to all the above described property are indisputable. Possession will be delivered on the 1st of April next, and the terms made known by application to the subscriber residing at Harmony, Butler County.

GEORGE RAPP

June 10th, 1814.

Putting up an entire town of this kind for sale was a rather extensive undertaking, and it is not surprising that there was not a tremendous rush of bidders. Nevertheless, there were quite a number of inquiries. One of the first of these came from Horatio G. Spafford of Albany under date of July 4, 1814. He was commissioned by a great number of his friends to ask about the price of the property. Frederick Rapp informed him that the property was exposed to sale for $200,000, which sum would have to be paid in four equal payments, the first with $50,000 on the first of April, 1815, and the other three in the next following years. He urged him to
see the land, because he could not picture the beauties which nature and
art had made thereon, but warned him that this would have to be done
as soon as possible, as it would be sold without doubt in the space of six
weeks.

Another inquiry came from R. H. Helme of Smithfield, North Caro-
lina, under date of July 6, 1814. Frederick informed him of prices of
various foods and products in the vicinity and stated that whiskey was
much used in the neighborhood, and that if more were distilled, it could
at all times be disposed of at Beaver Point. Since people came to Harmony
from as far as fifty miles around all trades and machines were in demand.
He quoted the same price and added that an offer of $160,000 cash was
already in hand. Again he called attention to the excellent location for
raising sheep and to the many artistic improvements on the land.

The following reply to Daniel Reigart on August 6, 1814, shows that
Frederick had improved his English style and that he was also getting
impatient with some of the inquiries:

Yours of the 25th ultimo I have received, and perceived in its contents that
you with a company own a large quantity of wood land which you wish
to exchange with us for our town and settlement here. I therefore inform you by
this that we are already sufficient supplied with land on which we are inten-
tioned to make a new settlement, and therefore can not make an exchange, and
if we would wish to make one it would be first necessary to know whether your
land lays in Asia, Africa, Europia, or in America and in what part of these
countries.

The sale did not go quite as quickly as Frederick had expected, so
rather than go through with the bother of selling in lots he postponed the
date to January 1. This was done because the well-known missionary
and author John Heckewelder of Bethlehem had asked, in behalf of a
neighbor, Nicholous Kraemer, about the lowest price Frederick would
take for the property. Heckewelder had first indicated his interest on
October 13, 1814. Since Frederick preferred to sell in one piece he set
the low price of $135,000, one fourth cash, the rest in four years, or he
would take ten per cent less for the entire amount in cash. This price, he
claimed, was not half of the true value of the property. Kraemer gave up
negotiations when the rumor persisted that a “Colonel Harra” and others had bought the “Harmonie.” Frederick later renewed the negotiations through his good friend Godfrey Haga, who was also a close friend of Heckewelder, and to whom he wrote because Heckewelder had not replied. Frederick in this connection gave Haga the interesting information that in that year they had made as much money in Harmony as he was asking for the entire property. He requested Haga to inform others, who might be interested, of the property.

It was probably another friend of Heckewelder who finally bought the town of Harmony. On May 6, 1815, Frederick sold the entire property to a Mr. Ziegler from the vicinity of Bethlehem, where Kraemer and Heckewelder lived, for $100,000, exactly one half the amount which he had first asked. He did not even ask for a down payment “because I do not see that we need it. He is carrying it at $600 interest anyway, and I have $12,000 in the bank . . . .” Frederick figured the profit on this sale at $8,000, but how he arrived at that figure cannot be determined. He also sold Ziegler all the things still at Harmony, which had not been included in the sale, for $1,600. The Ziegler transaction was not to be completed for many years to come, and Frederick had to wait for payment a long time and never could get what was offered, but as George Rapp’s friend had suggested, they could afford to burn the place and make up the loss within a year. The Harmonists now had a magnificent system in perfect working order, and the combination of their skill and industry with a country rapidly opening up and welcoming new industries was bound to bring rich results on the new frontier.