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Decadence of Country Towns in Rhode Island

Welcome Sands Carmichael
University of Rhode Island

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Carmichael, W. S.
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THE DECADENCE OF ~~THE~~ COUNTRY TOWNS IN RHODE ISLAND.

The state of Rhode Island and the government of the United States have established here a college whose special aim is "to teach such branches of learning as are related to Agriculture and Mechanic Arts." It therefore seems peculiarly appropriate at this time to call attention to the serious loss of population, and to what is coincident with that loss, to the decadence of industrial activity in the country towns of Rhode Island.

In the year 1790 the population of certain towns in this state was at its maximum, and from that time has steadily decreased. To give an idea of this decrease, a group of towns consisting of Charlestown, Exeter, West Greenwich, and Foster has been selected. These towns illustrate the decline in population characteristic of many others ^{of} this state similarly situated. The first, Charlestown, with a population of 2,022 in 1790, fell to 915 in 1890; Exeter during the same period of one-hundred years, from 2495 to 1255; West Greenwich, from 2024 to 798; and Foster, from 2268 to 1255. It is interesting

to know that these towns developed to their maximum population through the raising and exporting^{of} such products as lumber, horses, and cattle.

The close of the eighteenth century was an era of invention. In 1790 Samuel Slater brought to Rhode Island the spinning-jenny. He took advantage of the abundant water power of this state and established an industry on the Blackstone River at Pawtucket. Shortly afterwards there was scarcely a town in the state which had not several factories in operation. Charlestown, it is surprising to learn, has never had more than a single factory running at one time, although it once had a population of over two thousand. Now note the change. In Exeter alone, there are at present nine abandoned factories and not even one mill continues to run in that district. An imaginary circle whose radius is one quarter of a mile, contains more than twenty deserted house cellars. It is astonishing to see how many abandoned farms and dilapidated factory villages there are in the various towns, especially in the southern portion of the state. In West Greenwich there were once four flourishing mills, but to-day only one remains in operation, and that is a cotton mill at Nooseneck.

What is true of these towns is equally true of other places in Rhode Island in which were located hamlets once busy with flourishing industries, giving employment to many hands and around which were clustered reasonably contented people. I know of no better field of investigation than Usquepaug, a village only a short distance fro West Kingstan Station. Other peculiarly striking illustrations and almost in sight of our dormitory are Moorsfield, Rocky Brook, and a little further distant South Ferry. All at one time prosperous factory villages have long since ceased to be such. Other places especially worthy of mention are the northern sections of the towns Richmond, Hopkinton, Foster, and Westerly.

There are numerous agencies which suggest themselves as producing this retrograde movement and decline of population. First of these is the aggregation of industries, a good illustration of which may be seen along the Blackstone and Pawtuxet Rivers in the northern portion of the state. The aggregation of industries has resulted in promoting the growth of certain towns, but in so doing has drawn a greater part of the population and wealth from the outlying districts. From this it is readily observed that those centres around which the industries

are gathered, occupy a much more favorable situation for economic production than the rural districts. Another cause is cheap transportation and consequently greater competition. The home producers are unable to compete on old lines and old methods with the producers in the western states. Again, the increase of wealth in the cities has tended to draw men from the country and place them where they could enjoy better educational, religious, and social facilities, and find fuller scope for their superior abilities than has been possible in the rural districts.

Now comes the most important question of all and one not a little perplexing. What means are there of restoring an equilibrium of population to these sorely depressed districts of this state? It is a problem for the serious investigator rather than the tyro, but one thought seems peculiarly fitting just at this time and should be impressed upon the public. Many of the manufacturing industries are bound to suffer perhaps, but there is hope for the disheartened farmer; there should be a revival of agriculture in the agricultural districts. Natural conditions should be studied, and only those products attempted which the farmer will be able to successfully raise. To help him in his decisions is one aim of the State Agricultural College. To this end there should be hearty

coöperation between the farmers of Rhode Island and this institution. Like the other state colleges, it was designed to further the Agricultural interests of the whole country upon which the strength of the nation so largely depends.

W. Leonard Sands Carmichael