

“You look down upon the Susquehanna, about three or four miles off; 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 Cooper<sup>1</sup>

When settlers travelled along the Susquehanna River in the late 18<sup>th</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> Combined with Romantic ideas concerning nature as a place for healing and peace, the American frontier became 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 settlements in particular fell prey to the clash between romance and reality: French Azilum and Joseph Priestley’s Dissenter colony. Both of these settlements were planned along the North Branch of the Susquehanna River, and in both of these instances, the expectations of the New World definitely clashed with the reality of the necessary sacrifices needed in order to live on the frontier. In this paper, French Azilum and Priestley’s colony will be examined as settlements that mistakenly relied on utopian thinking, or “prescriptive and improved imagined states of collective and/or individual being,”<sup>3</sup> as well as Romantic writings of the period in the formation and planning of their settlements.

French Azilum was planned to be a safe haven for French aristocrats fleeing the guillotine and instability of the French Revolution. After being devised by Viscount Louis de Noailles and Antoine Omer Talon, and financed by Robert Morris and John Nicholson, the settlement was born in 1793. French Azilum became home to a number of high-class French citizens as well as planters from San Domingo who had been forced to flee Haiti due to slave rebellion. In addition to planters, some of these emigrants had been connected to the king’s household, while others were merchants, members of the secular clergy, soldiers, or were owners of cafes and restaurants<sup>4</sup>. Within years of its creation, Azilum essentially became a recreation of French high society located in the middle of the wilderness. In 1803 the settlement began to dissolve as Robert Morris and John Nicholson suffered from financial troubles and Napoleon offered to return the estates of many of the aristocrats if they would return to France.

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<sup>1</sup> Cooper, Thomas. *Some Information Respecting America*. London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1794. Web. Pg 105.

<sup>2</sup> Crèvecoeur, Jean de. *Letters from an American Farmer*. 368

<sup>3</sup> Ivana Milojević, “FUTURES OF EDUCATION: FEMINIST AND POSTWESTERN CRITIQUES AND VISIONS”, PhD Thesis, School of Education, The University of Queensland, 2002, pp. 40 – 85. Pg 1

<sup>4</sup> Geoffroy, Rebecca. “Asylum ‘A Paris in the Wilderness.’” Penn State University Libraries, 12 Oct. 2012. Web. 17 Jun. 2013.

As a result, by 1804 there were only a few families left in the settlement.<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Priestley's Dissenter colony was planned to be a refuge for "friends of liberty" or Dissenters, meaning those who were being persecuted for objecting to the Creeds and offices of the Church of England<sup>6</sup>. Joseph Priestley, commonly known as the man who discovered oxygen, was labeled a Dissenter in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, because he subscribed to Unitarianism and was a vocal opponent of many political policies in England. As a result, he was denied a number of civil and political rights that were available to Roman Catholics and Jews, and he was slowly excluded from multiple scientific societies.<sup>7</sup> When an anti-royalist riot broke out and a mob sacked his house (due to him being a public supporter of the French Revolution and opponent of certain pieces of English legislation),<sup>8</sup> Priestley and his family were forced to flee to France. However, France could not be a permanent option due to the violence of the French Revolution, and so Priestley set his eyes on America. While remaining in France, Priestley sent his son, Joseph Priestley Jr., and his friend Thomas Cooper to survey and buy land. Although a settlement for Dissenters had been planned, once Priestley arrived in America in 1794 the plans had been scrapped.<sup>9</sup>

When studying these communities, numerous questions arise as to why such educated and affluent characters were drawn to the American frontier. Why did they choose to settle specifically on the Susquehanna? What did they expect to experience once they arrived? And where did their plans go wrong? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at some of the literature that was circulating in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as well as examine where the utopian expectations of the settlers clashed with reality.

In his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Jean-Jacque Rousseau popularized the idea of finding peace in nature and solitude. "Fifteen years of experience have instructed me at my own expense: back now under the sole laws of nature, I have regained my original health through them."<sup>10</sup> During the time that French Azilum and the Dissenter colony were being devised, instability was rocking Europe, and the serenity that Rousseau described seemed like a dream. The notions of finding an "earthly paradise" and "regaining [one's] health]" seemed heavenly in comparison to the horrors and persecution that these emigrants were facing at home<sup>11</sup>. As a result, it is likely that both Priestley and the French emigrants drew on these anecdotes of finding peace and health in nature as they prepared to leave their homes. Furthermore, Rousseau's writings would have been relatable, seeing as he had also been rejected by his countrymen and

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffroy

<sup>6</sup> "The Susquehanna Settlement, 1794." Ancestry.com, 24 Nov. 2004. Web. 17 Jun 2013.

<sup>7</sup> "The Susquehanna Settlement, 1794."

<sup>8</sup> Silverman, Sharon Hernes. "Joseph Priestley." Pennsylvania Museum and Historical Commission, n.d. Web. 10 Jun. 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Duke de la Rochefoucault Liancourt. "Travels Through the United States of North America, the Country of the Iroquois, and Upper Canada, in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797; With an Account of Lower Canada." London: Printed for R. Phillips, 1799. Web. Pg 74

<sup>10</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "The Reveries of the Solitary Walker." Translated by Charles E. Butterworth. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. Web. Pg 95

<sup>11</sup> Rousseau 95 and 119

was in search of a place where he could be at peace<sup>12</sup>. What might have given these emigrants hope was that Rousseau did end up finding a place where he had been happy and had enjoyed his life. “The moment I slip away from the retinue of the wicked is delightful; and as soon as I find myself under the trees and in the midst of greenery, I believe I am in an earthly paradise and I savor an inner pleasure as intense as if I were the happiest of mortals.”<sup>13</sup> He offers solitude in nature as a healing salve for the soul and the mind. Unfortunately, while Rousseau was able to venture into the French countryside to find serenity, Priestley and the French refugees were forced to look elsewhere. What they decided on was an untapped frontier that provided them with an immense amount of space between them and their persecutors.

While Rousseau had planted the idea of finding an escape from society through nature, what influenced these emigrants’ decision to settle on the not-so-glamorous frontier may have been the works of the writer J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur. In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur romanticizes the Susquehanna River and makes it seem as though it awaits civilization’s touch. He describes the river with such wonder and such singularity that causes everywhere else to seem inadequate:

Few rivers in this part of the world exhibit so great a display of the richest and fertilest land the most sanguine wish of man can possibly covet and desire...The eye stops with pleasure from considering attentively the level plains which it can easily pervade, to view the next rocky points covered with the finest pines, affording springs of the most excellent waters, producing brooks where mills are erected to turn grain into meal and the neighbouring logs into boards.<sup>14</sup>

His description lends the Susquehanna a utopic quality, where the soil is rich, the waters are clear, and the land is ready to be settled. By proposing that this land was especially suited to settlement as well as industry, Crèvecoeur was expanding his audience to not only include the weary emigrant, but also the businessman. His suggestion that the Susquehanna was a fine place for mills and lumber, while beneficial for aspiring settlers to know, also blurred the lines surrounding the purpose of emigration; was it for peace, or for profit? For the innocent emigrant, the Susquehanna most likely took on the appearance of a paradise within the wilderness—somehow a part of the wilds, but also completely separate in temperament. But for the not so naïve, that image of utopia and the hope for peace were tainted with the promise of lucrative business. And it is very possible that both the French aristocrats and Joseph Priestley were exposed to Crèvecoeur’s writings, because *Letters* had been widely distributed during the later half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, *Letters* had been produced in multiple languages and editions, and had appeared in various major cities such as London, Dublin, and Paris.<sup>15</sup> Admirers of Rousseau especially found purchase with Crèvecoeur’s writings.

With the writings that were circulating during the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is consistent to theorize that the French emigrants’ and Priestley’s views of America and the Susquehanna were distorted through descriptions of utopia. A place free from pain and persecution. A place somehow “better” than what they left behind. For the French settlers, Azilum was an escape from terror, as well as a place that would only accommodate the

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<sup>12</sup> Rousseau Preface xvii

<sup>13</sup> Rousseau 119

<sup>14</sup> Crèvecoeur 364

<sup>15</sup> Crèvecoeur 8

high-class and well educated of society. This settlement, which was located on the “pristine” Susquehanna River, was a place that they could not help but to compare in their imaginations to the lush gardens of Versailles. For the Dissenter colony, Priestley envisioned a safe haven for Dissenters or “friends of liberty,” meaning all those who had been persecuted in England for divergent beliefs, where discussion and debate would lead the day so as to encourage philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Priestley seemed to envision a more *Arcadian*<sup>17</sup> utopian theme, where man and nature would be in harmony, and the latter would provide solitude and enlightenment for the former. However, with only letters from friends, Romantic books, and propaganda to inform them, the romanticization of the Susquehanna took on the form of truth. Plus, since these settlers were fleeing their homelands and were seeking a new home, the paradisiacal interpretation of the Susquehanna quickly became a crutch. And when they were faced with the reality of the frontier, that crutch was taken away and the Susquehanna became a prison.

The French aristocrats were fleeing for their lives, and so they were not entirely prepared, mentally or physically, for the reality of the wilderness. Although they may have read about the peace that one finds when interacting with nature on a spiritual level, their reaction to life on the river shows that they were not ready for the solitude or the lifestyle. They did not know the language of the area, and showed no inclination of learning it, and “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.”<sup>18</sup> However, instead of working to learn the trades necessary to be self-sufficient and coming to terms with their new circumstances, most tried to recreate high-society France on the banks of the Susquehanna.

In addition to the unfamiliar environment and expectations that the frontier posed, the settlers were also facing the reality of having their illusion of power shattered.<sup>19</sup> Due to the uprisings of the lower classes that occurred in France and San Domingo, the French doxic, or unquestioned, social customs, hierarchies, and beliefs about people were all thrown into question.<sup>20</sup> If the common people could rise up and disrupt the nobility, what kind of power did the social elites really have? By disturbing the status quo, and revealing the arbitrariness of power, the lower classes had turned the world of the aristocrats upside down, and the aristocrats reacted by holding onto. As a result, their visions of creating a French utopia in America were infected by their attempts to display what remained of their social power; their colony of aristocrats became an act of denial as well as survival.

So from the beginning, the idea of French Azilum became associated with trying to reestablish upper class superiority and power, which tainted the initial utopian goal. “In France

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<sup>16</sup> Duke de la Rochefoucault Liancourt 74

<sup>17</sup> Ivana Milojević, “FUTURES OF EDUCATION: FEMINIST AND POSTWESTERN CRITIQUES AND VISIONS”, PhD Thesis, School of Education, The University of Queensland, 2002, pp. 40 – 85. Pg 3

<sup>18</sup> Murray, Louise Welles. “The Story of Some French Refugees and Their ‘Azilum.’” Athens: Tioga Point Historical Society. Web. Pg 61

<sup>19</sup> Rob Mann and Diana DiPaulo Loren. “Keeping up Appearances: Dress, Architecture, Furniture, and Status at French Azilum.” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 51. 4 (2001): 281-307. Web. pg 285

<sup>20</sup> Mann and Loren 284

during the ancient regime, elites were distinguished by their extravagant tastes in homes, their dress, furnishings, and their leisure,<sup>21</sup> and soon after arriving, the emigrants attempted to gain some kind of imaginary control over their circumstances by recreating the class system in the same way. The houses that were built in French Azilum were two stories and were fashioned for comfort and style: there were fireplaces, wide porches, and even glass windows!<sup>22</sup> One of the more extravagant buildings was *La Grande Maison*, which was rumored to have been constructed for Marie Antoinette.<sup>23</sup> It was two stories, spanned a width of eighty-four feet and a length of sixty feet, and contained eight fireplaces.<sup>24</sup> Yet, since the Queen never escaped from France, the house was turned into an inn and also served as a center of social activity when guests came through the town.<sup>25</sup>

The French elites also distinguished themselves from the local population through the use of their clothing and style. While the home served as a sedentary construct that allowed for the presentation of status, the dress of the elites was a more mobile representation.<sup>26</sup> Through style and ostentatious displays of wealth, one could express religious and social ideologies, as well as one's level of education.<sup>27</sup> However, living on the frontier made obtaining the necessary volume of fashions very difficult, and opportunities to don the proper extravagant dress were scarce, so once again, the French were forced to capitulate.

Over and over again the frontier refused the emigrants and forced them to compromise. Despite their desires to retain their "Frenchness" and status, the emigrants found that the Susquehanna River was less of a providing mother and more of a demanding mistress. Consequently, when Napoleon began to grant clemency and restore lands to returning aristocrats in 1802, there was no shortage of emigrants who accepted the offer, leaving the settlement with only a few small families.<sup>28</sup> Because the river had seemed to refuse them, the emigrants turned their backs on the supposed utopia and elected to return home.

While the French had trouble adapting to the solitude and rigors of frontier life, Joseph Priestley faced the disruption and corruption of his fantasy when the idea of his Dissenter colony was abandoned and turned into a land venture. Although his plans had been to create a colony where fellow Dissenters could come and live in peace, once Priestley arrived in Northumberland, the colony idea had been scrapped. The land that had been bought by his son and Thomas Cooper was found to be close to uninhabitable, and no Englishmen had shown up to purchase it.<sup>29</sup> However, there were still plenty of American buyers, so Cooper and Priestley Jr. continued to speculate on land, and even formed a land company which purchased tracts of land throughout Northern Pennsylvania. These lands have not been entirely mapped as of yet,

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<sup>21</sup> Mann and Loren 284

<sup>22</sup> Geoffroy

<sup>23</sup> Geoffroy

<sup>24</sup> Geoffroy

<sup>25</sup> Norman B. Wilkinson, "A French Asylum on the Susquehanna River" *Historic Pennsylvania Leaflet No. 11* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> Mann and Loren 291

<sup>27</sup> Mann and Loren 291

<sup>28</sup> Wilkinson

<sup>29</sup> Duke de la Rochefoucault Liancourt 72

but landholdings associated with Priestley Jr.'s land company have been found in Elk County as well as Lackawanna County.

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."<sup>30</sup> 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."<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.

Unfortunately, the abandonment and perversion of the Dissenter colony was not the only heartbreak that Priestley faced during his time in America. Similarly to his time in England, Priestley's religious teachings did not fall among entirely welcome ears, and he was not invited to preach at any of the local churches.<sup>33</sup> "They [the Americans] concern themselves but very little about dogmatic discussions of the Bible, and the tenets of the Unitarians."<sup>34</sup> Facing indifference as well as exclusion from the religious scene, Priestley continued his pattern of tenacity and began to hold Unitarian services in his house, which were attended by his family, servants, and some loyal followers.<sup>35</sup> His time in America was also marked by the sadness of having both his wife and his youngest son pass away within a couple years of them reaching America.<sup>36</sup> And so his idea of a utopia on the banks of the Susquehanna was repeatedly pierced by reality.

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 humanity. With these two settlements, the issue was that the settlers had unrealistic expectations as well as little to no frontier experience before their arrival. In addition, both Priestley and the French aristocrats were fleeing persecution, and were comparing the American frontier to their homelands. As a result, when they arrived they became disillusioned, and were forced to confront the reality of their situations: they had nowhere else to go. For the French aristocrats, this confrontation only led to denial as they attempted to control the wilderness and create their own France on the banks of the Susquehanna. Priestley on the other hand, while facing multiple tragedies as well as disappointments, seemed to adapt to the solitude and continued his experiments and religious writing, but saw his settlement for "friends of liberty" become replaced

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<sup>30</sup> "The Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley." Ed. John T. Boyer. Washington: Barcroft Press. 1964. Print. Pg 131

<sup>31</sup> Memoirs 131

<sup>32</sup> Cooper iii

<sup>33</sup> Graham, Jenny. "Revolutionary in Exile: The Emigration of Joseph Priestley to America 1794-1804." *American Philosophical Society* 85. 2 (1995): i-xii + 1-213. Web. Pg 50

<sup>34</sup> Duke de la Rochefoucault Liancourt 74

<sup>35</sup> Memoirs 145

<sup>36</sup> Memoirs 145-146

by a land venture. But are these just stories—just pieces of history where we can read and shake our heads at their naiveté? Of course not, for what purpose does history serve other than as a medium of reflection and to provide insight into the future? Through these stories, we see how America has had a long tradition of romanticizing the ideas of home and sense of place, and we can see how this tradition is still strong in the modern day.