Free Acres, New Jersey

by M. B. Thomson

Free Acres differs from the Delaware and Alabama enclaves in that the original site was donated to its founders, the Free Acres Association, whereas the southern enclaves' land had to be purchased from outside sources. The donor was Bolton Hall, a New York attorney, the author of several books on land use and an admirer of Henry George, whose doctrines he hoped would, to some degree, be demonstrated through this experiment.

The title, Free Acres, is no misnomer, since the Association received the land free from Bolton Hall and each original leasehold was obtained from the Association for nothing. Now that all acreage has been given out, a leasehold can be obtained only through the purchase of a house, at which time the lease is automatically transferred.

The colony is located in the center of New Jersey, straddling the corners of Union and Somerset counties. The post office address is Berkeley Heights.

The taxes are paid to the townships of New Providence and Watchung. Two blanket tax bills based on the usual assessments of land and buildings are sub-
mitted by these townships each year and are paid by
the Free Acres Association out of the aggregate rentals
received from the leaseholds. Leasehold rentals are not
based on the townships’ assessments but on an assess-
ment made by the officials of the Association itself.
They vary, of course, according to the size and location
of the plot, and there is always a surplus above the
tax bill which the colony uses to defray expenses for
roads, the water system, swimming pool, meetinghouse,
etc.

As can be seen, in some respects Mr. Hall’s hopes
have been realized, although in the ensuing years the
colony has departed in matters of considerable detail
from the original principle. For instance, when a lease-
holder rents his house to someone else, he now must pay
the Association 15 per cent of the total he receives in
addition to his regular land rent. The question of
whether this can be interpreted as a tax on improve-
ments, inasmuch as the amount varies according to the
size and quality of the house that is rented, is a matter
of controversy in the colony today.

Free Acres covers 60 acres which have been divided
into 90 leaseholds, although 150 to 200 might have been
made, increasing the income and benefits to the Associa-
tion without seriously affecting the privacy of any hold-
ing. The population of the colony is about 300, and there
are no restrictions as to race or creed.

It is a colorful community. Colorful because of its
lovely wooded hills and the interesting people who have
lived there. It is colorful, too, for its community activities
the folk dances that are given under stately trees, the performances in the open-air theatre, and its fiery monthly meetings at which matters concerning the running of the community are threshed out and every man's voice is heard.