

Priestley and French Azilum: A Tale of Two Susquehanna Visions

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You look down upon the Susquehanna ... a river about half a mile broad, running at the foot of bold and steep mountains, through a valley, not much above three miles broad in part, rich, beautiful, and variegated."

-Thomas Cooper¹

When settlers travelled along the Susquehanna River in the late 18th century, they saw a place rife with opportunity. The soil was rich and fertile, the land had just been cleared of the Indian "menace"—the Susquehanna was a blank slate that was awaiting civilization's influence. Land companies were started, and propaganda spread throughout America and Europe, enticing dreamers and businessmen to the frontier with tales of cheap land and an easy living: "Here a man, to live well is not obliged to work ½ his time."² Combined with Romantic ideas concerning nature as a place for healing and peace, the American frontier seemed an almost otherworldly place; a paradise; a utopia.

While the literary romanticization of a place was a fantastic marketing strategy, it also created a false sense of security for the emigrants who based their decisions off of those descriptions. Two visions of community in particular fell prey to the clash between romance and reality:

--French Azilum, a settlement near present-day Towanda, PA, by French families fleeing from the French and Haitian Revolutions.

--Joseph Priestley's idea of a Dissenters colony of like-minded English people, which while abandoned more quickly, helped indirectly to inspire the poetic idea of a utopian Pantisocracy along the Susquehanna through Priestley's presence in the area. Pantisocracy (from the Greek meaning "equal or level government by/for all") was a utopian scheme devised in 1794 by the poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey for an egalitarian community.

Both emerged at the same time (French Azilum in 1793 and Priestley's move to America in 1794), the property holdings of Priestley and his son and their partners overlapped the landholdings of the French Azilum company (and indeed sparked some litigation), and both represented essentially different views of the French Revolution who had fled from different types of violence.

While Priestley was persecuted in England for his support of the French Revolution after the burning of his home and laboratory by a mob opposing his free thinking in England, many of the French Azilum residents had fled from the Revolution's Terror. In both instances, the stark reality of life along the Susquehanna changed initial high hopes that approached utopian visions for the promise of creating a new society in the early American republic. Within 15 years, the French Azilum community had largely dissipated, despite its early promise of being a major proto-urban center along the Susquehanna, due to leading residents returning to France at Napoleon's invitation, amid the practical hardships of farming there. And Priestley's interest in attracting a like-minded community quickly yielded to the logistics of life along the Susquehanna, which kept him from moving farther north into the "wilderness" up river from Northumberland. Indeed, his family's landholding interests became more of a real-estate business. The extent of the land dealings indicates further their nature as a large real-estate business operation, which helps further contextualize Priestley's presence on the Susquehanna.

While Joseph Priestley had thought of creating a colony where fellow Dissenters could come and live in peace, once he arrived in Northumberland, the idea had been scrapped. The land that had been bought by his sons and Thomas Cooper was found to be close to uninhabitable, and no

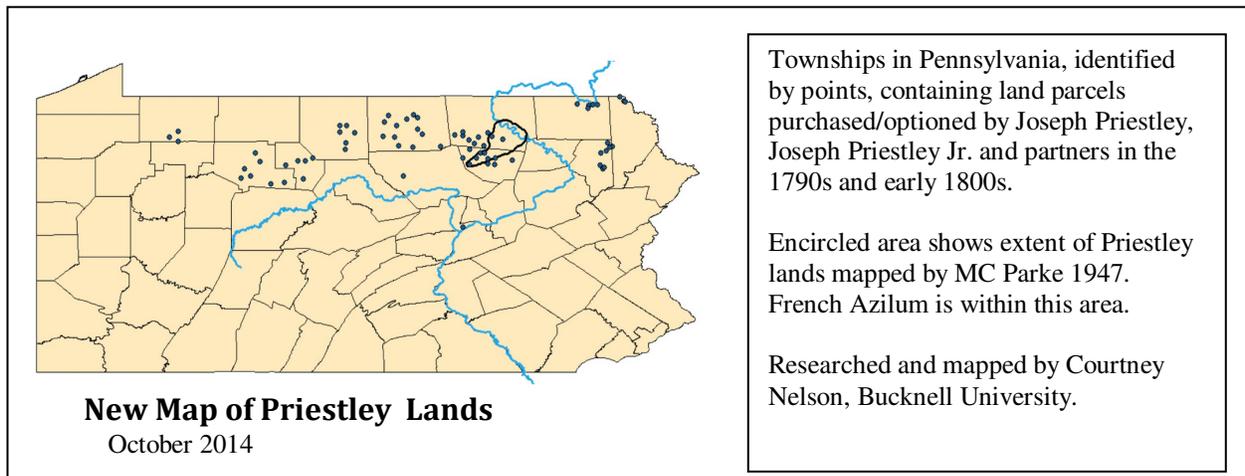
¹ Cooper, Thomas. *Some Information Respecting America*. London:, 1794. Web. Pg 105.

² Crèvecoeur, Jean de. *Letters from an American Farmer*. 368

Englishmen had shown up to purchase it.³ However, there were still plenty of American buyers, so Cooper and Priestley Jr. formed a land company which purchased tracts of land throughout Northern Pennsylvania. (See map below)

In hindsight, Priestley Jr. remarked that it had been a fortuitous turn of circumstance that the settlement had been given up, because “the land now sells at double and treble the price then asked for it.”⁴ He also noted that the settlement would have been more trouble than it was worth, because “the generality of Englishmen that come to this country with such erroneous ideas, and, unless previously accustomed to a life of labour, are so ill qualified to commence in a wilderness.”⁵ In essence, Priestley Jr. and Thomas Cooper turned Priestley Sr.’s settlement into a business venture. Thomas Cooper even produced a book called *Some Information Respecting America*, which supposedly provided the information necessary if one was thinking of immigrating to America.⁶ In this piece of propaganda, Cooper made sure to paint the most glorious picture of Pennsylvania, because that was where immigration would boost his profits.

The French settlers attracted by the promise of simple, peaceful, and virtuous life along the Susquehanna, “were entirely ignorant...of clearing and cultivating the soil, of keeping or working cattle, of building houses, of making roads, and in fact of everything relating to the settlement of a new country.”⁷ One of the more extravagant buildings of French Azilum was *La Grande Maison*, which was rumored to have been constructed for Marie Antoinette.



The stories of French Azilum and Joseph Priestley’s Dissenter colony provide a vivid commentary on how utopian ideals and Romantic expectations tend to conflict with reality. But the legacies of both represent two enduring threads in American views of nature. From French Azilum, ideas of the French economists that valued land as the source of all wealth were echoed in Jeffersonian ideals of the virtues of small farmers as the basis of the republic. Priestley’s own scientific outlook and literal devotion to biblical prophecy lived on partly in America’s orientation toward faith in scientific progress and even Manifest Destiny. Both legacies can be seen in early form and in modern historic sites along the Susquehanna River.

³ Duke de la Rochefoucault Liancourt 72

⁴ “The Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley.” Ed. John T. Boyer. Washington: Barcroft Press. 1964. Print. Pg 131

⁵ Memoirs 131

⁶ Cooper iii

⁷ Murray, Louise Welles. “The Story of Some French Refugees and Their ‘Azilum.’” Athens: Tioga Point Historical Society. Web. Pg 61