Colonizing the Cutover: Wisconsin's Progressive-Era Experiments in Rural Planning

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Abstract

During the Progressive Era (c. 1890-1920), rapid industrialization and unregulated economic development jeopardized the quality of life, not only in the nation's burgeoning cities, but also throughout its rural areas. Growing concern about deteriorating rural conditions led to the creation of the Country Life Commission by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908. In the period leading up to World War I, a small but dedicated group of landscape architects and planners worked toward raising standards in planning and design within rural settings. In several states, rural planning initiatives were promoted through the extension divisions of land-grant universities, many of which had only recently begun to develop academic programs in landscape architecture and planning. At the Universities of Illinois and Wisconsin, faculty members advised rural clients on how to lay out community centers, site farm structures, and prepare landscape designs that utilized native plants. One of the most ambitious manifestations of Progressive-Era rural planning ideals emerged in Wisconsin's "Cutover" region, a former logging district in the northern part of the state. Here, University of Wisconsin planners collaborated with the private sector to develop agricultural colonies where settlers received various forms of assistance as they struggled to establish farms. This article describes the planning and development of five such enclaves established from 1904 to 1919.

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