

Note on "Plans of an American Country Town," 1769-1770

By WENDELL D. GARRETT

THE first colonists who settled in New England brought with them fixed conceptions of town planning. It is quite clear in fact that their whole effort was devoted to recreating the towns they had known at home—nucleated villages with the home lots grouped closely together and a land system that extended from that nucleus to the bounds of the town grant. Yet in practice their experience persistently led them away from the patterns they judged desirable and new towns altered their street plans rapidly in a piecemeal fashion and maintained, side by side, both new and old institutions. The new settlers were constantly moving off on tangents through the force of circumstances and the pressure of environment. The New England town plan that finally emerged was abnormal. That is, it not only diverged from the experience of the English society from which the newcomers emigrated, but it was also contrary to their own expectations of what an American town plan should be. Like all problems in early American design (i.e., furniture, painting and architecture), what finally emerged was symptomatic of a profound disorganization of European society in its American setting.

In the structure of the population, the New England colonies followed a pattern which was contrary to their own expectations. Unlike colonizing ventures in other parts of the world, a group setting out to plan and settle a town could not

exploit available surface resources or an economy already functioning. Instead, sponsors found it necessary to people a town to keep it in existence. Their ability to expand was limited by the restricted free labor supply. Since economic growth depended upon a steady increase in the number of laborers, sponsors resorted to a number of desperate expedients, like a shorter duration of service for indentured servants, that quickly changed the character of settlements. Towns developed slowly and erratically. A high degree of mobility and the westward surge of English settlement triggered the transition from a communal to an individual economy.

This change touched the basic assumptions of the society. The early conception of the self-contained, well-populated New England town, controlling a strategic site that might serve a trading as well as military purpose, collapsed. The availability of land continued to amaze newcomers accustomed to the restrictions of Europe. As late as the middle of the eighteenth century they had penetrated only the edge of an almost empty continent; the existence of open space to which men could withdraw remained a constant condition of their life. That in itself was an element tending toward social and geographic fluidity, families moving in and out of several towns in the course of one generation.

But as the original conception of what the town plan should be changed in the

face of the realities of New England life, the old aspirations were still reflected in English circles of social thinkers and literati. Strangely enough the impetus did not come from architects, but rather from thinkers who belonged basically to the Age of Enlightenment who foresaw the breakdown of the cottage system in England and wished to replace it with villages of co-operation. The ideal of an overall-planned, homogeneous township remained powerful, reminiscent of a powerful tradition to regulate life in a rational pattern. Home lots were roughly uniform and allowed to vary only within relatively narrow limits. These town planners gave no thought to the possibility of settlement along the borders of the more remote roads nor did they seriously consider communication by land with neighboring towns. The geometric pattern predominated, principally the development of the bastide or military town without fortified walls. Like these it had a grid pattern with a large central square left open as a common or market. Two students of town planning, characteristic of the age, proposed their "Plans of an American Country Town" in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 39:489-490 (Oct. 1769); 40:61-62 (Feb. 1770), which are printed below:

MR. URBAN,

The inclosed plan was drawn up some time ago for the private use of a gentleman; who intended to settle a colony in North America, and has met with the approbation of several persons who have seen it. But that it may be of more extensive use, and suggest some hints to other persons engaged in such a design, I hope you will publish it in your next Magazine.

The design is to settle 124 families to-

gether in one town, and to give each of them there sufficient ground for a house, barn and stable, a yard for poultry, a garden of one acre, and land enough to keep one cow, all close to one another; besides near forty acres of land in the neighbouring fields.

The whole contains a portion of land three miles square, with the town in the middle. And whenever it is fully peopled, another such square may be added to it on any side, and so on, till the whole country is well inhabited: and if a small quit-rent be paid by every house, it will in time arise to a large annual sum.

If any gentleman would improve this scheme, by any just remarks, or additional hints, I hope, Mr. Urban, you will be so good as to publish them. I am very sensible that some alterations must be sometimes made, from the situation of rivers or hills; and from the nature of the soil, as for example, swampey grounds must not be laid out for corn, or feeding of sheep, and the like.

Yours, &c. J. V. N.

Explanation of the figures in the town [Fig. 1], or middle square, which is a mile on every side.

1. The first street, consisting of 16 houses on the East side only.
2. The second street, consisting of the same.
3. The third street, consisting of 15 houses on the East side; and 15 on the West; 30 houses in all.
4. The fourth street, consisting of the same.
5. The fifth street, consisting of 16 houses on the West side only.
6. The sixth street, consisting of the same.

With every house, there is a spot of ground about 50 yards in front, and 382 yards in depth, (including the house) for the yard, barn, stable, &c. a garden of one acre, and an orchard or field of near two acres and a half, for keeping one milch cow.

are 50: to prevent fires from extending cross the streets.

Explanation of the letters in the other eight squares; each of which is a mile on each side: and the roads are 45 yards broad, and run quite strait.

a) Four woods or copses at a distance

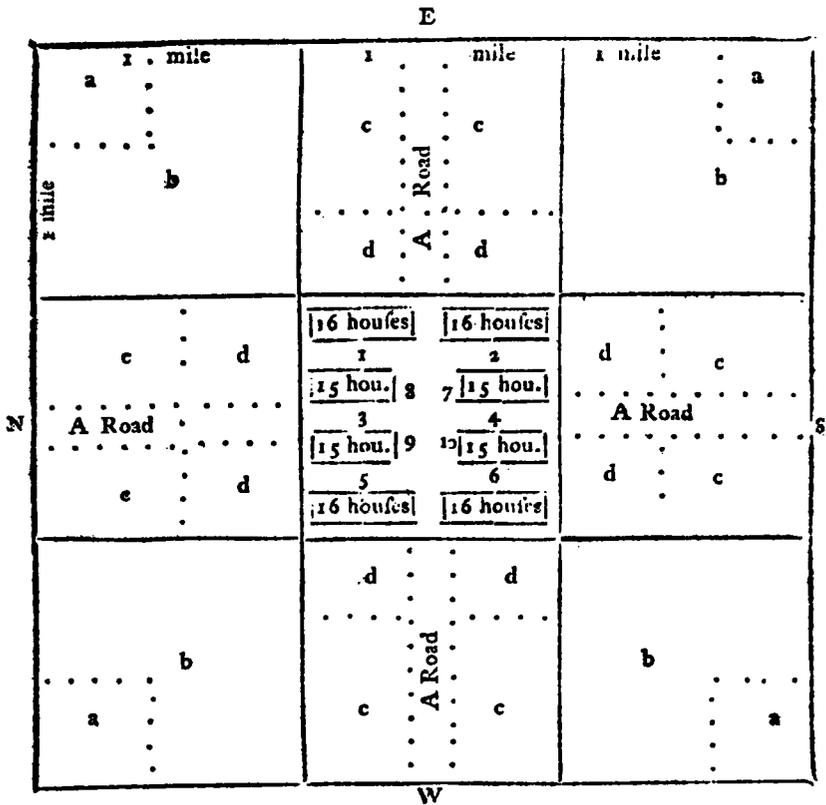


Figure 1

7. The church and church-yard.
8. The public hall or stadhouse.
9. A public granary for wheat, to prevent any famine.
10. The market place.

Note, every street is 45 yards over, except the third and fourth streets, which

from the town, each of them containing 124 acres, or 496 in all, four acres of which are allotted to every house for timber and firing.

b) Four commons for feeding of sheep, containing 2064 acres, being above 16 acres to every house.

c) Eight portions of arable land, con-

taining 1688 acres, or above 13½ acres to every house.

d) Eight portions of grass land, for feeding horses, oxen and cows: containing 734 acres, or six acres to every house.

Note, that every one may have their grass and arable grounds as near to their house as can be, the grass and arable land which lies East of the town, belong to the 32 houses in the first and second streets; and the grass and arable land West of the town, belong to the 32 houses in the fifth and sixth streets. So also the grass and arable land North of the town, belong to the 30 houses in the third street, and that on the South of the town, to the 30 houses, in the fourth street. But as these two last mentioned streets have but 30 houses each, there will remain near 40 acres of land on the North side of the town, and as much on the South side for public uses.

MR. URBAN,

In looking over the articles in your Magazine for October last, I was pleased to find that of a plan for an American town. However, on perusal, I thought it liable to many objections, and that the author was unacquainted with our plantations in America; give me leave to mention a few. 1st, I think his plan has not land sufficient for a township, six miles square being the common quantity allotted for that purpose. 2dly, His houses, as a town, are not contiguous enough for society, or defence. 3dly, There is an unnecessary waste of land in public roads, more than 80 feet wide would be a nuisance in any country. 4thly, The quantity of lands allotted to each family is too small, nine square miles, supposing it to be equally divided between 124 families, would scarce be 50 acres to a family, which could be only fit to starve on. The

different governments in America, I believe, one and all, do not give less than 50 acres a head, in fee simple, to all Protestant families, that will come and settle there, for as many white heads as they can count in their family; it would be difficult to speak with precision, or lay down any general rule for the distribution of lands; some will always have greater quantities than others, in spite of all the laws that ever were made, or ever will be; nor is that in some cases an evil, where people have greater abilities than others to work larger quantities, in producing a greater general good. Was I to give my opinion in this matter for some rule to adhere to, it should be that farms should not be too large, nor too small, perhaps from one hundred to three hundred acres, according to the ability of the person who is to occupy it; I would be understood to mean in a country where the lands are good, and not designed to be worked much by slaves. 5thly, There is too great a quantity of land appropriated to the use of sheep; land for that use will certainly be the last, if not the least wanted. In a desert country, it takes many years to clear away the woods, and make the land and air wholesome for breeding sheep, supposing nature to have adapted both land and climate for that use. 6thly, The having lands and stocks in common, is with me an objection of more weight than all the rest; the primeval ages are past, people now a-days must have their properties ascertained, that they may improve them after their own way; for without this, it would be soon found, that there could be no improvement at all. More deficiencies might be pointed out, but I shall only further observe, that it is not necessary in any society that every person or family in it should be a possessor of lands, for any time, and on trial, even in

a new country, would be found inconvenient. Jack of all trades, is seldom good at any; the labouring tradesman and artificer, whose residence is in town, if he has more land to take care of than what his house and garden stands on, has al-

care and culture; but as such people are the most valuable and useful part of a community, proper encouragement should be found out to induce them to come and settle, and this may in some measure be effected, in the fixing and planning the

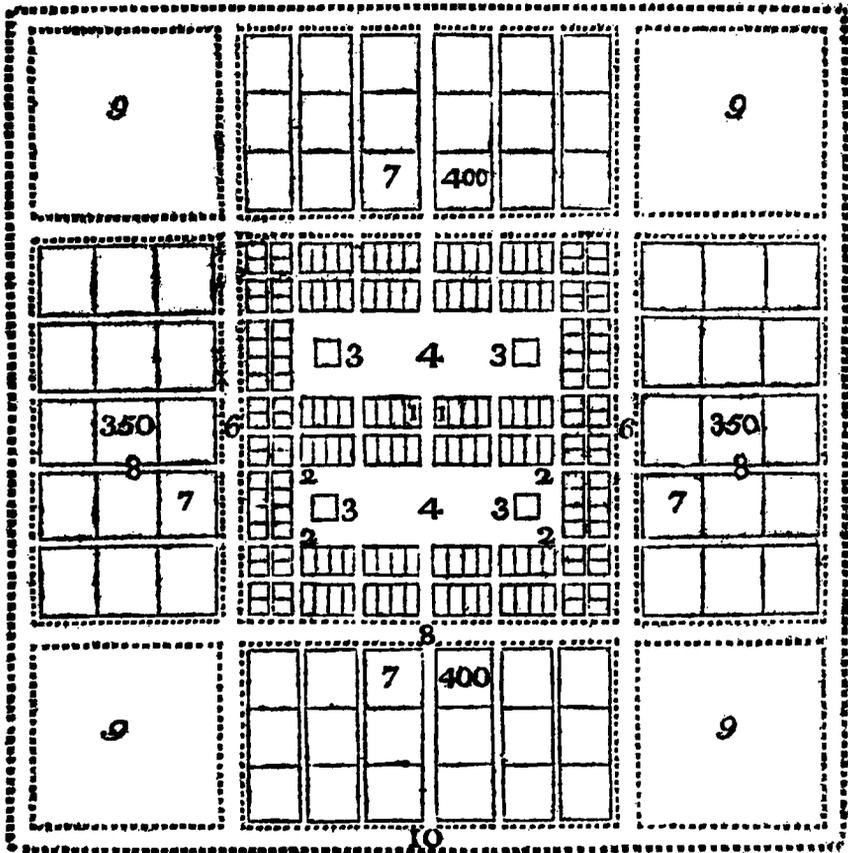


Figure 2

ways an idle pretence to draw him from his business, to the hurt of himself and family, and to the vexation of all those who have any thing to do with him, as well as to the public loss in general, as his lands must remain a desert, or what little he may do will be lost for want of proper

town. To this end the situation must be carefully chosen, as convenient, healthy and pleasant as the country will admit, and a sufficient number of town lots in the plan ready to be given gratis to all comers who will occupy them, and the community should give the indigent, but

worthy tradesman, some assistance to raise his house, and this will naturally bind him to be a fast, as well as useful member of the society. There should be a law made and strictly adhered to, that no person whatever should hold a town lot that did not build and keep in repair a good dwelling house on it, and all lots not so occupied should be deemed vacant, and given to the first who would make a proper use of them; a law similar to this should extend to lands, or the country will thrive but slowly. I herewith send the rough draught for an American town, whether it will be deemed a tolerable one or no I know not, I believe it may be an original one, as I have never seen any town on this plan, and indeed all the English towns I ever saw, with some little exception, seem to have been built without any plan at all. The square of this town is something more than 2000 feet, and contains 176 family lots, 66 garden lots, of about three and three and a half acres each, and about 200 acres of common land; the whole, including gardens and common land, forming a square of about 5000 feet, or something less than a mile, the references will explain the rest. In taking leave of this amusing subject, (and to some it may be interesting) give me leave to recommend the mulberry tree, to

the proper notice of all future planners and schemers, as in all the temperate climates of North America, the soil is as natural and favourable to the growth of that tree, as it is obnoxious to the vine and olive. If what I here send you, Mr. Urban, should not merit your notice, you may put it to what use you please, only permit me to be with much respect,

Your humble Servant, J. P.

REFERENCES [Fig. 2]

1. Family lots, 176 in number, 80 by 160 feet.
2. Streets 80 feet wide.
3. Public buildings.
4. Public squares 480 feet wide.
5. Back lanes between the lots 30 feet wide.
6. Common ground round the town planted with mulberry trees 300 feet wide.
7. Garden lots of 350 and 400 feet deep, about 3 acres more or less.
8. Lanes between the garden lots 80 feet wide.
9. Common land, about 200 acres in all.
10. A road and walk round the town and gardens, planted with a double row of mulberry trees, 100 feet wide.