The Corporation Community: Life in Sparrows' Point, Maryland

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First, I should like to say a few words about how I came to be interested in Sparrows' Point. For the last 18 months or so I have been involved with planning and research for a museum exhibit on life in industrial villages and company towns, especially in the Middle Atlantic region. In its life and death Sparrows' Point serves as a vivid illustration of the cardinal traits of the company town -- the total involvement of the company in the affairs of the community and the subordination of community to corporate needs and goals. Because the ultimate goal of this research is a museum exhibit rather than a book or article, I have been concerned with accurately describing the community and delineating the various aspects of the interaction between the company and its employees.

Sparrows' Point is located on the north shore of the Patapsco River about nine miles from Baltimore's business district. As the Pennsylvania Steel Company became increasingly dependent on imported ores for its Steelton, Pennsylvania, mill, it selected Sparrows' Point as the site for furnaces to convert the ore to pigiron for final processing at Steelton. By 1891 the facility had been expanded to include rolling and other fabricating mills, and the Maryland Steel Company had been formed to operate it. The relative isolation of the site made a number of initial demands on its developers. A fair amount of the early correspondence between Frederick W. Wood, the general manager of Pennsylvania Steel, and various officials at the site concerns arrangements for boat service between the city and the Point and construction of the Baltimore and Sparrows' Point Railroad. Because of the distance from the city it was felt that housing had to be provided to attract a stable work force. The town was begun at the same time as the works, and it continued to expand until by 1927 there were 1,200 houses and a population of close to 8,000 people. While production workers did not have to live on the Point, all members of management did.

The town was divided into areas with different sizes and styles of houses for different types of workers. There were single-family homes for management; semi-detached for foremen; and row

houses with eight dwellings to a block for ordinary workers. In addition, there were several large boarding houses for unmarried workers. All of the houses were well built of frame or brick construction with hot and cold running water and attached to company-owned water and sewerage systems. The houses for white workers had central heating, while those built in the separate, somewhat isolated, section for black workers did not. The company also provided an array of other services -- a school system, or more properly school systems in deference to segregation, a fire department, a police force, and lots for the use of religious groups. The first kindergarten south of the Mason-Dixon line opened on Sparrows' Point in 1892. The company also provided a manual training school. Pictures of the school indicate that its facilities were up to the highest standards of that time. A sizable portion of the land on Sparrows Point was set aside as a park, which, when combined with the dairy farm the company operated, gave a strongly rural cast to the community. The company maintained a store that sold dry goods, baked goods, and milk and produce from the community farm.

The company saw to all the needs of its workforce -- or at least that segment that lived in company housing. Living on the Point was an attractive alternative to living elsewhere. There was a waiting list for company housing, and workers needed the recommendation of their supervisor to be considered as it became available. At its fullest development the town housed about half of the work force.

Sparrows' Point was a forcefully positive expression of corporate paternalism. The housing the company provided was well built and well maintained. Those workers whom the company considered loyal were well treated, and the total environment of the town made their lives more pleasant than they might otherwise have been -- a substantial house with modern facilities, a school system with an excellent and varied program for their children, and park land. The company controlled the community through ownership of the land on which it was built. Schools and churches were encouraged and assisted, but taverns and liquor stores were kept out. The firm succeeded in getting a law passed by the state legislature prohibiting the sale of liquor on the Point. And the houses, attractive as they were, were available only for those workers who were found worthy. Even the keeping of pets came under the jurisdiction of the firm, and the strange blend of attitudes in the dog regulations -- offering free registration tags, but threatening to kill unregistered dogs -- suggests the complexity of corporate paternalism.

The company town was, after all is said and done, a particular response to a particular set of circumstances. The George Pullmans who set out to build model communities that would serve as examples of great ideals of human or business life were rare. Companies

such as Pennsylvania Steel seem to have had more limited and more pragmatic goals. A work force had to be attracted, housed, and kept. When the industrial site was somewhat isolated, as at Sparrows' Point, housing and a community were required. If the housing and community could be attractive and substantial, the problem of keeping skilled and experienced workers might be solved. The corporation had the resources to establish the community and by holding onto ownership could subordinate the needs of the community to its own goals and use the array of services to win the loyalty of the work force. Sparrows' Point expanded; and when even more housing was needed the Maryland Steel Company (successor to Pennsylvania Steel) did not keep adding to its totally owned housing, but rather established a real estate company that purchased land and built houses for sale to its workers in neighboring Dundalk.

The paternalism of the company town was neither benevolent nor sinister in its nature -- it was in the final analysis a rational response to a series of interrelated problems.

REFERENCES

1. The Maryland Steel Company Papers of Frederick W. Wood. Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, Accession 884.

2. Maryland Steel Company Collection. Pictorial Collections Accession 75.330, Eleutherian Mills Historical Library.