

AN EARLY FRENCH ACCOUNT OF RAPPITE SETTLEMENTS

Edited by
EDWARD D. SEEGER

In 1817, the French traveler Edouard de Montulé undertook an extensive tour of the United States, going from New Orleans to Niagara Falls by way of Pittsburgh. His journal includes a description of the town of Harmony, Pennsylvania, recently abandoned by George Rapp and his followers, and also a brief remark on the contemporary Rappite settlement on the Wabash River, in Indiana.¹ This latter narration is entirely omitted in the one and only English translation of the *Voyage*, published in London in 1821;² the passage concerning the Pennsylvania town is included, but the translation is somewhat unfaithful and inaccurate.

This account offers little that is new beyond the facts presented by Lockwood,³ Duss,⁴ and others; yet its importance among the rare contemporary notices of the Indiana Rappites would seem to justify the following translation. For the purpose of comparison, I give first the passage from the 1821 translation:

On quitting Pitzburg I traversed Alleghany, taking the road to Franklin. Having proceeded some miles, I met two travellers, with whom I breakfasted, at an inn standing at the branching off of two roads, the one conducting to Franklin, the other through Mercer; we chose the latter, and, although the longest, we were amply repaid, by arriving to dine at a little town which delighted me, containing an establishment without exception the most perfect that I have seen in America, and the only one in which individual industry is directed to the general good. This town is called Harmony, is regular, and built in the German style, in the centre of a fine valley. The houses are of brick, and the roofs thatched. From this place I proceeded alone, entering a dark forest, through which I advanced twelve miles without perceiving the trace of an habitation. I this day performed thirty-six miles and gained the town of Mercer....⁵

¹ *Voyage en Amérique, en Italie, en Sicile et en Égypte, pendant les années 1816, 1817, 1818, et 1819* (2 vols., Paris 1821), I, 251-52.

² According to Sabin, the same version forms part vi of the fifth volume of Sir Richard Phillips' *New Voyages and Travels* (9 vols., London, 1819-23).

³ George B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement* (New York, 1905).

⁴ John S. Duss, *George Rapp and His Associates* (Indianapolis, 1914).

⁵ E. Montule [sic.], *A Voyage to North America and the West Indies, in 1817* (London, Printed for Sir Richard Phillips and Co., 1821), 86. The paragraph, undated, is included in Letter XIX.

In the following translation from the French, I have kept the original spelling of place names, and added the footnotes:

LETTER XX

Buffaloe, 27 July 1817.

Leaving Pitzburg, I crossed the Allégany, and took the road to Fort Francklin. After covering a few miles through a wild country, I met two travelers; one of them, a German, spoke French pretty well for a German. We had lunch together at a wretched inn, located at the fork of two roads, both of which led to Erie, one by way of Francklin, the other by Mercer. We took the latter, and arrived at dinner time in a pretty little town whose aspect delighted me, and amply consoled me for having taken the longer route. This settlement, which is beyond a doubt the finest of its kind that I have seen in the interior of America, is the only one in which individual enterprise has been directed toward the common good. This town is named Harmony. It is regular, and built in the German manner, in the midst of a superb valley. The houses are of brick, and the garrets have thatched roofs. An immense orchard, planted in quincuncial fashion, lies to the rear as far as the little river which nearly encircles the valley. Several years before, seven or eight hundred Germans of a peculiar sect had followed a clergyman, who was their leader, into this region. At first, nothing disturbed them in their rites and ceremonies: everything was held in common among them; the work, as well, was equally apportioned. They formed a sort of happy little monarchy; they were beginning successfully to cultivate grapes on a knoll which rises in the middle of the valley, when, for reasons unknown, the leader suddenly sold the holdings for 500,000 francs,⁶ and went off with his followers to clear another piece of land on the Wabash, which flows in the west and empties much farther down, to the south, into the Ohio. It is believed that the population having increased in the vicinity, he feared lest his proselytes eventually lose something of the strictness of the principles that he had inculcated in them. These lands, in the hands of divers individuals, are deteriorating daily. Independently of the sale he had made, the leader had reserved for himself several parcels, for the sale of which he had sent his son,⁷ whom I saw at the inn.

My traveling companion, having come to buy a piece of this land, stopped there. I continued on my journey alone . . .

⁶ The amount is correct. In 1815 Rapp was informed in a letter from his son, regarding the sale of the property, that "a man named Ziegler has bought it for a hundred thousand dollars." Duss, *George Rapp and His Associates*, 12.

⁷ Young Frederick Reichert, a compatriot and early associate of "Father" Rapp, became the latter's adopted son, and changed his surname. To him were entrusted the business affairs of the society, which he managed with great acumen.