LEWISBURG IN SPACE & TIME

by Ben Marsh; from *Eastern Historical Geographers Association* field guide, Fall 1987

Bucknell and Lewisburg, 1884

Like many towns in central Pennsylvania, Lewisburg was founded by a German. Ludwig Derr laid out the town in 1785. The "Lewis" in Lewisburg is an anglicization of Ludwig; the street names (St. Catherine, St. Mary, St. George) are mistranslations of streets named after his children — Strasse Katrina, Strasse Maria, Strasse Georg. Derr built a saw mill and a grist mill at the site. Lewisburg is still a local center for handling wood and grain two hundred years later: a furniture factory is one of the town's biggest employers.

Growth was always slow for Lewisburg although the town is the natural outlet for the rich Buffalo Valley. Most transport routes have been located on the other side of the river. When the canal went through, Lewisburg immediately built a "cross-cut canal" (about under the current path of Rt. 45) from Montandon to link up to it; when the railroad was built beside the canal in 1855, Lewisburg constructed a long covered bridge for a spur line. By these means the town remained connected to Buffalo Valley behind it and moderately well connected to the rest of the world downstream. Lewisburg has grown inore-or-less continuously toward the west for two centuries now. The progression of architecture from the river along Market St. is the town's chronology. The compact old brick and stone houses by the river along Water St. were built in the 18th Century by store keepers and millers — often both business and home, in the pre-industrial fashion. The bulky Federal buildings from the early period of commercial growth stretch from Front St. to Second St. The Hotel was built in 1831, two years before the canal arrived. Other buildings were homes for grain merchants and the schoolmaster. The wealth and interaction that the canal, and later the railroad, brought induced the relative exuberance of the older buildings around Lewisburg's market blocks, from Second to Fourth Sts. Classical Revival architecture is rare for residences in Pennsylvania, but clubs, banks, churches, and the courthouse are all done in elegant imported styles. The University at Lewisburg --now Bucknell — was started in 1846 in an austerely Baptist version of a Greek Revival building.

Lewisburg is now doing quite well by itself. Of all the towns in the region, Lewisburg has been most successful in profiting from historical-ness. Lewisburg had nice buildings to begin with and Lewisburg is open enough and sleepy enough to have been spared significant downtown destruction in the 60's. The University was probably the catalyst for the town's current growth. What was important in the success of this town is that Lewisburg found itself to be the most livable place in an increasingly difficult region, and has benefited as much for its relative attractiveness as for any absolute qualities. Because of its shops, its trees, and its college town flavor and functions, Lewisburg attracted the wealthy and mobile people of the region: doctors from the hospital complex at Geisinger, managers from various medium-sized businesses, operators of the last manufacturing plants, and lawyers and engineers and salesmen from the whole region. And that appeal has been self-perpetuating; the town becomes more attractive as more well-off people live here.

The reordering of central Pennsylvania's landscape into this new century, as the traditional sources of wealth continue to dry up, will follow the model of Lewisburg. The advantages of towns are now esthetic or perceptual advantages, and the benefits of those advantages are relative to nearby towns, not relative to the entire national industrial apparatus. It is style, not resources, that will select the growth poles for the 21st century.

The rest of Union County presents a well-isolated example of rural development in Pennsylvania. The land we see is the product of a long history of conflicting demands on the landscape, between farms, non-farm residences, businesses, and recreation. Farmers value prime soil, flat land, water, and contiguity to other farm land. Much of the center of the valley fits this requirement, and is in dairy farms. Within and around that .region are clusters of Old Order families, Amish and Mennonite. Needing to be together because the difficulty in traveling by buggy or bicycle, these families are arrayed around a church or a school. They tend to be in more diverse areas with smaller farms (i.e., hilly areas).

The expansion of newer nonfarm housing shows best in the most highly visible places: next to roads — on scenic hills, and on hillsides of marginal (i.e., cheap) land. Farms continue to maintain a hold on

much of the prime farmland because adequate nonprime farmland exists to siphon off development. Low-income, non-farm rural residents live on the shalier parts of Pennsylvania valleys. The use of the land here might very familiar to someone from the upland South: houses dispersed along smaller roads, rambling assemblies of buildings and outbuildings with little attention to the appearance of the homestead from the road, and a tendency to accumulate disused objects in the yard and on the porch.

A rural model of business depends on habitual customers to maintain a *sufficient* level of commerce. Rural car garages, Mennonite greenhouses and harness shops, country bars, and Mom & Pop grocery stores dot the countryside and illustrate this form. The success of these establishments is largely dependent upon the owner's friendships and reputation, not on the traffic out front. Churches are businesses in a way, and some of them resemble those stores. Small, personality-oriented, evangelical churches are scattered across the land, unlike the more institutional churches in towns.