EARLY

CANADIAN UTOPIAS

. by Jeanne M. Wolfe .

La poursuite d'un idéal, d'une société parfaite et l'espérance d'un monde amélioré sont tous des éléments de la pensée utopique. Cet article traite de quatre communautés utopiques canadiennes résultant de la recherche de la liberté religieuse et raciale, et de la volonté de créer une société communautaire, coopérative et socialiste.

The pursuit of an ideal, the dream of a perfect society, and the belief that the world can be improved, are all elements of utopian thought. Expressed in literature, poetry, philosophy, politics and in design, the ideal society has been one of the most compelling images in the history of western thought. For some people it has been a dim and distant vision, only to be attained in the after-life, but for others it has led them on epic journeys of great intellectual discovery, and for the absolute believers, to undertake the heroic task of trying to establish an ideal community of their own.

In the history of town planning the utopian ideal is a continuous thread since earliest times. Although in some circles, the word has become debased and is used scornfully to describe quixotic or futile endeavours, the idea of social and environmental perfection is part of the intellectual tradition of town planning, and much is of public health efficiency, aesthetic order, social equity and conflict resolution. Plato for instance gave much thought to the ideal city. It was one which numbered 5,040 families; this figure being the product of multiplying all numbers from one to seven, is divisible by every number up to ten, and also by twelve. He thought that this was a splendid number from the administrative point of

view since the populace could be readily divided up into groups of any size for different activities.[1]

From this time on, the literature is replete with examples.[2] Sir Thomas More, writing in 1516, contrived the word Utopia, using it to describe an ideal state in a comparitive satire designed to point out the deficiencies of England at the time.[3] A state of literary utopias followed: Campanella, Bacon, Hobbes, Filmer, Rousseau, to name a few, each attacked the theme. Then in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century practical experimentation began—sometimes motivated by group action, sometimes by a religious sect, and sometimes by philanthropic intervention. These utopians, notably Owen, St. Simon, Fourier, and Cabet felt that the evils of the industrial city could only be remedied by inventing new forms of society and starting from scratch in building new towns. It was this group of thinkers and their brand of socialism that most competed with Marxian ideas, and it is this group that was scornfully labelled by Marx as "utopian socialists". Many experiments ensued in England, France, and the United States, and these have been fairly extensively documented.[4] However little attention has been paid to similar events in Canada.

The purpose of this paper is to document some early attempts to build utopian communities in Canada. In a way, almost all immigrants to the New World were utopians in that they sought a better life. In this paper, utopian means any attempt to found a settlement not within the normally accepted framework of society. In other words, the deliberate founding of a community with a new social order.

There have been many attempts in Canada, and one clas-
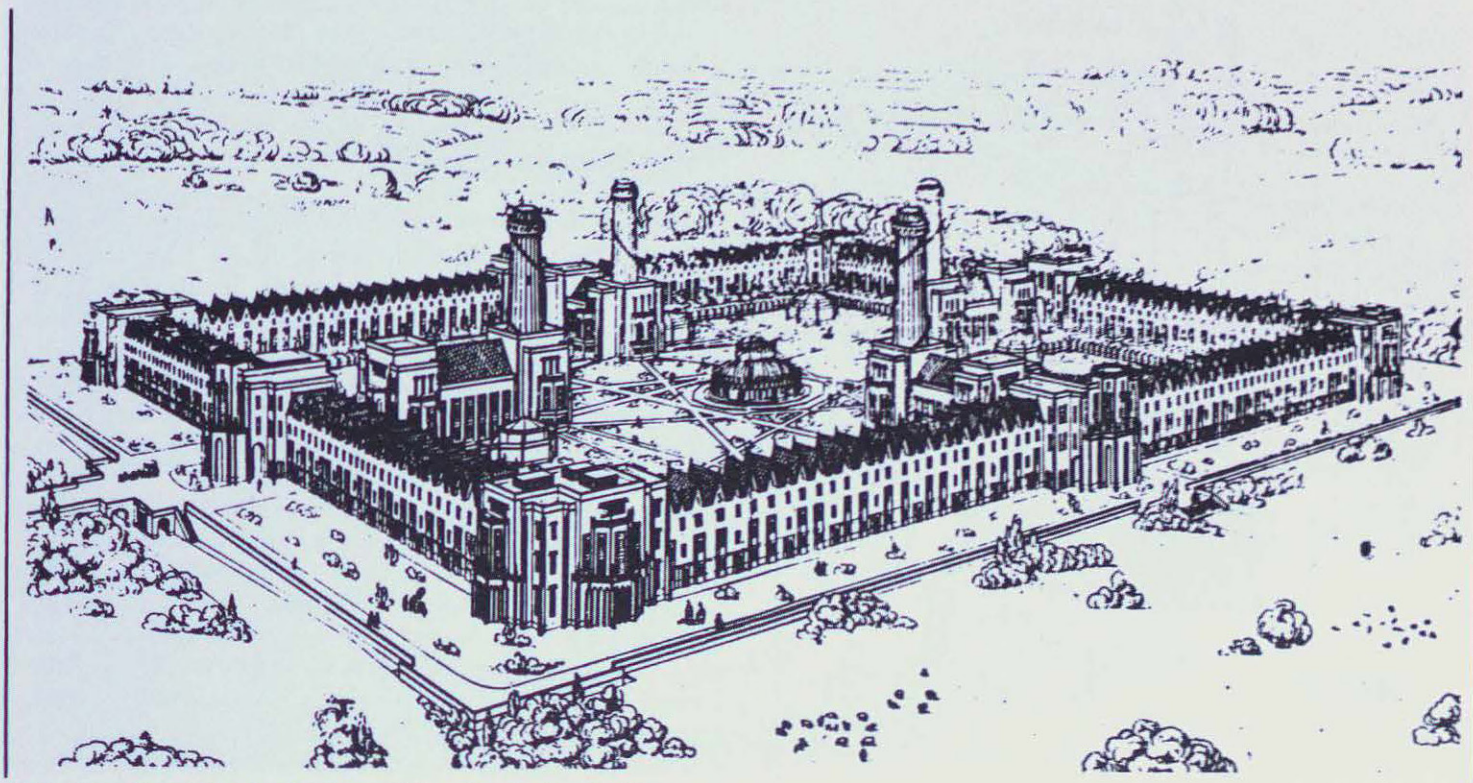
A drawing by architect Steadman Whitwell of Owen's ideal community

sification of utopian communities can be related to the motives governing their founding. These cover a broad spectrum and include, freedom from religious or racial persecution, attempts to found cooperative, socialist, or communitarian societies in the Owenite or Ruskinian tradition, and back-to-the-land self-sufficiency movements.

In this paper four earliest examples from Southern Ontario have been chosen to illustrate these themes: Fairfield, built by the Delaware Indians in 1791; Sharon, the home of the Children of Peace founded by David Willson in 1814; the Owenite colony of Maxwell, started in 1827 by Henry Jones and the fugitive slave colonies of Dawn and Buxton established in the 1840's.

Fairfield

The earliest attempt to found an ideal community in Canada was in the last decade of the eighteenth century, and its overriding motive was to provide refuge for a band of Delaware Indians harassed by the events of the American Revolution.

The story of Fairfield begins in Pennsylvania and is the outcome of a brave experiment by the pacifist Moravian missionaries who had come to America in 1727. Their work among the Indians was initially to convert them, but resulted in an heroic effort to save them from starvation as traditional hunting grounds disappeared under fast advancing white colonization. The story of their 40 years of migration is epic, but suffice it to mention here that they were forced from Pennsylvania to Ohio, and later to Upper Canada, where, to avoid taking sides in the American Revolution, they sought
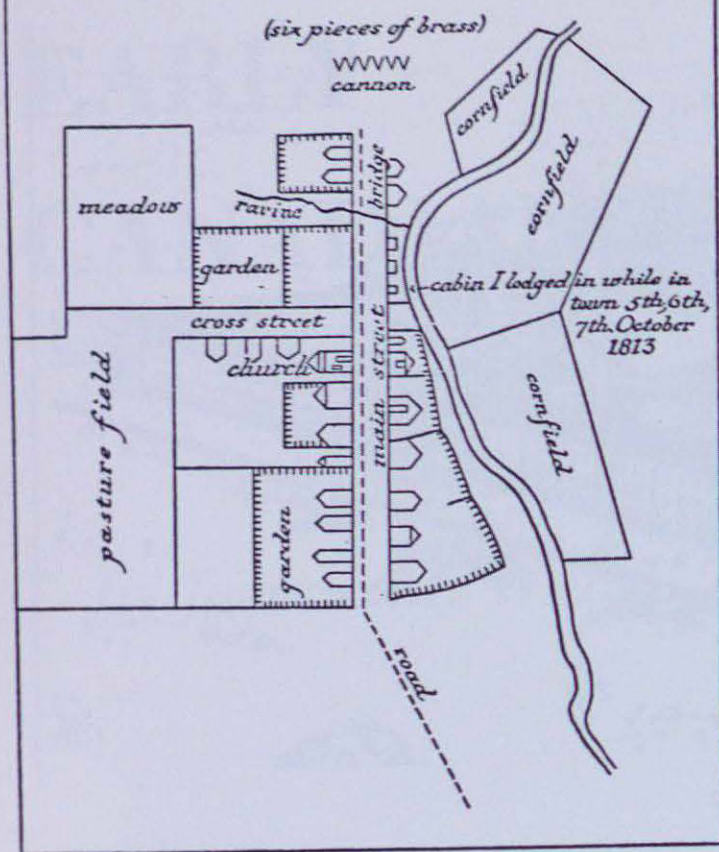
the protection of the British Crown. Under the leadership of David Leisberger, whose diaries record their history, they believed that they had found their promised land at Fairfield on the north side of the Thames River in Ontario. The band, numbering about 150, arrived in 1792 and immediately set about clearing the forest and building a village. As numerous early hardships were overcome, the settlement prospered, despite the frequent influence of other bands of Indians, given to drink and other non-Christian vices.

Excavations by Dr. Jury have shown that Fairfield was laid out in a simple linear form, parallel to the river.[5] The main street, about 36 feet wide, stretched four hundred feet long. Plots were laid out along it, about 18 feet wide and 45 feet deep. Each Indian drew, by lot, his parcel of ground and was free to build whatever form of house he preferred so long as he kept its front in a straight line with his neighbours.

The houses were small and square, and some had two storeys. They were all of log construction, often on foundations of stone with stone fireplaces. Gradually the backyards became fenced, enclosing small, intensely cultivated gardens. Descriptions suggest that the village was a model of cleanliness and order, in comparison to most contemporary settlements.

A space was reserved for a cross-street, and adjacent to it a church was built in 1794. This was the largest structure in the village, 36 feet long, and also built of logs. Fairfield became a village of about fifty houses, with a church, two schools, and a carpenter's shop, surrounded by rich farmland and maple forests. Corn and maple sugar were sold profitably in Detroit, and many Indians were supposedly more liter-

A plan of Moravian Town, on the River Thames in Upper Canada inhabited by Hostile Indians of the Delaware Tribe containing sixty or seventy houses - which we burnt.

(six pieces of brass)
wwww
cannon

meadow

ravine

bridge

cornfield

cornfield

garden

cabin I lodged in while in town 5th, 6th, 7th. October 1813

cross street

church

cornfield

pasture field

main street

garden

road

Drawn from sketch in McAfee's Journal

ate than most mercantile clerks from Detroit.[6]

Fairfield, alas, was doomed. As the War of 1812 progressed, in the golden autumn days of 1813, the American invaders met, fought, and defeated the British and their Indian allies in a battle near the site of Fairfield. The Delawares, neutral in war, fled in terror to hide in the forest, whilst the long suffering missionaries gave aid to the wounded of both armies. The Americans were led by Captain Robert B. McAfee who thoughtfully drew up a map of the village, before he had it pillaged and put to the torch.[7]

After the War, the Indians and Moravians regrouped to rebuild. This time their chosen site was south of the river Thames. The church of New Fairfield built in 1827 survives to this day, but the village, later known as Moraviantown, and built in the same linear fashion, has disappeared.

Maxwell

The second Canadian Utopian attempt epitomises more secular virtues. This was the Jones settlement, founded on the shores of Lake Huron, just east of present day Sarnia, in 1829.

Henry Jones (1776-1852), a former purser in the Royal Navy, was a dedicated follower of Robert Owen and determined to found a community based on the twin principles of common ownership and collective living. Retired from the Navy in 1815 after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, he became interested in the idea of cooperative communities as a solution to acute unemployment among hand-loom weavers who were being replaced by machinery. He was involved in utopian schemes at Motherwell and at Orbiston in Scotland.

The great social reformer, Robert Owen (1771-1858), was the manager and later on, owner of the New Lanark cotton mills in Scotland. There he established a model industrial community, with development based on education, for both workers and children.[8] Owen's ideal "Village of Unity and Cooperation" was conceived as a large rectangular place enclosed by dwellings on all four sides. Included were factories and civic elements planned in internal wings. The optimum size of such a community was thought to be about 2000 people. In 1825, he purchased a former Rappite colony in Indiana, renamed it New Harmony, and set out to prove the truth of his ideas.

On the fourth of July, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence, he issued his own "Declaration of Mental Independence". It called for liberation from the "monstrous evils" of "private or individual property, absurd or irrational systems of religion or marriage founded on individual property" and declared the arrival of a new moral world.[9] Internal dissention and the lure of free homesteading broke up the New Harmony community in a brief two years.

The Canadian Owenite settlement was founded by Jones on a tract of land at what is now Bright's Grove. He named the settlement "Toon o'Maxwell," reportedly after Owen's home in Scotland.[10] A large two storey log house with community kitchen and dining room was built, with side wings containing separate quarters for each family, grouped around three sides of a green square. Separate buildings for a school and a store were added later. Accounts seem to suggest that the main building was constructed in 1826 by local French settlers under contract, and that in 1827 Jones returned to Scotland and collected about him a group of disaffected home-weavers from the Rutherglen and Paisley districts.[11]

About twenty settlers arrived from Greenock in 1829 and in August 1830 his wife and five of his children joined them. One of Jones' sons, Henry John, already in Canada, later kept a diary for much of his life which gives us the subsequent history of the settlement.[12] His youngest daughter, Bessie, left the only sketch known of the colony's main buildings, drawn when she was thirteen years old.

Jones' original intention had been to secure the whole of Sarnia township for his communal scheme, his idea presumably being Owen's ideal of a population of 2000. Protracted negotiations with the Colonial office did not bear fruit, and finally in July 1834 he was granted the 800 acres or so his previous naval rank allowed to incoming settlers. Early in the year he returned to England to sort out various financial problems and while he was away, on May 17, 1834, the Maxwell commune burned to the ground "within an hour" and only the barn was saved.

The community, never very secure, gradually broke up. As early as the first winter, some settlers had left over some dispute focussed on tobacco rations, and by 1834, few were left to save the family. A new house was built at Maxwell, but in 1835 Jones had to return again to England on business affairs. He was involved in a protracted law-suit to get back money he had invested in Motherwell, and remained away for eight years. During this time he continuously wrote to his family urging them to form a "family community" with the few settlers who remained at Maxwell. He evidently kept up a continuous stream of letters proposing various cooperative schemes, and describing reform movements he was busy with
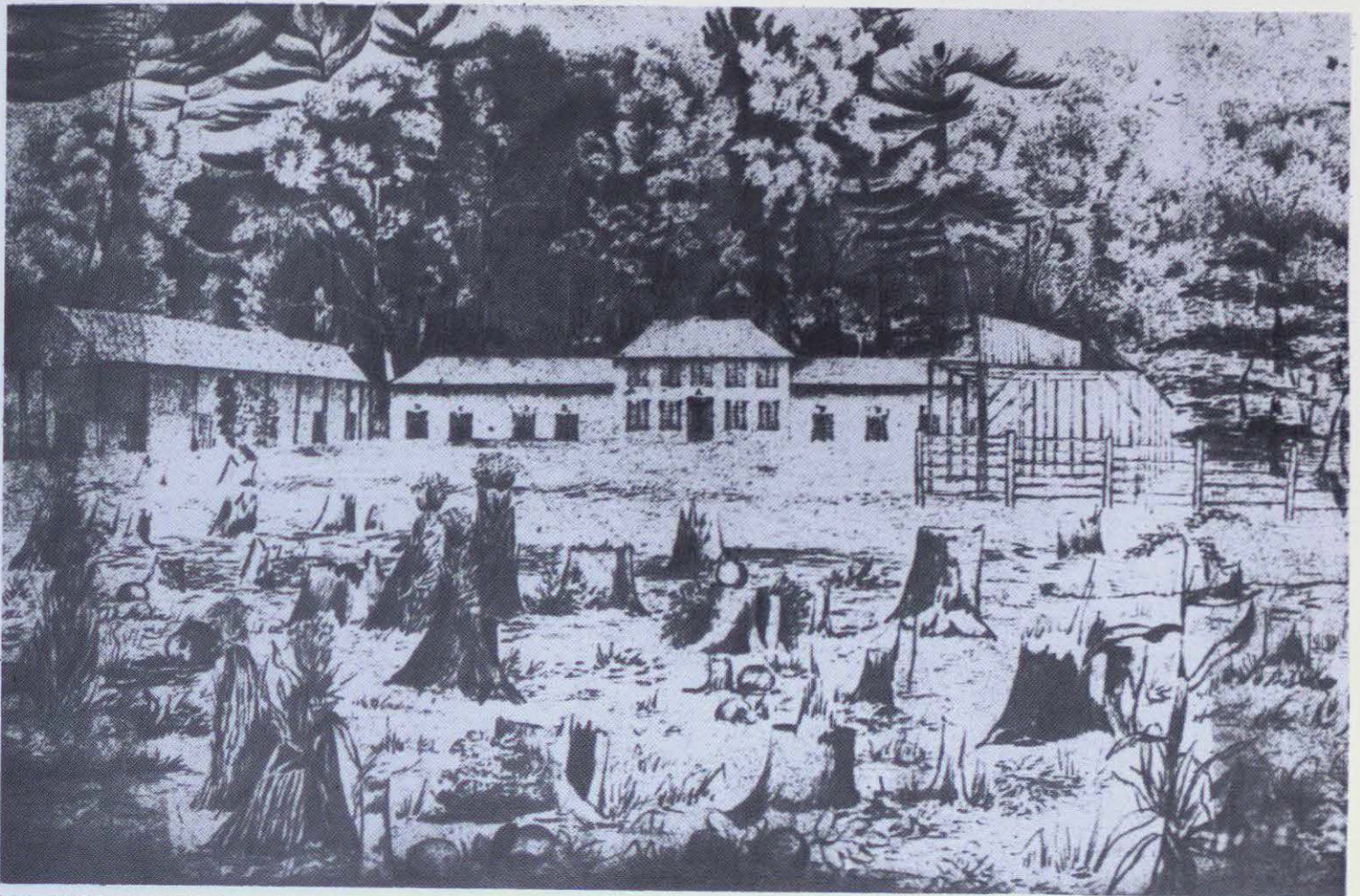
Main buildings of the Maxwell colony

in England, since his son, Henry Jones, records tiredly, "father is further gone in Socialism than ever." Jones returned to Canada in 1843, and died at Maxwell in 1852, his ideals still unfulfilled.

Sharon

Another type of utopianism is demonstrated by breakway religious groups who formed their own sects, usually under the influence of a charismatic leader. First among these was David Willson (1779-1866), an American-born merchant seaman who eventually settled at Hope, in East Gwillimbury township about fifty miles north of Toronto, in the early 1800's.[13] He became a school teacher and an active member of the Quakers; but having a passion for music and being given to outbursts of joy, he was a poor candidate for the Friends meetings of quiet meditation. He was expelled from the congregation. In 1814, he established his own group of Davidites, or as they became known, "The Children of Peace."

David Willson was a fine and spell-binding preacher and his congregation rapidly multiplied among the local farming population. The name of the village, gradually identified as Davidtown, was changed to Sharon. A meeting house, a day-school, a resident school of girls, a mechanic shop for boys, a music school and a silver band were founded, the first pipe organ in Upper Canada was constructed, and most rare, a spectacular Temple was built.[14]

The Temple, we are told by Willson, was designed by divine inspiration. It is unique in construction; a symbolic masterpiece in wood. Willson's beliefs have been described as a "confused hodge-podge of Quaker mysticism and Jewish ceremonialism of which the ancient temple worship was the central feature."[15] He saw his mission as uniting the Jewish and Christian faiths, the destruction of sectarianism and the formation of a universal brotherhood. The absolute square symmetry plan of the temple denoted justice to all men, the three storeys represented the trinity; the four doors at the four points of the compass symbolized equal access for all; and an equal number of glass panes on each side of the building allowed the light of the gospel to fall equally on all worshippers. The twelve lanterns remind us of the twelve apostles and the suspended gilded copper ball symbolizes Peace on Earth.

Internally the building is equally singular. It is square, and has an open square of twelve pillars holding up the second level, each labelled with an apostle's name. Within this first square is a second square of four larger pillars labelled faith, hope, charity and love linked by arches—God's rainbow. In the middle of these pillars is the altar, housing a wooden Ark containing the Bible.

The Temple was constructed by master-builder Ebeneezer Doan, whose house still stands nearby. Like that of Solomon it was built in seven years (1825-1832), the parts being constructed away from the site, so that it could be fitted together on the holy ground without the disturbance of the voices of the profane. Further, it was only used fifteen times a year—once per month, and for three special festivals; otherwise services were held in the meeting house.
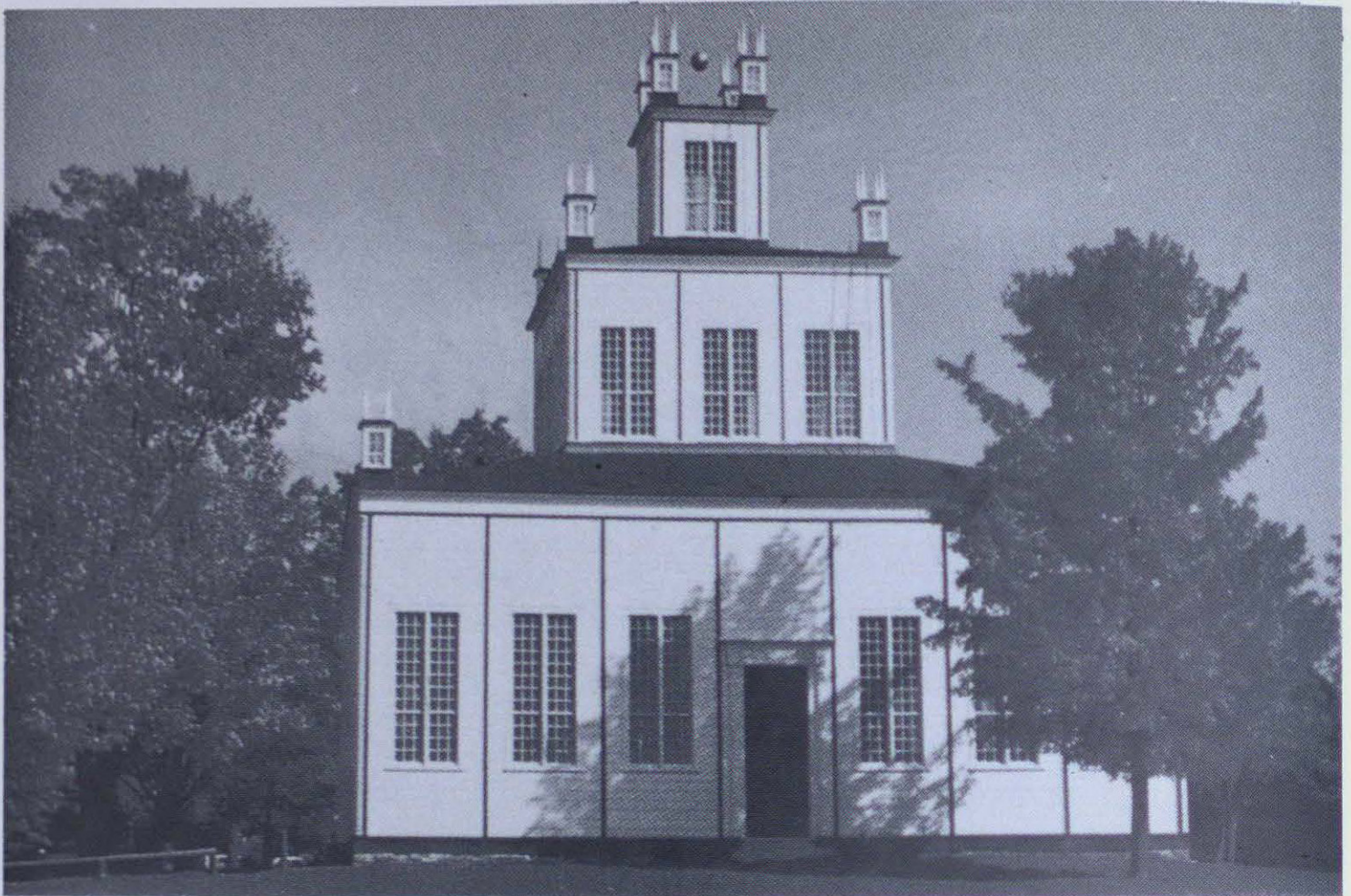
Temple of the Children of Peace

When David Willson died in 1866, the Children of Peace gradually returned to more traditional religions, but their remarkable temple of wood and glass still stands and is preserved as a museum by the York Pioneer and Historical Society.[17] The tradition of music-making has remained in the village with the descendents of Willson's congregation and music festivals are still held regularly in the Temple of the Children of Peace.

Dawn and Buxton

The fugitive theme illustrated in the case of the Delaware Indians of Fairfield is repeated in a dramatic way during the tortuous history of the abolition of slavery. Although the final Act abolishing slavery throughout the British colonies was not passed until 1834, Upper Canada had adopted a law in 1793 which forbade importation of slaves and provided that the children of slaves should become free at the age of twenty five. Canada in consequence became a haven for escaped slaves from the U.S., and Kent County on the north shore of Lake Erie, and especially its county town, Chatham, became the terminus of the "underground railroad". Although many blacks settled in and around Chatham, three special "Black Utopias" as William Pease has named them, were founded.[18]

The first, Wilberforce, was organised when the city of Cincinnati decided to enforce the State of Ohio's Black Code in 1829.[19] Although slavery was abolished in 1802, this statute required that the newly arriving blacks produce certificates of freedom and post a $500 bond as surety of good behaviour. The Cincinnati negroes, unable to raise this sort of money, thus looked to Canada for freedom. Four thousand acres of land held by the Canada Land Company was sold to the group for $6000, partially through the good offices of the Quakers. A community of perhaps 200 ensued, although it seems to have been badly managed and did not last very long.

The idea that slaves would have to be trained to enjoy freedom when it came, was given wide currency. Manual labour institutes, practical training in carpentry and farming, the fundamentals of reading and writing, and some understanding of how the capitalist system works, including the handling of money, were considered necessities for the newly freed to be able to make their way in the world.

It was thus that the British-American Institute, a colony less formally known as Dawn, was founded near Dresden. The man most responsible for Dawn's early fame was Josiah Henson, supposedly the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom". The fact and fictional stories of Henson and Uncle Tom are so intertwined that it is almost impossible to separate them.[20] It seems that the settlement started in 1834 and that the Institute was founded in 1841, with the help of Quaker funding.

Buxton, the third negro colony, is considered by observers to be much the most successful. This experiment was begun by a vigorous Irish born, Scots educated, Presbyterian Minister named William King (1812-1895). He organised a joint stock company, the Elgin Association, to raise funds from philanthropic sources to purchase nine thousand acres of land, about ten miles south of Chatham. He chose a site through which a military road already passed, and laid out a village and fifty acre plots for the settlers.

The fertile wooded land stretched northwards from Lake

Erie, a rectangle of about six miles long and three miles wide, crossing seven concessions in Raleigh Township. The old military road became the main street, and the lots were orientated towards it instead of maintaining the traditional concession alignment. A central square at the crossing of the Centre Road and the Middle Road became the focus of the community. Grouped around it were King's house, the church, shops, a mill and a brick yard.

The first settlers took possession in 1849. The head of each household was to pay about $2.00 per acre, in monthly installments, to receive clear title to their land. They were obliged not to sell to a white person for ten years, nor lease it out until it was fully paid for. These arrangements were designed to protect the black community, to ensure voting power, and to be certain that each family had equity and pride in ownership.[22] Minimum standards were set for all houses: none could be smaller than 18' x 24' x 12' high, all had to be at least 33' from the road on a site cleared back to at least 64'. A drainage ditch was to run across the front of the property, each had to be enclosed by a picket fence. Prizes were given annually to the best kept house and garden. By 1854, a potash factory, a sawmill and a shingle factory were under construction, and the population numbered over three hundred.

Whilst King and the Buxton mission were Presbyterian, land was made available for other churches too, notably the Methodists and Baptists, largely it is suspected, to keep out itinerant begging preachers. In 1850, a post-office and a school were opened. The latter was so successful that the children of many white settlers became pupils, and it developed the reputation of being the best in the county.

By 1856, Buxton had a population of about 1000. It was prosperous and successful. Its subsequent decline was due largely to the outbreak of the American Civil War; many men went back to enlist and never returned. After the war, others started the long trek back to the South to reunite with lost relatives, relying on Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1865 to preserve their well-being. However, a fair number did stay and their descendants still live and prosper in the district to this day!

Conclusion

Fairfield, Sharon, Maxwell, Dawn, and Buxton were all attempts to establish perfect communities. Their common ideals were peace, happiness, freedom from interference, and self-sufficiency based on agriculture and associated industry. It is striking that their objectives were so similar even though their origins were so diverse.

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