Rural Solutions in the Industrial Age: Joseph Fels, the Single Tax, and Land Reform

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Fels, a wealthy Philadelphia soap manufacturer, subscribed to Henry George's single tax economic theory that considered land a natural resource to be used for the common good of all citizens. A hefty single tax levied on land values was intended to replace all other forms of taxation, in effect forcing landowners holding property for speculative purposes to use their land productively or make it available to others. In theory, wealthy land monopolists would be forced to pay an equitable share of taxes while the amount paid by the working class would be lowered to a proportionate level. Following the Panic of 1893 and the ensuing four-year depression gardening programs were established in major urban areas to support unemployed workers. In 1897 Joseph Fels helped to establish and finance the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association, and later, the Vacant Lots Cultivation Society in London, in addition to several farming colonies in the English countryside. He also financed several experimental living communities based on the single tax: Fairhope in Alabama, Arden in Delaware, and Rose Valley in suburban Philadelphia. In addition, Fels supported single tax candidates, and corresponded with national and international reformers including Samuel Gompers, Booker T. Washington, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, and George Bernard Shaw. Fels was an equitable employer, a philanthropist, and a reformer who campaigned fervently for the rights of the working class until he died in 1914 at age sixty.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A 1909 letter from playwright George Bernard Shaw playfully admonished Philadelphia soap manufacturer Joseph Fels for his support of urban gardening as a means of "exploiting" the working class: "how you, I say, can deliberately make their clothes dirty, as agriculture alone can do, passes my understanding. But it is always the same: the lunacy of country life always attacks the manufacturer first."[1] Shaw's satirical prose taunted the Philadelphia soap maker while underscoring his opinion that city farming was a backwards undertaking. Shaw's criticism was penned in reference to Fels' financial support of urban-based agricultural programs in both the United States and England that hinged on Henry George's single-tax economic theories. In 1879 George published the prodigious tome, *Progress and Poverty,* in which he argued that land and its resources should be nationalized and used to benefit all citizens. Fels embraced and supported George's economic theory that was developed in response to issues stemming from industrialization. Fels and other reformers of the era proffered rural solutions, such as urban agricultural programs, for industrial problems that included hygiene and unemployment. Urban gardening organizations were developed to improve the physical health and economic situation of the working class, in effect keeping them from accepting charity. In addition to urban agriculture the millionaire supported institutions, communities, and political candidates who agitated to bring George's theories to fruition.

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[1] George Bernard Shaw to Joseph Fels, 23 March 1909, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Fels believed that he was providing sensible, equitable solutions for challenges that arose from urbanization and industrialization.

According to historian Arthur Dudden, when Joseph Fels died at age sixty in 1914 he was as world famous as William Jennings Bryan.[2] Memorial services in his honor were held across the United States and in Europe, yet little is know about Fels or his contributions, or his ideas about land and reform. He is, in fact, virtually absent from accounts of post-Gilded Age developments. The metamorphosis of cities in the late nineteenth century was due to the influx of workers, including immigrants, who left the countryside for urban wage labor that resulted in overcrowded conditions and an impoverished working class. The majority of city dwellers in the second half of the nineteenth century were wage earners whose employment was frequently disrupted by industrial slowdowns and economic depressions and recessions. It was an era marked by profound change and uncertainty.

The rapid pace and uncertainty of urban living replaced rural routines that coincided with nature's slower rhythms and included generational ties and continuity. Because cities were viewed as corrupt, in contrast to salubrious country living, reformers such as Fels initiated urban gardening programs to bring a measure of wholesomeness to cities. He believed that agricultural programs promoted self-sufficiency for workers who constantly found themselves on the brink of poverty, and reinstated some of the values and traditions commonly associated with the countryside, including a sense of

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[2] Arthur Power Dudden, *Joseph Fels and the Single-Tax Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1971), 4. Bryan, a liberal Democrat, ran for presidential office in the 1896, 1900, and 1908 elections. He also served as Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of State.

community, moral uplift, and robust health and physical strength. Much can be learned about this philanthropist by examining the programs he pioneered in America and England, including urban gardening associations, farming colonies, and other experimental living arrangements. An examination of his life and an overview of developments in this era will provide insight into the economic and political climate that facilitated their creation. Fels associated and corresponded with many like-minded reformers of the era, including Robert La Follette, Samuel Gompers, and Booker T. Washington in the United States and George Bernard Shaw, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Lloyd George and Israel Zangwill in Great Britain. An examination of Fels' personal papers provide insight into his personal philosophy; and public documents from the era generate a greater understanding of societal conditions and justification for Fels' support of the programs he developed and funded to aid the working class.

Fels spent the last ten years of his life traveling throughout the world in order to spread Henry George's single-tax message, utilizing his personal wealth to establish urban gardening initiatives and egalitarian living communities, and to support political candidates that endorsed single-tax measures. Fels behaved in a manner that contradicted his position in life. A millionaire like Andrew Carnegie, Fels was better suited to preach the Gospel of Wealth, but instead identified with those who administered the Social Gospel.[3] In lieu of pursuing greater personal wealth, Fels agitated to make the world in which he lived in a more equitable place by creating land-based opportunities for the working class to improve their financial circumstances. He acknowledged the problems

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[3] Published in 1889, Andrew Carnegie's essay *The Gospel of Wealth* presented individual financial success as a benefit to society that did not require government intervention. Adherents of the Social Gospel, however, considered unchecked capitalism harmful to society, insisting that governmental reforms were needed to protect ordinary citizens.

facing modern industrial workers and formulated a solution that stressed the continuing importance and value of rural virtues.

CHAPTER 2

LAND REFORM IN THE UNITED STATES

By the mid-1890s, when he began to sponsor the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Association (PVLCA), Joseph Fels was already a prominent businessman and millionaire. Born In Halifax Court House, Virginia in 1853 to German Jewish immigrant parents Susannah and Lazarus Fels, refugees of the 1848 European Revolution, Joseph Fels was raised in the pre-emancipation South, where his father's grocery store served as Yancyville's post office for the Confederate States of America during the Civil War.[4] An intelligent young man, Fels was somewhat rebellious and restless within the confines of the classroom. He left school at age fifteen to work for the family soap manufacturing business that had been established in Baltimore. Lazarus mismanaged the company, leading to an 1870 bankruptcy that forced Joseph to take an itinerant sales position. A career in sales suited his gregarious personality, and while on the road in Keokuk, Iowa he met his future wife Mary Fels (possibly a distant cousin) whom he married in 1881. When Lazarus and Joseph were hired as soap salesmen in 1873, the family moved to Philadelphia, where they enjoyed a modest level of prosperity. In 1875 Joseph purchased a share in the soap-manufacturing firm Thomas Worsley and Company, installing his father as foreman, and just one year later acquired the business outright, renaming it Fels and Company. In 1893 the family purchased Charles Walter Stanton's benzene formula, which they incorporated into a product dubbed Fels-Naptha laundry soap, and moved the business to Stanton's former building at 73rd Street and Woodland Avenue. Fels-Naptha

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[4] Dudden, *Joseph* Fels, 8.

became a bestseller due to its ability to cut through grease and grime. In 1890 the company sold 107 varieties of soap; by 1894 it was the sole product manufactured. An equitable employer, Fels initiated profit sharing with his employees. Perhaps even more striking, he chose to postpone the use of new machinery if it would replace workers' jobs.[5] Fels-Naptha propelled the family to financial success just as most of the country was experiencing a severe economic downturn. The Panic of 1893 and the ensuing four-year long depression, described as the most severe of the nineteenth century, did not affect business at Fels and Company. However, one-fifth of the nation's population experienced massive unemployment created by the failure of seventy-four railroads and the closure of approximately six hundred banks and 15,000 businesses.[6]

Philanthropy took on renewed importance in the economic climate of the late nineteenth century. Private charities generally provided aid to the "deserving" poor, a group that included the disabled, elderly individuals without family support, orphaned children, and widowed mothers, who in total constituted less than ten percent of the population.[7] Able-bodied individuals were expected to work, however, employment levels neared twenty percent during the 1894 depression. According to Daniel Rodgers, late nineteenth-century reformers strove to keep the largest segment of the population, the working class, off the dole, but with so many citizens unemployed the need for charitable contributions was overwhelming.[8] Americans leaders clambered to find solutions.

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[5] Dudden, *Joseph Fels*, 32.
[6] In 1894 Coxey's Army, a group of unemployed men from Ohio, marched on Washington D.C. demanding federal government creation of work projects, such as road construction.
[7] Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1998), 211.
[8] Ibid., 209.

The Fels family adhered to the tradition of *Tzdakhah*, defined in Jewish culture as righteousness and justice associated with charitable giving. In addition, Evelyn Bodek Rosen explains that philanthropy in the later nineteenth-century helped to "lessen the tensions between remaining Jewish and becoming a proper American citizen" in that era of large-scale immigration.[9] Many wealthy citizens contributed money to building funds for hospitals, schools, and religious institutions, as the state became more responsible for maintaining the poor with tax revenues; however, some philanthropists were willing to aid the working poor, especially in the harsh economic climate of the late nineteenth century. Joseph Fels asserted: "The noblest charity is to prevent a man from accepting charity; and the best alms are to show and enable a man to dispense with alms."[10] It is not surprising that his first major philanthropic investment[11] was in the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association, a program that paired unused city land with unemployed or underemployed workers, thereby requiring an element of sweat equity from its participants. Fels was part of a group of approximately fifty people comprised of social workers, civic leaders, and businessmen, who met at the Spruce Street home of Mrs. Thomas Kirkbridge on the evening of 2 March 1897 to establish an urban gardening organization in Philadelphia. The program's design was to be modeled after the original one in Detroit initiated by its mayor, Hazen S. Pingree. In 1894, when the effects of the economic depression exhausted Detroit's poor fund and wealthy citizens refused to make

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[9] Evelyn Bodek Rosen, *The Philadelphia Fels, 1880-1920* (Madison: Farleigh Dickenson University Press, 2000), 21-22.
[10] Untitled article, *The Times of London*, 20 October 1908.
[11] In 1895 Fels helped to establish the Philadelphia Public Baths Association, an organization that provided facilities for the poor to bathe and launder clothing. Fels made a small financial contribution, but provided the agency with cases of Fels-Naptha soap gratis.

further contributions, Pingree developed a program designed to give unemployed workers access to unused city lots to cultivate vegetables. To fund his controversial and much criticized plan, he offered to sell his prize horse at auction to establish funds for the program. Pingree solicited private citizens to loan their unused land to the unemployed and raised $3600 for supplies. By the end of the first growing season, participants cultivated produce worth an estimated $13,000 that provided 945 families with a food supply for the upcoming winter. Pingree declared "citizens who own vacant land would much rather allow it to be cultivated by the poor than to pay a large tax for their support."[12] He appealed to landowners in economic terms, but Pingree's desire to make land available to the working class had larger implications. Like Fels, Pingree was concerned with the plight of laborers. In addition to instituting urban gardening programs he agitated for municipal control over fledgling utility and transit companies prone to corrupt practices that resulted in higher costs for the working class.[13]

Both Fels and Pingree were greatly influenced by Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879), a bestselling book that sold over two million copies, was translated into numerous languages and serialized in newspapers throughout the county. George systematically asserted that land should be used communally to benefit the masses. He proposed that in order to distribute wealth more equitably all taxes should be eliminated except for one, a single tax on land values. George argued: "the possession of land is the

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[12] Frederic W. Spiers et al, *Vacant –Lot Cultivation* (New York: The New York Charities Review, 1898), 3.
[13] Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 134.

base of aristocracy, the foundation of great fortunes, the source of power."[14] George directly equated economic inequality in society with relative access to land. Laborers typically lived in cities and rented their dwellings. Increases in rent were inevitable whereas increases in wages were uncertain, and during economic downturns employment could be nonexistent or unsteady at best. In this era before social programs such as unemployment or workmen's compensation, a layoff or work-related injury could spiral those living at a subsistence level into destitution, creating a greater demand for charitable giving.[15]

Fels believed that access to land could improve the lives of millions of urban laborers who found themselves frequently unemployed due to boom and bust manufacturing cycles. Land ownership and distribution of wealth were critical issues on both sides of the Atlantic at the turn of the twentieth century. While Henry George inspired both Shaw and Fels, they disagreed on the single tax issue. Shaw belonged to England's Fabian Society,[16] moderate Socialists who favored government control of natural resources but opposed a single tax, while Fels zealously regarded it as the salvation of the working class and the best way to raise their standard of living. Shaw, Pingree, and Fels belonged to a class of Progressive reformers who desired to change society by restructuring its very organization. George posited that poverty accompanied progress in modern, industrial

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[14] Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (San Francisco: W.M. Hinton and Company, 1879), 296.

[15] Workmen's compensation was not offered in the United States until 1911. Some workers belonged to fraternal organizations, but their insurance policies often proved inadequate. Terry R. Lowe, " History of Health Insurance in *Fundamentals of Health Insurance Part A (*Washington, DC: The Health Insurance Association of America, 1999), 4-15.

[16] The Fabian Society, established in 1884, is considered the precursor to England's Labor Party, founded in 1900.

societies based on unequal economic principles. The chaotic, overcrowded, and unsanitary conditions associated with urban tenement houses were byproducts of industrialization and an economic system of unregulated capitalism. In addition to repugnant physicality, citizens of the middle and upper classes thought cities to be socially demoralizing, leading fair-housing advocate Jacob Riis to call urban centers "nurseries of crime, and of the vices and disorderly courses that lead to crime."[17] Renowned psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall blamed urban crime and chaos on city dwellers' estrangement from nature.[18] Urban gardening programs were dually designed to reduce crime by improving the working class's economic situation, and to instill a sense of hope and appreciation for nature in an otherwise bleak environment.

Throughout history city culture has frequently been associated with corrupt practices in contrast to wholesome and pastoral rural settings. This designation may explain nineteenth-century reformers' endorsement of urban gardening over other types of work projects. The Biblically rooted pastoral myth contrasts the wicked city with the good garden. Agrarianism was elevated in political economic theories of Enlightenment-era French Physiocrats, influencing American Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, who upheld the rights of farmers as he denounced city living. In the early nineteenth century Romanticism prescribed communion with nature as the route to reconciliation with God, as demonstrated by Thoreau and his Walden Pond experiment. In addition, nineteenth century garden cemeteries were designed for spiritual healing and renewal in contrast to their grim urban churchyard counterparts. "Sometimes the insistence of the city's

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[17] Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York, W.W. Norton and Company 2010, c. 1890), 5.
[18] Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), xix.

wickedness and degradation took the form of sympathy for the urban poor who were its victims, as in the famous opening chapter of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*."[19]

As Paul Boyer acknowledges, the wicked-city stereotype was reflected the period's literature, in particular sensationalized newspaper stories. Georgites and other early urban reformers thought of cities as licentious harbors of vice: alcohol, gambling, and prostitution were a "menace to personal virtue." In addition, crowds of immigrants speaking foreign languages and practicing different religions were viewed as a threat to white, middle class, Protestant social order. The crowded, fast pace of city living was shocking to those accustomed to the "predictable routine of the village." [20]Insufficient running water, poor air quality, and inadequate ventilation in tenement houses and factories contributed to widespread disease, raising questions about the health of city inhabitants, and inspiring reformers to crusade for government intervention in those matters. In addition to economic aid for the working class, urban agriculture was an attempt to reclaim some of the values and traditions commonly associated with the countryside, including moral uplift and robust health.

In response to the rise of industrialization and urbanization, a number of back-to-nature movements developed by upper and middle-class reformers came to fruition, including scouting and fresh-air programs for urban youth. Cornell botanist Liberty Hyde Bailey, prominent leader in the Country Life Movement, feared that urban children were losing touch with nature. In response, G. Stanley Hall and other educators devised and implemented nature lore curricula.[21] The creation of municipal recreational areas in

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[19] Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 129.
[20] Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 127-130.
[21] Schmitt, *Back to Nature,* xx, 77-85.

the mid-nineteenth century, such as New York City's Central Park, Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, and others, addressed the issue of urban overcrowding and the need for fresh air and green space. In addition, some considered the 1890s America's first decade without a frontier, when the United States' seemingly endless expanse of land was diminished in size and threatened by development. Richard Slotkin argues that the closing of the frontier was not real, but rather a populist myth that "[defined] the crisis of modernization as a loss of the democratic social organization, the equitable distribution of wealth and political power of the agrarian past." In Slotkin's opinion, it was the dividing line between the country's agricultural past and industrial future that required reconciliation with the American psyche.[22] Poverty existed before the rise of industrialism, but it was not as pronounced in agricultural communities as in cities. Daniel Rodgers asserts that the country tended to mask its poverty; conversely, it was so concentrated in urban centers that it couldn't be ignored.[23] While most rural dwellers were not rich, an agricultural lifestyle provided basic sustenance and a supportive network of kinship.

In addition, Progressives such as Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir rallied to preserve swaths of wilderness from development and for perpetual enjoyment of their natural beauty, a crusade that inspired the eventual creation of the National Parks Service in 1916.[24] Peter Schmitt explains the distinction between back-to-nature and back-to-the-land movements: elite members of society enjoyed the physical and intellectual

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[22] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (NewYork: Antheneum, 1992), 23.
[23] Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 210.
[24] Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920.* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003),164-68.

advantages of city living and had no desire to return to farm life. Instead, they sought to "make rural America the playground of an urban society." Rather than conform to nature, urbanites attempted to tame and control it.[25] Some wealthier citizens chose to escape the hassles of city life by moving to suburbs or returning to rural land, but most members of the urban work force had little control over their choice of environment.

Although much historical emphasis has been placed on wilderness and open space, problems in cities had grown substantially to the point that they too, constituted an untamed wilderness. Because wild environs were typically domesticated through cultivation, it seemed sensible to turn vacant, trash-strewn plots of urban land into gardens, in effect countering the ill effects of city living and advancing the agrarian heritage idealized by Thomas Jefferson, who believed "the earth is given as common stock for Man to labor and live on."[26] In 1897 local philanthropic businessmen and civic leaders like Fels established the PVLCA to tame the effects of urban life with wholesome, rural practices. Georgists viewed urban gardening positively, considering it rightful access to community property held by monopolist landlords. Urban gardening also appealed to upper- and middle-class reformers as a way to instill work ethic in the lower classes through a program that demanded sweat equity.

Moreover, urban gardening and other work initiatives were efforts to restructure charities from systems of gratuitous handouts to one of reciprocation for program participation because the able-bodied were expected to toil. According to Michael Katz,

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[25] Schmitt, *Back to Nature,* xviii.
[26] Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 28 October 1785. Source: www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index. Written in France, Jefferson questioned why so many citizens were unemployed when an abundance of land went uncultivated.

by the 1880s charity was approached in a scientific manner, administered by a new class of highly educated, professional social workers. Charity was bureaucratized and institutionalized, eventually replacing outdoor relief (donations such as food and fuel that did not require repayment) by private organizations and individuals. According to Katz: "the impersonality of municipal relief was its virtue."[27] Furthermore, when the depression of 1893 overwhelmed private charities, citizens looked to the government for support, but inadequacies in municipal infrastructure and lack of funds prevented most cities and towns from providing aid. Americans were also influenced by the philosophy of Thomas Chalmers, a Scottish minister who believed that individuals were responsible for their own poverty, and that acceptance of charitable relief would only increase its demand.[28] Unfortunately, many middle and upper-class citizens shared the belief that handouts created dependence and eroded the work ethic without taking into consideration that circumstances, including poor health and unemployment, were often beyond an individual's control. Early reformer Mathew Carey defended charity recipients: "[The] charge so frequently alleged against the poor, that their distress and wretchedness arise from their idleness and worthlessness…is utterly destitute of foundation as regards the majority."[29]

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[27] Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986), 154.
[28] John Landon, *The Development of Social Welfare* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986), 93.
[29] Mathew Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Clark and Raser, Printers, 1830), 50.

The famous adage "God helps those who help themselves"[30] was embedded in the national conscience and the PVLCA's mission: "Our motto: 'Increased opportunity for self-help.' Our purpose: Not to give charity, but to open an opportunity for those in need to help themselves by their own work."[31] Urban gardening involved a personal investment of time and labor, thought to promote self-dependence and counter pauperism, a condition associated with low self-esteem, and laziness equated with accepting outdoor aid.[32] It was considered a healthier alternative to overcrowded poorhouses where residents were required to perform labor in return for their keep. PVLCA members received a plot of land and were educated on how to cultivate it properly. In return participants were expected to tend their vegetable patches diligently and accurately record the number of hours worked and the amount of produce grown. In addition they were asked for a small donation to offset the cost of preparing the land. Participants paid one dollar per year, up to a maximum of five dollars in the fifth year and beyond. Since many urban gardeners sold excess produce, they were permitted to pay the amount at the close of the growing season.

The human suffering caused by widespread poverty, disease and overcrowding that accompanied industrialism prompted some reformers to regard it as a failed experiment

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[30]Credit for this adage varies, from the ancient Greeks to Algernon Sydney (1698) and Benjamin Franklin. Referred to as the spirit of the Protestant work ethic by German sociologist Max Weber, it helped to explain a unique aspect of American life that contributed to the country's unprecedented success. Stephen Turner, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2000), 157.

[31] n.d. PVLCA Report

[32]"The typical 'pauper' is a social parasite, who attaches himself to others, and, by living at their expense, suffers loss of energy and ability by disease and atrophy. Pauperism at this stage is a loathsome moral disease, more difficult to solve than crime." Charles Richmond Henderson, *An Introduction to the Study of the Dependent, Defective, and Delinquent Classes* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1901), 9. Henderson's assessment is typical of the era.

that could only be remedied with a return to rural practices. PVLCA annual reports provide many examples of desperate citizens who could not afford rent payments based on their meager income. The program served as a means of salvation, not only for able-bodied workers, but "those classed as semi-invalids or convalescents,"[33] in part because gardening did not require the Tayloristic speed and efficiency necessary for most manufacturing jobs of the era. PVLCA members solicited colleagues and city officials to obtain private and municipal lands suitable for cultivation,[34] and proceeded to raise funds to cover a superintendent's salary and the cost of tools, seeds, and related supplies.[35]

Fels responded to PVLCA requests by loaning a tract of his personal property at 60th Street and Kingsessing Avenue, and with increasing generosity: his initial donation was twenty-five dollars. After 1900 he gave the sizable amount of $500 annually[36] plus added funds for special projects or equipment. In 1902 he offered to contribute ten cents for every dollar raised by the Association that year, the first reference to matching gifts that became part of his legacy.[37] Fels also contributed his own time and energy to the program. In November of 1899 he was appointed to the publicity committee. The

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[33] Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association Thirtieth Annual Report, 1928.
[34] The designation "desirable land" meant not only lots with adequate soil, but those within participants' walking distance. Public transportation was in its early stages and available as an option, but the cost to transport an entire family was economically prohibitive.
[35] In the 10 March 1897 Minutes it is noted that Hon. Simon Gratz requested cooperation from the Board of Assessors with acquiring land. The PVLCA provided educational training, prepared vacant land, and supplied participants with the necessary items for gardening. In return participants contributed their labor, faithfully cultivated their plots and kept record of the produce raised, and paid a minimal fee to offset costs. The vegetables they grew could be consumed, given to others in need, or sold for profit.
[36] The 2010 equivalent of $10,000
[37] Dudden, *Joseph Fels*, 38-39.

following year he served on a special finance committee to address the organization's deficit. When the association was running a deficit again in 1907, Fels criticized its board of directors, who refused to match his donation. The story made newspaper headlines when Fels announced: "If some of our members could help us out, and have fewer dinners at the Bellevue-Stratford, it certainly would be a good thing."[38] Although Fels traveled in high society, he was known to be frugal, especially with personal expenses. Fels once claimed that he would travel fourth class, if it possible, justifying his economizing as a way to distribute his funds to more causes and individuals who were in need.

Fels' creative ideas brought exposure to the PVLCA: he solicited area newspapers for free or low-cost advertisements requesting financial support of the organization, and had journalists and photographers accompany board members on their annual inspection tour. In addition he asked city lawyers to approach their clients about bequeathing all or part of their estates to the PVLCA. Fels was elected as a director to replace William Hull in 1900, frequently hosting dinners for board members in his home or local establishments. He also actively supported Philadelphia's School Gardens program due to his firm belief in practical agricultural training.

Although averse to organized religion, some of Fels' philanthropic motivation can be traced to his religious upbringing. Sometime after the death of their first and only child in 1884, a son named Irvin, Fels' wife Mary sought a spiritual outlet. The couple compromised by joining the Ethical Society of Philadelphia in the winter of 1889-90. Influenced by the Social Gospel Movement, the Second Great Awakening, and

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[38] "Blames Fine Dinners for Society's Deficit," *North American*, 10 January 1907.

Transcendentalism, Felix Adler, son of a New York City rabbi, founded the movement in 1876; afterwards, it spread to other cities where it appealed to cosmopolitan individuals who desired to reform urban ills.[39] The organization's motto was "Deed, Not Creed!" and its philosophy combined personal aspects, such as prayer, with social action, in particular aiding the poor.[40] The Ethical Society appealed to nondenominational Protestants and secular Jews, blending people from a variety of religious backgrounds. It was thought by Adler to be "a path for Jewish acceptance" into American society.[41] It was suitable for those who eschewed ritual and other aspects of traditional religion while still fulfilling spiritual needs. Additional Ethical Society members included painter Thomas Eakins, naturalist John Burroughs, sculptor Sidney Morse, and Horace Trambul, editor of the liberal publication *The Conservator* and poet Walt Whitman's caretaker. Through the organization the Fels were exposed to and influenced by intellectuals and non-conformists including Whitman, freethinker Robert Ingersoll, and most importantly, Henry George. The Fels, who belonged to the Young People's Section of the Ethical Society, held Wednesday evening discussions in their home, and attended the Philadelphia Single Tax Club on Sunday afternoons where Georgist principles were discussed.[42] At first Fels was skeptical of George's theory, but after a thorough examination of *Progress and Poverty* and continuous debate at the Single Tax Club he became devoted to the cause. George's theories surrounding land access influenced Fels

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[39] Felix Adler was also trained as a rabbi, but his philosophy was considered too radical for most congregations, leading him to establish the Ethical Society.
[40] Dudden, *Joseph Fels*. 26.
[41] Rosen, *Philadelphia Fels*, 130-32.
[42] Dudden, *Joseph Fels,* 28-30.

greatly: his exposure to them should be considered a turning point in his life, when he began dedicating his energy and resources to land-based initiatives.

During this period Fels took interest in an experimental single-tax colony named Fairhope, established in Alabama in 1895. Its residents sought to bring Henry George's theories to fruition through unconventional living and equitable real estate arrangements that included group ownership of the land. Fels corresponded on a regular basis with Ernest B. Gaston, Secretary of the enterprise and one of the editors of the *Fairhope Courier*. In 1909 he donated $5000 to fund the Fairhope Organic School founded by Marietta Johnson, who incorporated the educational theories of John Dewey and Maria Montessori into her curriculum.[43] When Johnson elected to open enrollment to outside residents Fels advised her against doing so, trusting that the school's reputation for educational excellence would attract additional settlers to Fairhope, thereby securing its existence. In addition he financed a public library and loaned money to establish telephone and water lines; additionally, when a ferry was required, Fels was the largest donor, contributing over two thousand dollars towards its purchase. In recognition of Fels' generosity, Fairhope residents named projects after him, but in customary modesty he pleaded with Gaston: "Please do not let any more things down there be called by my name. It is the hardest thing in the world to make you people understand that I hate hero-worship."[44] Fels sent the PVLCA's first superintendent Robert Powell to oversee his investments in the community, but Fairhope residents accused Powell of mishandling situations, in particular an incident involving *Fairhope,* the community's first steamer

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[43] Ibid., 108. Fels also pledged $1000 annually.
[44] Joseph Fels to Ernest B.Gaston, 16 February1906, The Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

ferry that caught fire and was damaged beyond use, prompting a lawsuit against Fels. In addition Powell reported that Fels' funding was a source of discontent for orthodox Georgists who believed that all improvements in the community should be generated through rent payments. Both Fels and Gaston believed that improvements such as telephone lines would attract colonists, and that the overall success of the Georgist experiment was contingent upon a sufficient amount of settlers. When Fairhope became incorporated under Alabama law in 1908 it began to lose some of its unique characteristics. The mayor, H.S. Greeno, was a socialist with little inclination towards advancing the concepts of Georgism, and was critical of Fels' ally Powell. By 1909 Fels considered Fairhope "more nuisance than asset," and moved on to other prospective projects.[45]

Committed to land reform and determined to establish a community modeled after George's principles, Fels helped to finance two other single-tax colonies, Arden in Delaware, and the Arts and Crafts community Rose Valley in suburban Philadelphia.[46] The state of Delaware was a logical choice for a Georgist settlement since Frank Stephens and a small army of followers attempted to convert the First State into the first single-tax state in 1895. Overall their measures failed, but their efforts acquainted the public with single tax issues. In keeping with Henry George's philosophy, the land on

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[45] Dudden, *Joseph Fels,* 110.

[46] Fairhope and Arden presently operate as single-tax communities. The Arts and Crafts Movement, originated by English artist William Morris and English writer John Ruskin, proliferated in Great Britain and the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Artists rejected industrial piecework production, seeking a return to handcrafting items. Artisans formed communities where they lived and produced handcrafted home furnishings including wallpaper and furniture. Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 3-12.

both properties was held in common and residents signed ninety-nine year renewable leases. Members of the community paid rent, a portion of which went to the township, with the remainder used for common maintenance including roads and shared-use buildings. Architect William L. Price, a devout Georgist, was instrumental in designing both communities.[47] Rose Valley artists rejected modern industrial methods and used piecemeal production to create authentic handmade goods such as wallpaper and home furnishings. Furniture produced at Rose Valley was sold in Price's Walnut Street office, while Arden established its own Craft Shop in 1913. Price was influenced by Sir Ebenezer Howard's publication, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, a treatise on planned, economically self-sufficient utopian communities that avoided the chaos, clutter, and disease associated with metropolitan centers. Garden Cities were designed to incorporate the best of town and country, blending agriculture with manufacturing and living space. Likewise, Howard was inspired to write his book after reading *Progress and Poverty* and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, a popular utopian novel that highlighted socialism's positive aspects. Without the benefit of city planning, reformers attempted to replicate some aspects of Garden Cities through urban gardening programs, in effect integrating the country and city.

Like Fairhope, Arden and Rose Valley attracted progressive thinkers. Muckraker Upton Sinclair and University of Pennsylvania sociologist Scott Nearing were two of Arden's early residents. Nearing and his wife Nellie spent summers at Arden, renting

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[47] Price, a Philadelphian, was recognized by fellow architect George Howe (Philadelphia Savings Fund Society skyscraper designer) as one of the three pioneers of modern American architecture, the other two being Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan.

their home to Sinclair during the school year when they resided in Philadelphia.[48] The climate was politically charged: for example, the Women's National Single Tax League held its 1909 Annual Conference at Arden over the July 4th holiday weekend. One participant observed: "Single-taxers and radicals of all beliefs have their summer homes here, many living in tents, and a primitive 'inn' accommodates the transients."[49] Residents of the community were devoted to equality, referring to themselves as "Ardenfolk," undistinguished by sex and age. Every resident, including children, were eligible to vote at the town meetings, and many of them agitated for women's suffrage in the world outside their utopian community. In addition, housing size was limited to avoid ostentatious displays of wealth. Playing the Landlord's Game was one recreational pastime many Ardenites enjoyed. It was an early board game that served as an instructional aid for teaching Georgist principles, in particular the negative effects of land monopoly.[50] Arden and Rose Valley served as incubators for reform ideals that were put into practice by those who funded, lived within, or visited the communities. Industrial problems such as land reform, child labor, and manufacturing practices stemmed from unregulated capitalism. These issues were discussed and debated by community members

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[48] Stephen J. Whitfield, *Scott Nearing: Apostle of American Radicalism* (New York: Columbia University press, 1974), 16.
[49] "Women's National Annual Conference at Arden," *Single Tax Review*, vol. 9, no. 3. May-June 1909, 37.
[50] The Landlord's Game was invented in 1903 and patented in 1904 by a Quaker woman named Lizzie Magie. According to Scott Nearing "the game was used to prove the wickedness of land monopoly," and he utilized it in his classes at Wharton School of Finance. Nearing was dismissed from Wharton in 1915 for his socialistic views. Game manufacturer Parker Brothers bought out Magie's patent in 1932 for $500. The popular board game Monopoly can be traced back to Magie's early prototype. Ralph Anspach, *The Billion Dollar Monopoly Swindle* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 1998), 114- 185.

and supporters who espoused reform and became agents of social change, including Fels, Nearing, and Sinclair.

When Henry George died in 1897 his followers rallied to keep his message alive. However, support for Georgism quickly declined until Fels pursued it as his personal quest for land reform and revived this international movement. With Fels' funding Georgism gained momentum, especially throughout industrialized countries such as Great Britain, where huge discrepancies in wealth existed. That same year, Fels became involved with the PVLCA, corresponding with other Georgists interested in urban land reform including Bolton Hall, a member of the Committee on the Cultivation of Vacant Lots by the Unemployed in New York City and Vice-president of the New York Tax Reform Association.[51] When the Vacant Lots Association found it difficult to acquire land in the New York metropolitan area, Hall established an alternative program that involved purchasing larger tracts of land within a thirty-minute ride from the city. The land was used to establish training grounds for those who desired to leave industrial city life and return to rural agriculture, and for this innovation Hall is frequently credited as the originator of the Back-to-the-Land Movement. The PVLCA 1903 Annual Report noted Bolton Hall's donation of a seventy-six acre farm in the Trenton, New Jersey area for the PVLCA use as a farm colony. However, according to the 12 August 1903 minutes: "Mr. Kirkbridge recommends that the Trenton experiment be abandoned at the end of the current season" due to its remoteness and the inability to procure labor.[52] Additionally, in 1910 Hall established Free Acres Association, a single-tax colony in

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[51] *Biographical Directory of the State of New York* (New York: Biographical Directory Company, 1900), 178.
[52] PVLCA Minutes 12 August 1903.

Berkeley Heights, New Jersey that continues to operate as such.[53] Hall was the author of five books, including *A Little Land and a Living*, for which Fels wrote the introduction to the 1908 third edition. Fels heartily endorsed Hall's writing, claiming: "the circulation of these books is a benefit to mankind."[54] The *New York Times* reported that Hall was disinherited by his father, a Presbyterian minister, because of his "friendly attitude towards labor and his friendship for Henry George and belief in the single tax."[55] As Hall and Fels discovered, those who attempted to make the world a more equitable place were often met with resistance from conservative organizations and individuals.

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[53] Jay Romano, "Free Acres Journal; A Haven Where Residents Own the Houses but Not the Land," *New York Times*, 10 February 1991.
[54] Joseph Dana Miller, "Bolton Hall – The Man and His Books," *Single Tax Review,* vol. 9, no. 6 (November-December 1909), 47.
[55] "Bolton Hall Settles," *New York Times*, 18 August 1899.

CHAPTER 3

LAND REFORM IN ENGLAND

By 1895 Joseph Fels freed himself from daily business operations to pursue philanthropic endeavors, leaving his younger brother and partner Samuel in charge of Fels and Company. The brothers were opposite personalities, Joe dramatic and impulsive while quiet and even-tempered Samuel was slow to make decisions. Their common ground was involvement with the PVLCA, where Samuel served as President of the Board of Trustees for two decades. Though Joseph was the more secular of the two, he proclaimed his Jewish heritage in public while Samuel kept his private, a policy adhered to by many German Jews of the era as part of the assimilation process.[56] Joseph and Mary's social reform programs, considered radical by the conservative Fels family, were financed with company funds that led to a rift in family relations. Although Fels and Company was considering an overseas operation, and exploratory trips were made to England yearly from 1897-1899, animosity between the brothers sped up the endeavor. Joseph and Mary left Philadelphia in June 1901 to establish a London division of the company.

As it had in the United States, Fels-Naptha soap won over the British market. Fels did not enjoy overseeing daily operations, hiring Walter Coates in 1903 to assume his duties. Coates proved to be a trustworthy assistant, allowing Fels to pursue outside interests as he and Mary divided time between England and the United States. The Fels sought involvement with the Ethical Society again, this time in London's West End, where its

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[56] Rosen, *Philadelphia Fels*, 146.

director, Dr. Stanton Coit, introduced Fels to reformer Margaret McMillan whose platforms included school clinics and physical education that interested Fels enough to fund them. The soap factory was located at 39 Wilson Street in London's East End, the largest bastion of impoverishment in Europe, where private charities were exhausted by the area's unemployment rates.[57] Experiencing London's poor firsthand on a daily basis, Fels contacted M.P. (Member of Parliament) George Lansbury in 1903 to ask how he could help, a move that initiated a friendship and daily communication between the two men. In London the Board of Guardians was appointed to administer the Poor Law, an antiquated system that stipulated anyone on public assistance should not receive aid exceeding the poorest-paid laborer. Daniel Rodgers asserts that English law was "designed to deter the poor from asking for relief, but constrained to support those who did…through a complicated system of deterrents and entitlements."[58] Local Guardians of the Poor erected workhouses to provide employment and shelter for London's destitute, but these institutions frequently separated family members and were noted for their harsh, punitive conditions. Lansbury was Treasurer of the Right to Work Council and belonged to the Guardians of Poplar Union, the group that served London's East End. When Fels proposed vacant lot gardening Lansbury objected, asking the millionaire to establish labor colonies for the unemployed instead. Since both men agreed on an agricultural solution, and that employment was preferable to charitable handouts, Fels acquiesced, pleased that a rural solution could be used to solve an industrial problem. Lansbury's plan involved shifting a portion of London's poor population from the city to the country,

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[57] Dudden, *Joseph Fels,* 52.
[58] Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 211.

thereby isolating them in a controlled environment while relieving urban crowding.[59] The first project was Landion Farm Colony, initiated in 1904, which Fels envisioned as a bold reform experiment in agriculture and rehabilitation; unfortunately, English officials considered Landion an alternative government program, and as a result monotonous chores similar to those performed in workhouses were reenacted. The program did not offer communion with the land, as Fels had originally desired. Because many of the colonists had criminal records, M.P. John Burns criticized the compound for lacking protective walls to confine the men at night in order to prevent them from visiting neighboring areas. Fels also broke English Poor Laws by supplying the men with spending money, which was against workhouse policy.

A second colony, Hollesley Bay, was attempted in 1905 when Fels purchased land and transferred it to the London Unemployment Fund. Fels' plan was to turn unemployed workers into self-sufficient farmers by creating smallholdings (five to ten acre plots) for participants. He was convinced that a return to agriculture was vital to the economy, and could serve as a "safety valve" for unemployed workers.[60] Once again John Burns opposed the project, refusing to allow construction of small cottages on the property and blocking further land acquisition. Burns was a bureaucratic egoist who did not appreciate a rich American interfering with English Poor Laws.[61] The underlying problem, as Burns recognized it, was that farming colonies were less punitive than workhouses and violated

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[59] Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 211.
[60] Dudden, *Joseph Fels,* 89.
[61] Burns also refused to sign Sidney and Beatrice (nee Potter) Webb's Minority Report, an attempt to reform antiquated English Poor Laws. Perhaps as a snub to Burns, Fels contributed one thousand pounds sterling to the Webbs to publish their report (a staunch Georgist, he refused to join the Fabian Society as they had requested). The Webbs, George Bernard Shaw, and Graham Wallas collaboratively founded the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895.

England's Poor Laws by inflating the worker's standard of living. A 1906 letter from Fels to Lansbury states: "I have not heard a word about how things are going over there [England] with the Colonies, but I hope well, and that you have knocked out John Burns in great shape in his investigating fever."[62] In addition to having little influence over political authorities and government policy, Fels experienced another problem at Hollesley Bay that was logistical: its distance from rail lines made it difficult to get produce to market and realize a profit.

In yet another attempt to establish an agricultural program for the working class in 1906 Fels acquired a property with soil of a questionable nature, named Mayland, located east of London in the County of Essex. Again, the objective was to develop smallholdings, as Fels envisioned settlers providing an independent livelihood for themselves through small-scale farming. The property's superintendent, Thomas Smith, worked diligently to transform the land and developed an aggressive market strategy for selling the crops produced there, but Mayland was expensive to operate and rents fell behind, especially during a 1910 crop failure. Mayland was the most successful of the three colonies, but when Fels attempted to purchase additional surrounding land in order to expand the program he experienced Henry George's economic theory firsthand: the price of unimproved land held in speculation was driven up substantially by neighboring improved property, a development that thwarted further growth of the Mayland colony. Undiscouraged, in 1907 the optimistic Fels founded the Vacant Lots Cultivation Society (VLCS), appointing himself one of its Secretaries, and collaborating with settlement workers at Toynbee Hall to recruit participants. The organization was modeled after

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[62] Joseph Fels to George Lansbury, 29 June 1906, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia's exemplary program, and although its success was modest compared to organizations in the United States, it served as a less expensive alternative to farming colonies. The VLCS was established as a private charity that did not require government involvement, which appealed to Fels after the endless difficulties he encountered dealing with English politicians. In 1908 Fels confided to Bolton Hall: "I hear the Vacant Lots work in Philadelphia is progressing at a fine rate. We are getting along here but slowly, as we cannot get the right kind of land and the right kind of places."[63] Land ownership was concentrated into the hands of relatively few wealthy citizens in Great Britain, forcing a large segment of the population into cities. Fels and likeminded reformers believed that one solution to urban decay was access to land, both within and outside city limits.

Fels continued to debate with George Bernard Shaw and members of the Fabian Party; ironically, they all strove to alleviate the plight of the working class, but approached the problem from varying perspectives. Shaw was a modernist vehemently opposed to Fels' agricultural programs: "I know of no trick that you can play with the land outside this scheme that will be of any use except to make small masters, or large ones, out of monsters with a depraved taste for the revolting pursuit of agriculture, against which Nature herself protests by immediately striking down with fever the man who first strikes pick or spade into her virgin bosom." In addition, Shaw could not reconcile with the single-tax approach of taxing land values: "we had trouble enough in the old days to get rid of Henry George's impossible distinction between land and capital, between industry and agriculture, without reviving it again. All attempts to distinguish between income

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[63] Joseph Fels to Bolton Hall, 19 May 1908, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

derived from rent of land and interest on capital are futile."[64] Shaw's views celebrated the city. Like some of his reformer contemporaries, but unlike Fels, he had little nostalgia for the agrarian past.[65]

Marxist, Fabian, and Georgist theories were based on classical economics developed by Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and others which state: rents rise, profits fall, and wages remain approximately the same. While all three groups were in favor of land nationalization to some extent, Marxists aspired to achieve it through government collectivization and Fabians through gradual legislation. Georgists called for government control of natural monopolies such as mines, oil fields, and railroads, but recognized individual ownership of land. However, they believed that society would benefit most if land values were taxed substantially, in effect ending the practice of speculation that was responsible for driving up the cost of rents that affected laborers more than any other class: "Tax every building plot as if used, and immediately every holder will seek a tenant or a buyer."[66]Georgists believed that if this measure were taken up, land would be made available to more people, improving their overall financial circumstances.

Fels shared this notion. In 1908 he wrote to Bolton Hall: "I am beginning to get a little land reform stuff into the Labor papers here, though the Land Values Association itself is doing all it can to array the Liberal Party against the Labor people. The workingman is going to have his say in this country before many years, and we must

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[64] George Bernard Shaw to Joseph Fels, 23 March 1909, The Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
[65] Schmitt, *Back to Nature*, 4.
[66] "Tax Land Values and Arrest Disease," *Single Tax Review*, vol. 9, no. 5 (September-October 1909), 58.

recognize this as a factor in future legislation."[67] As an American citizen Fels was unable to vote in English elections, but he could financially support candidates who endorsed land reform. Fels viewed land reform and agricultural programs as panaceas for problems brought on by industrialization. He approached politicians "for the purpose of agitating the land question all over England, which will not only be joined in by the Government party, but by all radical reform associations outside, including the Labor people and socialists."[68]

Fels found an ally in Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George, who recognized the inequality of land ownership in his country and claimed that land in Great Britain was cultivated at a much lower percentage than anywhere else in Europe. Lloyd George attacked landlordism, calling it "the greatest monopoly in this land," while promising government actions to make land available to citizens.[69] Commonly referred to as the "people's Chancellor," Lloyd George called for a two-thirds reduction of aristocratic game lands to free up real estate for the working class to cultivate. Like Fels he firmly believed that laborers could improve the quality of their lives and stretch their meager salaries through agricultural programs, growing food for sustenance and selling surplus crops. In the urban world of corruption, stagnant factory wages, and uncertain employment, farming was viewed as "honest labor."[70] A 1908 letter written by Fels was published in *The Times of London*, explaining the benefits laborers derived from working

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[67] Joseph Fels to Bolton Hall, 19 May 1908, The Joseph and Mary Fels Papers {collection 18953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

[68] Joseph Fels to Daniel Keifer, 19 June 1909, The Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

[69] "Lloyd George Land Campaign Opened," *New York Times*, 12 October 1913.

[70] "Tax Land Values and Arrest Disease," *Single Tax Review*, vol. 9, no.5 (September-October 1909), 58. Excerpt from East Essex, England *Advertiser and Glaston News*.

the soil: "this provides them with food for the whole season, and makes them stronger. If given otherwise [handouts], it would help them for a week and make them weak."[71] In addition, outdoor work was thought to be a physical and social curative that strengthened bodies and uplifted morals unlike squalid, unventilated factory positions that weakened bodies and spirits. The PVLCA Annual Report for 1915 describes jobs in closely confined stores or office work as "a detriment to the health of the worker," because not enough time was spent outdoors by the worker "to counteract the evil effect of the occupation."[72]

Lloyd George considered the problem of land access a "ghastly failure" of the British government and agitated to rectify it.[73]Lloyd George's "People's Budget" proposed to tax land and luxury items such as alcohol and tobacco to fund social programs that benefited the working class. The Budget Protest League was organized by conservatives to defeat the People's Budget, publishing a weekly newspaper that aired their grievances against the measure. Meanwhile, members of the Liberal Party rallied together and sang *The Land* as their anthem: Why should we work hard and let landlords take the best? / Make them pay their taxes on the land just like the rest! / The land was meant for the people.[74] In Great Britain Fels was considered the 'indefatigable Philadelphia soap man" in the "Liberal struggle to break down landlordism."[75] Fels believed that the British had been denied access to the land for so long that they were out of touch with what he identified as their birthright and agrarian heritage: "Until man and women have the proper hunger

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[71] Untitled letter from Joseph Fels, *The Times of London*, 20 October 1908.
[72] Philadelphia Vacant Lot Cultivation association Annual Report, 1915.
[73] "Lloyd George Land Campaign Opened," *New York Times*, 12 October 1913.
[74] *The Land* continued to be sung at the end of Liberal Assemblies until the 1970s.
[75] "Fels in the Thick of British Fight," *Single Tax Review*, vol. 9, no. 4 (July-August 1909), 25.

for the land they will never get it, and until they properly know of what use the land is they will never demand it."[76] He arranged for every British voter to receive a single-tax propaganda packet subsidized by him, and personally attended trade union congresses to distribute the literature.[77] Land values in England had not been assessed since 1696, and as a result did not generate an equitable share of taxes. Fels criticized members of the House of Lords, calling them "Tax Dodgers," chiding: "Stealing candy from children would be considered a noble and generous act compared to the whole record of the House of Lords in the matter of taxation." [78] Land was held by a handful of aristocrats, making it unavailable to the average citizen. The People's Budget was upheld by the House of Commons but defeated by the House of Lords in 1909. However, it passed both Houses in 1910, resulting in the 1911 creation of the National Insurance Act, which established state financial support for the sick and infirmed, and the subsequent Unemployment Insurance Act. Overall, the passage of the People's Budget was a victory for single taxers because proceeds would be used to benefit commoners whose lives were affected by land monopoly and the machinations of capitalism.

In the early twentieth century governments frequently championed emigration as a solution for social ills such as unemployment, and overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions that accompanied industrialization and urbanization. Because of the inequitable land ownership system in Great Britain, Lloyd George commented: "It is no wonder that scores of thousands are fleeing across the seas from such a land of mean

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[76] "Fels in the Thick of British Fight," *Single Tax Review*, vol. 9, no. 4 (July-August 1909), 25.
[77] Dudden, *Joseph Fels*, 163.
[78] Joseph Fels, "Some Fruits of Landlordism," *New Century Magazine*, April 1910.

bondage."[79] When the Salvation Army planned to sponsor emigration of British citizens to Canada, Fels argued that the problem could be solved domestically by making land available to people in their country of origin. Aristocratic control reduced most British citizens' access to land, creating an inequitable system that penalized the working class. Likewise, in a letter to Henry Greene, Director of the American Immigration and Distribution League, Fels argues against sending immigrants westward claiming that land is readily available in established parts of the country, but "until the single tax has been adopted somewhere in the United States immigrants might as well stay in monopolized New York City as go to the monopolized South or the monopolized West. They might as well work for poor wages in sweat shops as to take up farms where they will be robbed of all the fruits of their labor."[80]

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[79] "Lloyd George Land Campaign Opened," *The Times of London*, 12 October 1913.
[80] Joseph Fels to Henry Greene, n.d. (circa.1912), Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

CHAPTER 4

THE SINGLE TAX CAMPAIGN

In a 1909 letter to Bolton Hall, Fels promised an annual matching sum of up to $25,000 for five years to bring the teachings of Henry George to North America. Perhaps discouraged by the limited success of land reform in Great Britain, Fels declared: "The hope of our cause is not in England, but here. England is too conservative."[81] Hall established an advisory committee that consisted of himself, Henry George, Jr., former banker and philanthropist George Foster Peabody,[82] and Louis Post,[83] editor of the major single-tax publication in the United States *The Public*, and future Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Wilson. Together they launched the Joseph Fels Fund, chaired by leading single-tax advocate Daniel Keifer of Cincinnati with directors Cleveland Mayor Tom L. Johnson and his cabinet member Frederic C. Howe, Maryland single-taxer Jackson H. Ralston, muckraker Lincoln Steffans, and George Biggs of Indiana. In addition, a Provisional Committee included Hall, George, Jr., John J. Murphy, Mrs. Charlotte E. Hampton, and F.C. Leubuscher, president of the Manhattan Single Tax Club. Fels also made matching donations offers to single tax associations in Germany, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada.[84]

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[81] "The George Anniversary," *Single Tax Review*, vol. 9, no. 5 (September-October 1909), 43.
[82] Namesake of the Peabody Awards for excellence in radio and television.
[83] Post divided his time between New York City and a single-tax community in Orange County, New York named Merriewold.
[84] Daniel Keifer, "The Joseph Fels Fund of America," *Single Tax Review* (September-October 1909), 52.

After Fairhope's incorporation, and limited success with the farm colonies and VLCS in London, Fels ceased agricultural land investments and spent his remaining years spreading Henry George's message throughout the world. In addition to subsidizing political candidates sympathetic to Georgist causes, Fels underwrote the operating costs of the journals *Single Tax Review* and the *Public*. Advocates of the Joseph Fels Fund wrote and distributed Georgist propaganda, provided speakers for various occasions, and held an annual Single Tax Conference starting in 1910. Fels originated his fund in order to establish single tax policies in the United States, with potential locations in Missouri, California, and Oregon noted for their liberal policies.[85]

Fels' zealous defense of Georgism grew yearly as he poured more money into the cause. In a 1909 letter to Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette, Fels expounds: "I am spending now in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand dollars a year towards educating all the civilized countries I know of in the economic philosophy of Henry George…"[86] By modern definition Fels could be considered a Progressive reformer, crusading against social injustice by improving the physical and moral condition of the underprivileged. However, he considered himself a staunch Georgist and rejected the title of "Progressive" as evidenced by his correspondence with Los Angeles attorney Meyer Lissner: "There would be no use discussing with me Rooseveltism or Progressivism- as you call the worship of that cult. The man Roosevelt is a first-class humbug. I had some strong suspicions of this after the first and last speech that I heard

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[85] A statewide implementation of Georgist policy was attempted in Delaware in 1895 without success.

[86] Joseph Fels to Robert La Follette, 30 November 1909, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Fels also spent a similar amount on Zionist causes. Rosen, *Philadelphia Fels*, 167.

him make in Philadelphia…"[87] Fels sent Lissner a copy of *Progress and Poverty* along with the letter, a ritual he duplicated many times "as a missionary distributes Bibles."[88] While Roosevelt advanced setting aside wilderness lands for preservation, areas generally visited by wealthier Americans, Fels's approach involved providing urban lands to average city dwellers. Roosevelt's plan was ascetically pleasing and appealed to those in the upper classes, but Fels' scheme was practical and economically benefited underprivileged citizens.

The idea of a Jewish homeland, with Jews adhering to the land, captivated Fels. In 1906 Fels visited Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO) leader Israel Zangwill and offered his organization $100,000 if the homeland would be organized as an equitable single-tax colony based on agricultural practices. After Fels' death, Zangwill reminisced: "Our first business was to obtain a territory. For Fels, the first business was to single-tax it…to him, Henry George was Moses, and 'single-tax' all the laws and the prophets."[89] The two men debated the homeland's location for years: Zangwill preferred North Africa, but an exploration financed by Fels proved it to be a "dangerous desert." Fels proffered spots at Mayland farm colony to Jewish refugees: "It would be a great object," Fels contended, "to settle 100 families on small farmlets close together and on a tract of land- I can put my hand on the proper land- 2 ½ hours from London and next door to a town of several thousand people."[90] He also offered to purchase land in the northeastern region of the United States, but Zangwill did not want that area to compete with Jewish colonies

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[87] Joseph Fels to Meyer Lissner, 16 July 1912, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
[88] Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 107 (June 1920), 918.
[89] Israel Zangwill,"Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review,* vol. 107 (June 1920), 918.
[90] Joseph Fels to Israel Zangwill, 26 May 1907, Joseph and Mary Fels papers [Collection 1953] The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

being established in Gavelston, Texas. Fels also suggested the South American country Paraguay as a settlement, a region where he owned land used to grow peanuts and palm plants for his soap making business.[91] Fels met with Mexican President Porfirio Diaz, who was amenable to Jewish colonies, and industrial or commercial activity, but not to agriculture. Like Shaw, Diaz believed that farming failed to elevate workers' status or standard of living.[92] Fels eventually backed away from the discussion for two reasons: Zangwill never agreed to agricultural use or single-tax policies, and his wife Mary supported the establishment of a homeland in Palestine, a region Zangwill considered unsuitable for settlement.

Several times a year Fels crossed the Atlantic Ocean and consulted with his brother Samuel on business matters, attended PVLCA meetings, and got together with politicians and fellow Georgists throughout the United States. He often gave speeches to American audiences as well. At both the PVLCA 1907 Annual Meeting and the 1909 Contributors Meetings, Fels gave, according to the Association's secretary, "entertaining" presentations on "the various lines of work for the relief and betterment of the unemployed and laboring classes in London and throughout England," inspired by the work in America.[93] He also visited Fairhope to monitor its progress, and on occasion made side trips. In 1907 he visited Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee University, which initiated a brief period of correspondence between the two men. In a letter to Washington Fels discusses his Southern roots and states "I think I understand the Negro question and

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[91] Dudden, *Joseph Fels,*175.
[92] Rosen, *Philadelphia Fels*, 165-66.
[93] PVLCA Minutes, 9 January 1907.

certainly appreciate its difficulties."[94] At that time a plan was being developed to establish Negro towns in Alabama where 20,000 government acres had been purchased with the intent of selling smallholdings through installment payments to residents who resided on the property for a minimum of three years. Advocating Georgist principles, Fels urged Washington to keep the land held in common ownership, and invited him to visit Fairhope to learn about its policies. Overt racism was an integral part of Southern life in the early twentieth century, leading some African Americans like Washington to establish living communities separate from those dominated by whites. Throughout his adult life Fels hoped that land ownership could lead to equitable relationships

In a biography of her husband, Mary explains his early Southern experience: "A large part of the population was colored and Joseph always retained a tender place in his heart for the Negro race." [95] As one of the founding members of the PVLCA, Fels agitated to improve the conditions of all working Philadelphians regardless of race or national origin. From the outset, the PVLCA accepted people of color into its association. Separate columns for "white" and "colored" were listed on early registration forms, but by the 1920s native-born blacks and whites were combined under the category "American." In an era characterized by severe racism, it is remarkable that blacks were included, as the PVLCA required all of its participants to be self-respecting and self-reliant. Whether white members of the association thought of blacks as equal to whites can never be ascertained, but their inclusion in the program is notable. Approximately fifteen percent of the participants were black, the majority of those listed as laborers,

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[94] Joseph Fels to Booker T. Washington, 25 September 1907, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
[95] Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels; His Life-Work* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1916), 3.

suggesting that their jobs were more vulnerable than those of skilled workers. A hint of paternalism is present in the 1922 PVLCA Annual Report: "There was a noticeable increase in the proportion of colored gardeners, and especial credit should be given them, not only for their efforts but for their successes." The average PVLCA participant was a seventeen-year resident of Philadelphia, but the increase in black participation could be credited to increased unemployment or migration from Southern states.[96] In his fervent campaign for land equality Fels often echoed Henry George, who compared landlords to slave owners and likened the campaign for land value taxation to abolition.[97] His mission was to improve the conditions of all laborers, regardless of race, by increasing their access to land.

Fels recognized his privileged position in society even as he decried it. In an article entitled "Joseph Fels- Robber?" he explained that the economic system that created him and John Jacob Astor is "ill-balanced and wrong."[98] The title of the article made reference to a standard speech he gave to the City Club of Chicago in 1910 where he stated: "We cannot get rich under present conditions without robbing somebody…but I propose to spend the damnable money to wipe out the system by which I made it." He also added: "The way to run a thief of this sort out of the country is to tax him out of it," a reference to land value taxation. That same year Fels called for "the overthrow of Privilege in all of its many forms and the triumph of Equal Rights – equal right to life, to liberty, to the pursuit of happiness, all of which depend on men's equal right to the use of

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[96] Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 340.
[97] Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, 357.
[98] Bruce Barton, "Joseph Fels- Robber?," *Human Life Magazine*, n.d.

the earth."[99] Fels acknowledged that access to land was pivotal to the creation of personal wealth and considered it an inalienable right for all citizens. He equated agriculture with self-sufficiency, supporting programs that enabled unemployed and underemployed workers access to smallholdings and urban plots of land. He also sympathized with labor, writing Samuel Gompers: "we are all engaged with the same enemy- monopoly and special privilege."[100] Although he was a millionaire, Fels recognized that unregulated capitalism created disparity and class division, leading him to fund programs and projects designed to promote more equitable circumstances.

According to Mary Fels, the last two years of her husband's life were "a time of incessant activity," having "become so identified with the movement that the demands made by it upon his time grew by leaps and bounds."[101] His grueling travel and speaking schedule should have exhausted Fels, but he claimed that it was the most exhilarating time of his life.[102] Fels attended single-tax conferences throughout the United States and Europe, including Spain, France, and Sweden, packing lecture halls in Germany and Denmark. In Spain he was greeted with cheers of "Viva Fels!"[103] Additionally, he corresponded with leaders in New Zealand, South Africa, Mexico, and South America. A letter from J.W. Stephens, executive secretary of the Brotherhood of the Presbytery of New York implored him to speak to the group: "Believe me sincere when I say that I

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[99] Joseph Fels, "Some Fruits of Landlordism," *Twentieth Century Magazine*, April 1910.
[100] Samuel Fels to Samuel Gompers, 27 June 1910, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers, [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
[101] Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 245.
[102] Dudden, *Joseph Fels*, 212.
[103] Ibid, 217, 237.

want you to come, because I feel that you are an apostle unto the people with a message that should be more earnestly heeded…"[104]

In 1913 Fels returned to the United States accompanied by Lansbury after the latter was imprisoned on sedition charges for supporting women's suffrage. After defeat in the 1910 election Lansbury channeled his energy into the suffrage movement, initiating a self-imposed hunger strike while imprisoned which weakened him considerably. Lansbury ventured to the United States to recuperate and experience single-tax agitation abroad, shadowing his friend throughout the country. Fels also had business matters to attend to. His use of company funds for social causes continued to be a source of contention for Joseph and his brother Samuel. In 1909 Samuel and his wife Jennie visited Joseph and Mary in England to make peace with one another. However, that reconciliation was short-lived, with Fels overextending his finances so greatly that by 1913 he was beginning to default on many of his matching gifts. He returned to Philadelphia that spring facing bankruptcy, his account overdrawn by several hundred thousand dollars. With Joseph and Samuel in disagreement over the company's management, in particular Samuel's desire to incorporate the business, both brothers consented to judicial arbitration presided over by Judge Louis Brandeis, and the issue was settled amicably in early February 1914.[105]

The fourth annual Fels Commission was held in Washington D.C. in January 1914. Fels was unusually quiet, likely depressed by the financial issues he was facing. Shortly after the arbitration was completed, Fels came down with a cold that developed into

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[104] J.W. Stephens to Joseph Fels, 29 December 1913, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers [Collection 1953], Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
[105] Dudden, *Joseph Fels,* 248.

pneumonia. After rallying for two days the conditioned worsened and Fels succumbed to the infection on 22 February, aged sixty at the time of his death. Fels was buried at Mount Zion Cemetery in Northeast Philadelphia. Pallbearers included Lincoln Steffans, Bolton Hall, Henry George, Jr., Daniel Keifer, and Frederic C. Howe. Assistant Secretary of Labor Louis Post eulogized him. Following his funeral, memorial services were held in Great Britain and Canada, and throughout the country including Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Cleveland. In Boston Harvard professor Lewis Johnson and William Lloyd Garrison, Jr. presented speeches. In his hometown of Philadelphia Fels' memorial service was held at the Forrest Theater with Scott Nearing, Louis Post, and United States District Attorney Francis Fisher Kane providing eulogies.

The Single Tax League of Houston hailed Fels as: "the great democratic millionaire." Frank M. Gorman attested: "He devoted his life, his fortune, and his sacred honor to the cause of relentless war against poverty. He was, as has often been said, the great Jewish apostle sent by God to teach Christianity to the Christians." And in a March memorial address, Ohio State Representative Herbert S. Bigelow praised the reformer: "Joseph Fels believed that the greatest curse of our civilization is poverty, chronic poverty in the face of progress and plenty. He had the sensibilities and the imagination to feel in his soul the tragedy of the race. He could not understand how any man could pretend to be a good Jew or Christian and remain indifferent to the shocking waste and brutalization of human life caused by poverty…Joseph Fels recognized the fact that poverty could be caused only by the unfair distribution of the world's goods."[106] Although eulogized as a saint, Fels certainly was not one and had his share of faults. He was impulsive and quick to

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[106] Memorial service keepsakes, Joseph and Mary Fels Papers, [Collection 1953], The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

anger. His good friend H.G. Wells called him a "monomaniac" for his singular insistence of issues, whether agricultural land reform or the single tax. No matter what the conversation, Fels would inevitably turn it into a discussion of Henry George's land-based reforms, which frustrated many of his acquaintances, in particular Israel Zangwill.

Fels resurrected the single-tax movement after the death of Henry George, but without his dynamic spirit and financial support the future of the movement was jeopardized. Mary Fels moved to New York City and became highly involved with Zionist causes, establishing the Joseph Fels Foundation in his memory. However, the Foundation solely supported the establishment of a Palestinian state and did not address the establishment of agricultural programs or Henry George's theories. The Fels Fund continued to operate until 1916 when it was dissolved and reinstated by Mary as the Joseph Fels International Commission to Promote the Single Tax, its headquarters moved to New York City where it remained in existence until 1965. Mary also supported the National Single Tax League, chaired by Daniel Keiffer, which was located in his hometown of Cincinnati. Mary's commitment to her husband's cause did not extend outside the country and as a result many of the single-tax organizations her husband supported in Great Britain and elsewhere began to lose their prominence.

A special 1909 Henry George Anniversary celebration paid tribute to Fels' contributions: "Mr. Fels probably cares little about it, but when the history of the movement is written his name will survive as one of the few rich men of his time who was its militant champion." When interviewed and asked why he was so devoted to the cause Fels replied with characteristic humor: "When I turn my toes up to the flowers, my money will not help me. I feel I had better put it where it would do the most

good."[107]Joseph Fels lived during a time of tumultuous change, when urbanization and industrialization changed the country from primarily an agrarian economy to a manufacturing one. Huge swaths of rural populations and waves of immigrants intersected in metropolises, competing for living space and jobs. Large cities were viewed with suspicion and frequently portrayed in literature as places of corruption. With sporadic employment and the rural safety net of family and land that provided sustenance gone, many members of the urban working class faced impoverishment. Industrialization created great opportunities for a few, but disproportionately brought disappointment to the lives of many who viewed the city as a chance to improve their lives. As Henry George stated, with progress comes poverty.

Reformers such as Fels hoped to correct modern urban imbalances, including economic disparity and poor health, through various measures including urban agricultural programs. Charitable aid was reserved for the so-called deserving poor, leaving unemployed able-bodied workers with little recourse. Vacant lot cultivation programs were designed to keep working class families off charitable doles; more importantly, they were meant to provide improved health, hope, and inspiration through communion with nature, which was lost in the dual processes of industrialization and urbanization. Other measures such as the creation of national parks, the construction of city parks, and the establishment of youth nature programs served to keep urban Americans in touch with their agrarian past. Citizens' views on urbanization were divided: while some mourned the passing of agricultural communities and economies, others, like Shaw, optimistically viewed industrialization and the benefits of city living as

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[107] "The George Anniversary," *Single Tax Review*, vol. 9, no. 5 (September-October 1909), 39,52.

progress, retaining no desire to return to farming. A new class of American aristocrats explored national parklands, and a decade later the middle class emulated their desire to commune with nature: hiking, hunting, and fishing, before returning to the modern conveniences of city life.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Joseph Fels' lived a life that was at once unique and typical for his time. His social conscience was influenced by his environment and upbringing, in particular the charitable lessons instilled in him by his family. As an adult he never forgot his modest origins and was proud of his heritage. He acknowledged inequalities that prevailed in the modern, urban, industrial world that he lived in, and desired to create balance between the classes. Unlike millionaire Andrew Carnegie, who wrote *The Gospel of* Wealth and supported laissez-faire policies in business and politics, Fels was attuned to the mission of the Social Gospel, believing that wealthier members of society had a moral responsibility to aid the less fortunate, and that government intervention was necessary for enforcement. Because people could not be left to their own devices, as was Carnegie's solution, reformers held the government responsible for employing the most equitable economic solution. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries reformers believed that change was necessary in order for civilization to endure, and they crusaded for federal, state, and municipal legislation to correct the evils of unregulated capitalism and urbanization, unsafe manufacturing practices, child labor and unsanitary living conditions.

Theories and potential solutions to industrial problems were devised by reformers of the era, but none appealed more to Fels than Henry George's single-tax theory, with its potential to make land available to the working class, and its implied agricultural solutions such as vacant lot gardening and farming colonies. Through his involvement with these programs, in both America and England, Fels attempted to rectify class-based

inequalities by donating land and money, while encouraging other wealthy businessmen to do the same. He was philanthropic, but held the recipients of his generosity responsible for becoming self-sufficient through hard work. When agricultural programs in England did not perform to his expectations, Fels chose to challenge that country's political structure, and those of other industrialized countries, by financially supporting political candidates who upheld Henry George's principles.

The PVLCA, who claims Fels as one of its founders, became one of the most successful, continuous urban gardening programs in the country. While most cities viewed urban gardening as an emergency measure, Philadelphia's program lasted until 1928. It appealed to both native-born citizens and immigrants who grew vegetables to supplement their diets and income, providing them with an opportunity to connect with nature in their technological world and also spoke to their ambivalence about industrialization. One component of the modern Progressive movement had rural origins: Joseph Fels had the foresight to help create the PVLCA in America, plus the VLCS and other agricultural programs in England that benefitted the working class. His support of Henry George's theories, and contributions to society that offered rural solutions to industrial problems, have been overlooked, and should be reexamined within the context of urbanization.

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