

"You are welcome hither"

**The Story of
THE THREE ARDENS**

**By
Donald Stephens**

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The Three Ardens

by DONALD STEPHENS

THE IMPORTANCE OF "SINGLE TAX COLONIES," OR "ENCLAVES OF ECONOMIC RENT," as they were more aptly rechristened by Fiske Warren of Boston, is greater than is generally recognized by those interested in the progress of land-value taxation. They are working models—better still, laboratories—wherein the basic theory underlying this policy may be demonstrated and techniques for its application tested and perfected.

Among these enclaves, the Three Ardens are particularly important. To their founders, an enlightened fiscal policy was not simply an end in itself, but the essential foundation upon which, alone, real democracy could be built.

ARDEN

Arden was the first of the three now-existing villages to be established. Frank Stephens, sculptor, and Will Price, architect, two Philadelphians, successful in business but more interested in social justice than in worldly gain, were its founders. Both were followers of Henry George and both had as their goal the setting up of a working demonstration of his system as far as state laws would permit.

So in 1900 they purchased for their purpose an old farm consisting of 162 acres of beautifully wooded, rolling land in northern Delaware, and, both being lovers of Shakespeare and amateur actors of no mean ability, they named it "Arden," after the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*.

It was situated six miles north of Wilmington, 20 miles south of Philadelphia and three miles west of the Delaware River, and the price was \$9,000. A down payment of \$2,500 was made and a mortgage of \$6,500 given. This mortgage was later taken over by Joseph Fels, wealthy soap manufacturer, who also was a follower of George. It was to be amortized over a term of years by annual payments by the village. Price and Stephens took personal title to the old dwelling house and barn in exchange for the money they had advanced to purchase the farm.

They created a Deed of Trust and appointed themselves and another Philadelphian, Frank Martin, as trustees to administer it. The land was deeded to these three, to be held in perpetuity for anyone who cared to live upon it and to pay the full rental value annually assessed against each plot. Ninety-nine-year leases (the longest term allowable under the law), with right of renewal, were to be given to those who came to live there. The trustees were obligated to pay all local taxes levied against the land and improvements—the Trustees are billed by the Collector of Taxes of New Castle County for all taxes levied against the land and improvements thereon, and for all road, school and other county taxes—and to see that the balance from the annual gross rentals was

used for "such communal purposes as are properly public in that they cannot be left to individuals without giving them advantages over others."

A town-meeting form of government was established to conduct the affairs of the community, and gradually by-laws were evolved to administer the village. Today three Townsmen, a Town Clerk, and an Assessment Committee are elected annually, the latter by proportional representation. Thus developed an experiment in fundamental democracy founded on the idea of conserving for the people themselves their socially created wealth.

Progress was at first slow, even though the annual rental for an acre of land was originally only \$6. But after 1908 growth went on apace, and by 1909 every foot of leasable land had a leaseholder and many applications for leases could not be filled. In 1911 the annual gross rentals were \$908, and by 1920 they had risen to \$3,164. The 1953 assessment list shows the gross rentals to be \$12,639.19 for the 175 plots. There are 191 homes and a population of about 615 men, women and children. The present trustees are Hamilton D. Ware, Philip Cohne and I. B. Finkelstein.

Frank Stephens and Will Price were both unusually gifted men with widely diversified talents, and they gave the enclave a distinctive, artistic character that attracted many other creative folk. Upon a sound, democratic base they aimed to realize William Morris's ideals of a healthy and beautiful society wherein handicrafts, music, drama, the dance and other arts would flourish. And, in a surprisingly large measure, they succeeded.

Over the entrance stile to Arden they placed a carved inscription, "You Are Welcome Hither," and this has been the motto of the Three Ardens ever since. Unlike the founders of almost all other experimental communities, Stephens and Price did not believe in selecting the people who should live there. If Arden was to have any significance for world-wide application, they were convinced that there should be no attempt to determine who were the "sheep" and who the "goats." So no applicant for land has ever been questioned as to his beliefs, who his forebears were, or what is his religion, his politics, or his race. If there is land to be rented, it is rented to anyone who applies for it, and the same terms prevail for all.

This same democratic principle has been practiced in the Arden Club since its founding soon after the enclave was established. Any resident of Arden (and, later, of Ardentown and Ardencroft) becomes a member of the club upon payment of the modest annual dues of \$5; there is no election and, consequently, no opportunity for "blackballing."

These unique policies have given Arden its character. Everyone there feels equal to his neighbor, and no man can say to another, "You can't come in." So all kinds of folk, from all walks of life, have been attracted and have come and settled here, and have learned to live together. A strength like that which prevailed in the days of early America has developed—it is part of that "something" about the place which visitors quickly sense, even though they may not know the cause. Consequently, there is a steady demand for houses. When

a leaseholder is obliged to leave Arden for business or other reasons, he can sell his improvements to anyone who chooses to purchase them; the village trustees simply transfer to the newcomer the lease of the land upon which these improvements stand.

ARDENTOWN

By 1922, with all available land in Arden long since leased and a steady demand existing for any lots which might be given up, the necessity of acquiring additional land became increasingly important. The death of a neighbor put an adjoining farm of 110 acres upon the market. This farm, lying largely east of Arden and extending up to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, was purchased by a Committee of Eight headed by Frank Stephens; and so Ardentown came into being. Seventy leaseholds were applied for even before the plotting and surveying of the new enclave had been completed, and, as with Arden, in a few years all lots were taken.

With a few improvements which experience had shown to be wise, Ardentown's fundamental documents—the Deed of Trust and the leases—followed the pattern so successfully used in Arden. The financing of the new project was made possible by Fiske Warren, wealthy Bostonian, who had long admired Arden and had founded several somewhat similar enclaves in New England¹ and one small one in the tiny Republic of Andorra.² He lent approximately \$30,000 to the Committee

¹See pp. 128-32.

²Sant Jordi was founded as an experimental enclave by Fiske Warren of Boston on January 19, 1916, and was re-formed legally on September 27, 1918.

Situated in the Republic of Andorra, high in the Pyrenees, midway

of Eight, which, following the example set by Stephens and Price, created a Deed of Trust and appointed three trustees to administer it.

Fiske Warren worked out an ingenious plan to secure the loan and yet not militate against the rapid growth of the new project as would an ordinary mortgage. He devised a "rent charge," which, in effect, is a mortgage, not on the land, but upon the annual gross rentals of the enclave. The loan was to be amortized by equal payments covering both principal and interest over a term of 50 years. This plan proved so sound in the eyes of conservative financiers that in 1949 it was possible to refinance Ardentown through a Wilmington bank on the same general basis, but with a much lower interest rate and other better terms.

Although Arden and Ardentown are legally separate entities so far as the social life of both is concerned, they are simply different sections of the same unit, and both have grown steadily stronger with the years.

The great barn of the Harvey Farm, which became Ardentown, has been transformed into an attractive summer theatre—the Robin Hood Theatre—and is rented to

between France and Spain, the enclave consisted at first of five and two thirds acres. This was added to in 1933 by A. D. Waldauer of Memphis, who purchased a small tract of adjacent land and presented it to the enclave in honor of his fellow townsman, Judge A. B. Pittman.

The Deed of Trust specified that the land of Sant Jordi could never be sold but was to be rented for use at a sum to be determined by the trustees. All buildings and other improvements made upon the land were to be free from tax. The trustees were Fiske Warren and Joseph Alemany y Borrás, a resident of Andorra.

The enclave was used largely for gardening and grazing. One house is known to have been built there and a second may have been erected. Because of its isolated position the enclave had but limited opportunity to expand, and after Fiske Warren's death in 1938 it was abandoned.

one of the finest summer-stock companies in the country. Here a dozen Broadway successes are produced each year by actors of high professional standards, to the delight of theatre lovers throughout the surrounding countryside.

Ardentown has approximately 115 homes and its population is roughly 275. In 1953 the rental list showed a total gross rental of \$9,754.71. Its trustees are Donald Stephens, Charles W. Pettit and Hamilton D. Ware.

ARDENCROFT

The third Arden, christened "Ardencroft," came into being in June 1950 on 60 acres of farmland adjoining Arden on the east and Ardentown on the south. It is a tribute to the proven soundness of the system on which the older communities had been established that two thirds of the purchase price of \$55,000, plus \$5,000 required for initial expenses, was obtained from a Wilmington bank on agreement that although a temporary mortgage was required, this would be changed to a rent-charge agreement similar to that of Ardentown as soon as the conversion from farm to enclave had been effected, each lot, as it was built upon, being released from the mortgage. This change was effected within a year. Most of the 97 lots were taken on the two "selection days" appointed and all were taken a few days later. Now there is a waiting list of thirty-odd applicants, all hopeful that some lots may be given up and that they may be able to lease them.

To make this third Arden more readily understandable to legal and banking circles, it was set up not as a

charitable trust, as were its older sisters, but as a non-profit corporation. However, it embodies the same fundamental tax principles as the others, with only a few improvements, growing out of experience, as to administration. Its affairs are administered by a town-meeting form of government, and its present directors are Donald Stephens, Hamilton D. Ware and Henry George III.

Today there are 20 houses built or in the process of construction, including a four-family apartment house, and it is estimated that by the time these buildings are completed there will be a population in the new village of between 60 and 70 persons. The gross land-lease rentals for 1953 were \$5,982.24. However, Ardencroft's annual income is fortunately increased by another \$3,000 a year from the leasing of a large mushroom farm that was already operating when the land was purchased.

Like Arden and Ardentown, Ardencroft adhered to the principles laid down by Stephens and Price that the only qualification for admittance as a leaseholder should be that the applicant wanted a lot and agreed to abide by the simple requirements of the lease. Newspapers in the vicinity immediately dubbed this "interracial" because among its early leaseholders were a number of Negroes. But the directors welcomed this as evidence of the fundamental democratic character of this promising new enclave.

How important are the three Ardens? Time alone can give the final answer. But to those who grasp the importance of experimental communities that have sought to solve the problem of evolving a saner and sounder

civilization it is suggested that there is a source of profitable study in the nature of these many and varied communities and particularly why, by and large, they have been so short-lived.

Why did Brook Farm of the Transcendentalists in Massachusetts, the Llano socialist colony in Louisiana, the anarchist colony in Stelton, New Jersey, the communist experiment at April Farm in Pennsylvania, the cultural community of Elbert Hubbard in East Aurora, New York, shrivel up within a comparatively few years? Why did the several "enclaves of economic rent," founded by Fiske Warren (with lavish funds behind them), have so short a term? And why is Arden still going strong, and with two healthy offspring?

We who have been close to the three Ardens are, admittedly, partial. But we are convinced that the communities owe their vitality and their charm to the fact that their fundamental documents have established a just and sound relationship between those who live there and the source of their living, the earth. And by confining as much as possible the functions of the State to those few things which cannot be left to individuals without giving some an advantage over others, we believe that a sound relationship has been established among the residents. Under such a system, democracy sends down deep roots, and a strong and healthy community life naturally flowers.