

H-Net Reviews

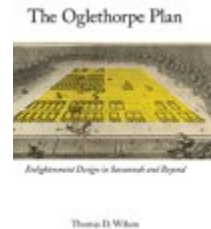
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas D. Wilson. *The Oglethorpe Plan: Enlightenment Design in Savannah and Beyond*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. xi + 257 pages. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3290-3.

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I am wary when history is presented as directly applicable to contemporary challenges while at the same time I know we can learn much from our past. Thomas D. Wilson argues for such an application in his book *The Oglethorpe Plan: Enlightenment Design in Savannah and Beyond*, suggesting that the plan might replace New Urbanism in the twenty-first century. Wilson's narrative enriches and expands on the work of John Reys, Turpin Bannister, and others who have been writing about Savannah for over fifty years (it may be one of the most researched city plans in North America), offering a remarkable account of the context of the British Enlightenment for James Oglethorpe's idea and Savannah's early construction. He does not try, as others have, to pinpoint one source for the idea or the plan, but rather to consider a more complex milieu in which Oglethorpe was thinking and acting. By taking such a strong stance for contemporary applications, however, he undermines the power of the compelling history he offers so carefully.

Oglethorpe's plan for Savannah, in its simplest description, is a grid of six "wards," each comprised of four "tything" blocks of residential lots and four "trust" blocks intended for public and civic buildings and uses, all surrounding a central open square, the specific use of which has been contested since the beginning. The purpose of the plan was, as Wilson writes, "to create a utopian agrarian society that would preserve and nourish fundamental principles of the British nation, principles that Oglethorpe believed were being eroded by urbanization and social disintegration" (p. 37). The plan was initially a product of Oglethorpe's engagement as a member of England's Parliament and his oversight of a committee to investigate three of Britain's increasingly dysfunctional

and dangerous prisons. While the efforts to improve the prison system were not particularly successful, with reforms only going into effect some fifty years later, an idea that surfaced was the establishment of a community in the New World that might provide former prisoners a new chance in life. The emerging utopian community plan was meant to embrace an agrarian model of sustenance while sustaining egalitarian values holding all men as equal. This was a radical concept and yet as Wilson demonstrates, deeply grounded in the British Enlightenment thinking.

Wilson's interest in placing Oglethorpe within a larger constellation of intellectuals, politicians, and progressive thinkers in the 1730s is evident as early as the prologue, in which he offers a detailed context for Oglethorpe's family and their political affiliations as well as the intellectual development of the British Enlightenment, including the arts, the sciences, and the humanities. This inclusive narrative does not negate the importance of Oglethorpe's leadership and coaxing throughout, and yet the significant support of individuals such as George Berkeley and John Percival as well as Dr. Bray's associates are important expansions of the standard narrative. However, I did find myself wondering how much I really had to remember in order to understand the history of the project. I had a similar response in places where Wilson lists evidence rather than summarizing, as in his discussion of the Trustee's Vision for the Colony, for which he provides a two-and-a-half page catalogue of the constituent parts (pp. 47-51). However, it is easy to skim those parts knowing that if needed, one can come back.

The slow pace of story-telling is maintained throughout the book; however, once the reader has settled into the rhythm, Wilson's close scrutiny reads as a much richer story than I expected when I picked up the book. He carefully builds a framework for the development of the idea for a model colony within the contemporary political, economic, and intellectual climate. He then moves on to the articulation of the plan for the ideal community and its manifestation as both a concept and a physical plan. The discussion of terminology in regards to both the specifics of the Oglethorpe and the Savannah plan is useful. The Oglethorpe Plan is defined as "the plan to establish a new model society in the colony of Georgia comprising social, economic, and physical elements" (p. 68). The Savannah plan is defined as "the integrated physical plan for the town of Savannah and its hinterland including a square-mile grid system and elements within the grid" (p. 68). The Regional plan is "the generic plan for towns and their hinterlands ... [t]he Town plan, the design of wards, riverfront development, right-of-way and the common that made up the town of Savannah," and the Ward layout is "the primary unit of physical development within the town, comprising four tything blocks, four trust blocks, a civic square, and right of way" (p. 68). It is a good review of scholarship and an establishment of a reflective glossary. Whether as a researcher or as a teacher, I will likely reference this section again.

Wilson then takes the reader through the early years, starting in 1733, of the Georgia project and Oglethorpe's building of Savannah and its regional plan. In this narrative Wilson builds on the many scholars who have considered Savannah and its plan and idea, at times choosing to allow existing scholarship to stand in for the details. This is true for the Public Garden that Wilson discusses, but a more critical analysis can be found in Julie Anne Sweet's essay, "The Misguided Mistake: The Trustees' Public Garden in Savannah, Georgia." [1]

In Wilson's telling, the idea is an experiment in planning, one that is grounded in British Enlightenment thinking. It is framed by a clear set of values that must be critiqued within the given circumstances. Oglethorpe identifies the mark from which all measurements will be made, and yet the plan, particularly at the regional scale, must develop in accordance with the realities of the people and related issues of economy, environment, and culture. It is in this adapting to the circumstances that the importance of the larger landscape and regional networks becomes even more intriguing. Given that, I do wish the maps were larger so I could really follow the text. This is true in many of the comparisons of plans,

drawings, and maps that seem so important and yet the small size challenges the opportunity. Nonetheless, the critical nature of the regional network of settlements and hinterlands is clear and Wilson demonstrates that to understand the idea without fully understanding this scale of the project is reductionist at best, futile at worst.

The implementation of the idea and plan ends with Oglethorpe's withdrawal in 1749 from the project and the eventual weakening of the initial framework. The communities, by elite majority, soon adopt practices that are an antithesis of the original intentions—allowing slaves in the community and essentially adopting North Carolina's plantation model. This decision will eventually lead to the establishment of a very different community than the plan originally intended or even imagined, leading to issues of race and class that defy the plan's egalitarian roots. Nathaniel Walker has recently explored these issues in his article "Savannah's Lost Squares: Progress versus Beauty in the Depression-Era South." [2] Thus in the end the plan failed as an ideal but as Wilson cogently notes, this does not negate the entire idea.

Wilson's description of contemporary Savannah, in his fourth chapter, persuasively points to the aspects of the plan that have been retained and in turn sustain the community at large to this day. This description is compelling as it is based on Wilson's long-time service as the director of comprehensive planning for Savannah. Where I find Wilson least persuasive is in the final portion of the book, "The Future of the Plan," and the epilogue, "Enlightenment Legacy," in which he contends that Oglethorpe's plan is the answer to most any urban woe today. Engaging in a critique of New Urbanism, which I would argue already dates Wilson's framework as most of us have moved beyond the narrow framework that New Urbanism stood for (and the brief and relatively inaccurate reference to landscape urbanism doesn't help), Wilson is not really addressing the complexity of urban growth, the challenges of population growth, density, globalization, or climate change in significant ways. The Oglethorpe Plan does have much to offer, but it is not a panacea for all urban woes.

To make the familiar unfamiliar is one of the most powerful acts of a historian and Wilson does this. His carefully researched story describes both Oglethorpe's contribution to the Enlightenment and the rich intellectual context for both the idea's initial generation and its manifestation in Georgia. Wilson successfully challenges the "static portrayal of Oglethorpe's role in history" and is able to persuasively argue for his contribu-

tions to “social reform, political theory, and town planning” (p. 1). The description of Oglethorpe’s efforts to create social equity through physical design remains relevant today. In addition, Wilson’s careful analysis points to a frequent misrepresentation of the plan as infinitely expandable, demonstrating instead that there is an ideal scale at which the plan as a whole is optimal.

Countering my own initial response, I might suggest that taking on New Urbanism and engaging in a discourse on contemporary urban planning and design in the framework of historical ideas and projects is a positive contribution because it is so direct and unapologetic. Historians can at times be so wary of such application of narrative that we discredit anyone who attempts to articulate what we might learn from history, and yet we know there is much to learn. The Oglethorpe Plan for any num-

ber of reasons has much to teach us today and tomorrow, and so Wilson’s willingness to go out on a limb and serve as both a historian and a contemporary critic can be refreshing and should generate a good discourse that I hope includes historians, planners, designers, and citizens, all of whom would benefit from reading the book.

Notes

[1]. Julie Anne Sweet, “The Misguided Mistake: The Trustees’ Public Garden in Savannah, Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (2009): 1-29.

[2]. Nathaniel Robert Walker, “Savannah’s Lost Squares: Progress versus Beauty in the Depression-Era South,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70, no. 4 (2011): 512-531.

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