Capital's Utopia
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In the midst of the 1893–94 Apollo labor dispute, George McMurtry went to Europe.\(^1\) Although the historical record is silent regarding his primary motives for departing southwestern Pennsylvania at such a critical moment, McMurtry’s travel itinerary suggests that he was on something of a reconnaissance mission, taking him to the Schneider family’s holdings at Le Creusot in France, the Krupp estates near Essen in Germany, and various British factory villages. Social reformers and commentators had made these special industrial towns internationally famous in the popular press and trade papers and on lecture circuits during the 1870s and 1880s. Hailed as models that other industrialists might usefully copy, these places not only served as the settings for successful production sites but also incorporated company-provided housing, schools, social programs, and physical infrastructure for worker consumption. Due to the amount of a priori planning involved (including the employment of architects and landscape designers) and to the resulting trim, orderly landscapes, writers easily concluded that these towns indeed seemed to be better than Europe’s unplanned, chaotic, and socially unruly industrial districts. Therein lies the reason for McMurtry’s visit.
As many later students of the “model industrial town” have observed, industrialists such as the Schneiders, the Krupps, Titus Salt (founder of Saltaire, near Bradford, in England), Lord Leverhulme (founder of Port Sunlight, also in England, near Liverpool), and George Pullman (founder of Pullman, Illinois) premised the special industrial places they created on a set of modern Enlightenment attitudes about supposed links between environment and behavior. According to their environmentally deterministic line of thinking, populations that lived in seemingly wild, corrupt, and disorderly physical environments could be expected to behave in wild, corrupt, and disorderly ways. If living and working spaces were somehow tamed, made honest, and designed in a rational way, then social behavior would follow suit. For industrialists, this meant offering something to workers other than the cramped, dirty, and unhealthy houses and neighborhoods that had become emblematic of the late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century industrial city. They built their model towns thinking that well-designed, company-built residential landscapes would ultimately compel workers to be reliable, honest, loyal employees. By providing a living environment that looked better than workers might find elsewhere, capital, as a social class, came to believe that it would have little trouble rationalizing the production process and appeasing—if not controlling—labor. Could McMurtry use this philosophy as a strategy for distancing steelworkers from the Amalgamated?²

Just as McMurtry was formulating an answer to this question, a lockout and strike at Pullman, Illinois, called into question the entire practice of company-backed industrial-town building. Throughout the 1880s, Pullman had been the United States’ archetypical company-built town. By providing rental housing, meeting halls, a library, and shopping precinct near his sleeper-car works, George Pullman tried to prove that: (1) industrialists could receive a positive return on investments in housing; and (2) through environmentalism they could reap the benefits of a good, loyal, and controllable workforce. Like the European model-industrial-town builders, he believed that these goals were attainable by use of expert urban design that provided an ordered physical setting for the daily work routine.³

After the Pullman dispute, Populists and social reformers saw company-built towns as embodying everything that was evil about big business as it had emerged in the United States. Social commentators remarked that excessive employer involvement in the home life of workers was manipulative and an infringement of workers’ rights; in other words, Pullman was a despotic and, therefore, un-American place. These commentators showed that Pullman and
his investors had set fixed rents on housing in an attempt to secure a 6 percent return, while workers in the Pullman factory were paid according to a sliding wage scale. When times were hard, as in 1894, the workers found it difficult to pay for shelter. The company refused, however, to lower rents or fix a minimum wage; for Pullman’s workers, the only options were moving out or rebellion.4

Pullman’s use of rental housing to generate additional profits for the company had resulted in worker unrest and public criticism, precisely the situation that Apollo Iron and Steel wanted to avoid in their new company-built town. Rental housing adjacent to the new Apollo Iron and Steel mill would, therefore, be out of the question. Apollo Iron and Steel would instead sell houses—a corporate strategy that McMurtry had already witnessed at Le Creusot and the Krupp estates. This strategy offered several advantages. First, by owning residential property, workers built equity, took pride in, and were uplifted by their homes. Second, by making fixed investments in housing, workers made financial and emotional commitments to the town in which they lived and to the jobs they held. Third, by participating in company real-estate ventures, workers assumed from their employers the responsibility for maintaining housing and infrastructure. For such schemes to work, however, housing had to be affordable to industrial workers. As he and other steelmasters had done when challenging the Amalgamated during the transition from iron to steel, McMurtry could again turn to Andrew Carnegie for a model: after the Homestead strike at Munhall, Pennsylvania, Carnegie, instead of raising wages so that workers could buy homes freehold, offered low-interest loans for housing near the Homestead works. McMurtry decided to mimic Carnegie’s scheme.5

By the spring of 1895, McMurtry had developed a vision for Apollo Iron and Steel’s new town. Through a practicable, tangible, and strategic application of environmentalism and home ownership to urban design, the company would foster a loyal workforce: it would handpick the initial pool of prospective buyers, making sure that they had no union affiliations. A complete package of infrastructural improvements, an aesthetically pleasing town design, and easy mortgage terms would serve as selling points. The price of lots in the town would pay for amenities: buyers would pay for what they got and get what they paid for; thus, the company would avoid “playing providence.”6

Next came the task of translating these ideas into an actual town design and landscape. Proceeding on the assumption that Frederick Law Olmsted’s attitudes and experience meshed with his environmentalist agenda for the new town, McMurtry made inquiries at Olmsted’s landscape firm. Over the next year,
McMurtry discovered the frustrations of town planning, especially when dealing with a firm as tenacious and idealistic as Olmsted, Olmsted, & Eliot.

The First Vandergrift Town Plan

On April 25, 1895, Apollo Iron and Steel's treasurer, Wallace P. Bache (who was also McMurtry's personal secretary) urgently inquired about the landscape-design and town-planning services of Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.

Dear Sir:

Our company proposes to build a new town on a tract of land located a mile and a half below our present works (at Apollo, Pa.), comprising 640 acres of farm property. We desire to have a town that in many features will be unique, and in all respects more attractive than the average manufacturing town of the present day. In fact, we want something better than the best. We want to know—first, if you can undertake the laying out of this town for us, and in the second place, what are your terms for getting up the plans for a town of this character? Also, please say if you can come out here and look over this ground with us, and when you could do this. That is to say how soon can you come out here[?] We are anxious to get this work started, and, of course, the quicker we could begin operations the better. We might say that we propose building new a new works in this new town that will probably employ in the beginning fifteen hundred men. The property lies on the Kiskiminetas River, in Westmoreland County, Pa., and is considered one of the most available sites for a town lying within forty miles of Pittsburgh.

Awaiting your prompt reply, we remain,

Yours very truly,

Apollo Iron and Steel Co.

Wallace P. Bache, Treasurer

A postscript urged that “an answer reach us by Saturday of this week by wire, at our expense.”

By 1895, when Apollo Iron and Steel contacted his firm, Olmsted Sr. was considered the premier figure in a small but important group of professional landscape gardeners, architects, and designers. Since the 1850s, he had been involved in the planning and design of several highly visible projects, among them New York City’s Central Park (1857), the model suburb of Riverside, Illinois (1869), Prospect Park, in Brooklyn (1871), and, more recently, the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition. As his career progressed, Olmsted came to be-
lieve that urban economies of scale and the heightened patterns of accessibility found in cities were important, if not essential, to national economic growth. Nevertheless, he believed that urban life was debilitating. To lessen the confusion and disorder of cities, he proposed fundamental urban improvements. Like other reformers of his day, Olmsted believed that well-designed sewer, drainage, and water-supply systems were essential to the continued survival and growth of cities. He also thought that there existed in nature aesthetic and re-creative qualities that could counter the psychologically harmful aspects of city life. Thus, Olmsted, his partner Calvert Vaux, and other landscape designers and town planners, including H. W. S. Cleveland, designed romantic and rustic parks where elite city dwellers could mix with the poorer urban masses. Both groups were to have access to an uplifting “natural” environment. For wealthier residents who wished to live away from the city and who could afford the daily trolley ride to work, the regenerative aspects of parks were incorporated into designs for model suburbs.9

The urban forms that Olmsted proposed were expensive, but he believed that the long-term economic benefits to the country as a whole far outweighed the costs to individual municipalities. Positive environmental changes in cities and suburbs were seen as a way to improve the social and mental health of the populace; in turn, urban residents would be more efficient in the work place. Thus, Olmsted subscribed to the same environmentalist logic that McMurtry had encountered in Europe: social order was achievable through environmental order. Olmsted, however, was more than seventy years of age when Apollo Iron and Steel contacted him. In failing mental health (it is today believed that he had Alzheimer disease), he was relinquishing an active role in the landscape firm to his partners Charles Eliot and John Charles Olmsted, his stepson, both of whom had been his apprentices.10 In the process of withdrawing from both the firm and reality, Olmsted Sr. had recently blundered through many business transactions. Eliot and the younger Olmsted, understandably sorrowed by the elder Olmsted’s condition, tried to cover up or correct mistakes that had been made. They also faced the task of completing several major projects (notably, the Vanderbilt family’s Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina).11 By the end of May 1895, when it became clear that Olmsted Sr. could no longer be trusted to carry out the firm’s business, John C. became the effective head of the firm.

Apparently anxious to take on new clients and perhaps a little worried that their business might fail with the elder Olmsted more or less out of the picture, John C. Olmsted and Eliot assured Apollo Iron and Steel via return post that
“the fact that others have employed our firm for work similar to yours, with lit-
tle or no attention from Mr. F. L. Olmsted personally would seem to indicate
that you might find the services of the Junior members worth what they would
cost.”

Five days after this reply, a representative of the firm, Edward D. Bolton,
made the first of at least ten Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot visits to the town site,
and McMurtry and Bache personally conducted him around the property.

Bolton noted that McMurtry and Bache had reserved “about 70 to 80 acres
for the [steel] works in the bottom land” on the northwest side of the peninsula
formed by the Kiskiminetas River (fig. 3.1). To the east of this reserved tract
was a shallow bluff and an undulating, rectangular-shaped tableland that gradu-
ally rose toward the south and east. The sides of this tableland were formed by
the river to the north, river bluffs to the east and west-southwest, and a steep up-
hill-slope to the southwest. The property extended one mile up the southern
hill, and from the top one could see the thickly wooded hills of Parks Township
to the north, Gilpin Township to the northwest, and the town of Apollo directly
to the east. McMurtry desired an Olmsted town design for the rectangular por-
tion of the peninsula. The steep hill to the south was to be saved for future res-
idential development.

As the trio examined the property, McMurtry also presented to Bolton a men-
tal blueprint for the town that largely reflected economic constraints and busi-
ness considerations. Nearly all flat land on the property was to be saved for the
steel mill and other industries. Commerce and industry were to be kept as sepa-
rate from the residential district as possible. There were even ideas concerning
where various streets and public buildings should be placed within the plan:

The [railroad] station is to be located as far towards the northwest as possible, so
as to avoid bringing strangers in close contact with the works upon their entering
the town, thus avoiding the dirt and smoke and disagreeable features of labor troubles
which are liable to occur. . . . The main street will be located upon the higher land
where the stores, banks, etc. will be built, and the town will extend to the south and
west of the main street, at first. . . . It is desired that there be, if possible, a public
square where the prominent buildings will be placed, and the other streets radiate
from it as far as possible.

As much as McMurtry let Bolton know that he had a set of economic and
business requirements for the town, he also made clear other ideas underscored
by social-reform arguments. For instance, McMurtry requested that Vandergrift
be a “sanitary town.” Influenced by sanitary reformers, he believed that sewers,
water mains, and gas lines should be constructed prior to settlement. A year later, when Apollo Iron and Steel advertised town lots for sale, the firm explained this rationale by arguing that “by taking a little pains” and making a “town where average people can live and be healthy . . . our employees and their families would be a great deal more comfortable, be sick not half so many days in the year, live twice as long (if you count children) and be stronger.” It is obvious from the justifications that Apollo Iron and Steel gave for a sanitary town that an economic motive lay behind the provision of public improvements.

McMurtry also looked for ways to incorporate the basic logic of environmentalism. Like other company-town builders before him (particularly Salt, the builder of Saltaire), McMurtry believed that the Protestant work ethic and the promotion of temperance went hand in hand. On this matter the company wrote in 1896 that “no one will live there who wants any liquor-selling. All this money, saved for good food and clothes, good houses and furniture, pictures and books, and the schooling of children, makes happy and prosperous homes and plenty of business.” The emphasis was, therefore, on the creation of a stable community and workforce that believed in American, not immigrant (and perhaps Roman Catholic), cultural values. Vandergrift would be a stable American community.
McMurtry recognized, however, that the steel mill required unskilled laborers and that throughout western Pennsylvania manufacturers employed European immigrants to fill these jobs. To compete with these producers, non-Americans would have to be incorporated into the town plan. He suggested that Olmsted and Eliot plan a section of town where immigrants would live. During a later site visit, Olmsted (i.e., John C.) reported that “a small part of their men are Poles, Russians and Negroes. These are only laborers. . . . This class he [McMurtry] wants to keep away from near the works and I suggested the end of the river bank, and he agreed.”

Influenced by the Pullman strike of 1894, McMurtry also made it clear that Vandergrift was to be a town of privately owned, single-family homes. Bolton wrote that “the house lots are to be sold and not controled [sic] by the company in any way.” Later, in an announcement that appeared in the trade journal *Iron Age*, it was explained that this policy would allow Apollo Iron and Steel “to avoid the dangerous tendency of playing providence.”: “There is not the slightest taint of paternalism in the whole undertaking, and that, to us, proves a clear sighted understanding of American character and American conditions.” In other words, Apollo Iron and Steel would not repeat Pullman’s paternalistic mistakes because there would be no company housing.

In deciding that the new town was to be filled with homeowners, McMurtry may have had two ideas in mind. The first was intrinsic to the basic pattern of thinking displayed at Pullman: towns built by industrialists should be considered first and foremost as business ventures. McMurtry was trying to recoup his firm’s economic investment in the town’s physical fabric as quickly as possible by passing Apollo Iron and Steel’s debt to residents. The firm stated that “here you begin with more than any city’s conveniences; all you have got to do is to buy your lot and build your house, and you own your share of it. This public work has been done at our expense; and you pay your part in buying your lot.” At the same time, however, McMurtry may have been trying to use home ownership to maintain social control. Workers who had committed their financial resources to a house and mortgage would not be willing to jeopardize their investment by striking.

Over the course of the summer of 1895, Olmsted and Eliot worked from Bolton’s field notes, themselves made several visits to the site, and incorporated McMurtry’s instructions into their design. Olmsted and Eliot had been commissioned to provide a town plan that would be better than Pullman, Le Creusot, the Krupp estates, Saltaire, or Port Sunlight. In fact, the landscape architects’
conceptualization differed markedly from nearly all industrial cities and towns. Apollo Iron and Steel’s new town would not be a cramped, unsanitary, chaotic Pittsburgh neighborhood; it would not be a “coal-patch” row of houses; and it would especially not be an Apollo, latticed with grid-iron streets. It would, instead, echo McMurtry’s economic and social agendas and the romanticism and rusticity characteristic of Olmsted’s model suburbs.

Olmsted, Eliot, and their assistants worked on the Vandergrift plan from their office in Brookline, Massachusetts. John C. enthusiastically reported about the project to the ailing Frederick. In a letter to another son, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., the father wrote enthusiastically that it was “the sort of work that I would like best, as being more comprehensive and more fully touching social problems on a large scale than others coming to us!”

The elder Olmsted’s great expectations for the town were clearly mixed with regret. Apart from the several parks that he had designed during his career, Olmsted had never had the opportunity to translate his broader ideas about urban reform into a large-scale landscape that incorporated several land uses and social groups. In the few instances where he came the closest to planning on a broader scale and scope in a model suburb, Olmsted typically had to modify his plans because they were either too costly or impracticable, the very same problems that would plague Olmsted’s firm during this project. McMurtry’s ideals for the town were lofty, and the interpretation put on them by Olmsted and Eliot made them more so. Furthermore, as the plan progressed and modifications were required, the elitist attitudes of Olmsted and Eliot about landscape aesthetics inevitably led to tension between their firm and the Apollo Iron and Steel Company.

Several design features typical of the Olmsted firm’s model suburbs found their way into the residential portions of plan. On top of an engineer’s survey, Olmsted and Eliot drew curvilinear streets that, to ensure proper sewer and storm drainage, ran slightly askew to the natural contours. Service alleys bisected each block. Single-family detached houses were to sit on lots with “an average depth of about 200 feet and a width of from forty to eighty or one hundred.” Irregularly shaped parklets punctuated street intersections. Combined with the names that Olmsted and Eliot planned for the residential streets—Chestnut Road, Dogwood Road, Elderberry Road, and Woodbine Road—the residential design was to give the impression that Apollo Iron and Steel workers lived along the bucolic, genteel thoroughfares of a romantic garden and not in a noisy, smoky, smelly mill town or bustling market town. The commercial section was
to be separate from the residential; moreover, it was to be monumental. Olmsted and Eliot expanded upon McMurtry’s request for a public square for the town’s important buildings. Drawing perhaps upon their intimate knowledge of the Court of Honor at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition, they created a symmetrical and elongated space flanked by two streets. This space—to be known as the Village Green—was to be the focus of the town. At the northern (downhill) anchor of the Green would be the train station; the southern (uphill) anchor would be set aside by the company as a possible site for the Westmoreland County courthouse. According to the plan, on one side this space would be lined by hotels, stores, and an office building; on the other side would be a fence and the main gate to the mill. Later, Olmsted instructed the Apollo company on how the Green should be planted with trees and shrubs in order to achieve a “good city-like effect.”

Emanating from the Green was Main Street (now called Washington Avenue). This street, eighty feet in width, was to serve as an extension of the business district. Olmsted and Eliot, however, suggested that this thoroughfare be reserved for “minor trades and light manufacturing occupations . . . due to the fact it is more remote from the noise of the sheet-iron factory and would be surrounded on all sides by residence property, instead of being backed on one side by the noisy factory and having residences on one side.”

To ensure the rural character of the residential neighborhoods and the urbanity of the commercial district, Olmsted and Eliot urged McMurtry to include in each deed a detailed set of twenty-nine restrictive covenants that specified permissible uses for each lot (table 3.1). The suggested covenants were based on restrictions that had been developed in the Olmsted plan for the 1891 Baltimore model subdivision of Sudbrook. The first seventeen dealt with residential lots, limiting their use to residential purposes and designating the types of structures that could be built on them. Mandatory front and side setbacks were suggested, to provide air and light, to preserve the “rural effect,” and “to prevent the crowded, cheap, bare and unrefined appearance which streets have when the walls of the houses abut directly upon the street.” “Spite fences” between lots should be forbidden, and under no circumstances should property owners build tenements, place houses at the back of lots, or subdivide single lots for sale. It was also suggested that, “as in Paris,” all house designs be approved by a board of architects. The remaining twelve restrictions were similar, but applied to commercial lots. Trades that injured surrounding property should not be allowed, and businesses should be barred from residential streets. Olmsted suggested that buildings erected on commercial-area lots should cost at least three
thousand dollars. False fronts should not be permitted: “Such ‘eye-sores’ ought certainly to be prevented at any hazard, in your model town.” Such restrictions not only would keep land uses separate, they would also, John C. argued, “advance the character of neighborhoods in social, sanitary and esthetic matters.” Thus property values would be protected over the duration of the covenants.24

Construction of the town began almost as soon as the first Olmsted and Eliot plan arrived at the Apollo Iron and Steel Company office in Pittsburgh in June 1895. But hardly had the steam shovels started to grade the farm property and workmen to lay sewers and water mains when a series of conflicts developed, involving the landscape architects, McMurtry, and the Apollo Iron and Steel board of directors. McMurtry seems to have straddled the fence during the major disputes, trying to placate both the Olmsted firm and the directors. The resolution of these conflicts left lasting and major marks on the spatial organization and landscape of the new town. The lofty ideals with which McMurtry, Olmsted, and Eliot started were allayed in the process, precluding direct translation of the plan into reality.

Revisions to the Plan

The results of the Vandergrift plan turned out to be not as innovative and sensitive as other Olmsted efforts. The planning historian John Reps argues that
the plan “must be catalogued among the small number of inferior designs associated with the name of Olmsted.” He claims: “The town has no central focus, no group of buildings that marks the center. Nor are the curving streets particularly well suited for business use, however admirable they may be for residential purposes.” Nevertheless, Reps concedes that “it is not known to what extent the Olmsteds were inhibited in their design by the wishes of the company.”

Through the primary records, it is clear that the inadequacies of the plan did not emanate entirely from Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot’s Brookline office. Apart from McMurtry and J. J. Vandergrift, the directors of Apollo Iron and Steel had been hesitant to finance the creation of a model town; they had, however, been persuaded by events in Apollo to initiate the development of an industrial town. Their hesitancy spilled over into their attitudes toward the Olmsted and Eliot plan. The directors requested design modifications of the plan to the point where John C. Olmsted desired to wash his hands of the entire project.

The initial conflicts that developed between the two men from the Olmsted firm and McMurtry (the latter representing not only his own interests but also those of Apollo Iron and Steel shareholders) were over relatively superficial matters of street names and tree planting. They were, nevertheless, indicative of differences in personal beliefs and professional style. Given their years of planning experience on behalf of the urban elite, Olmsted and Eliot recommended that McMurtry use the same building materials, trees, shrubs, architects, and engineers, and even the same restrictive covenants, that had been employed in the realization of earlier designs. Their recommendations reflected the firm’s New England and upper-middle-class biases, which in turn became targets for shareholders’ criticism. Apollo Iron and Steel wanted to build a less expensive town than their first letter to the Olmsted firm had implied. Furthermore, the economic integrity of the steelworks took precedence over the town design. Both the board of directors and McMurtry often found the Olmsted and Eliot ideas impractical and inappropriate for a western Pennsylvania steel town.

Within the residential areas, Olmsted and Eliot initially sought to blend toponymy and topography to give the impression of a stable, tranquil, and morally uplifting landscape, but McMurtry had a different scenario in mind. He suggested that “the names of streets might very appropriately be chosen from among the names of various statesmen and commanders in American history, that thereby patriotism and proper pride of country might be fostered and encouraged.” The Olmsted road labels were erased and replaced by Lincoln, Washington, Grant, Sherman, Jefferson, Franklin, Columbia, and other patriotic names.
On more than one occasion, McMurtry also used local popular taste as a justification for changes. In March 1897, John C. sent a letter to McMurtry expressing his ideas regarding the choice of plantings for the parklets and the Green: “As a matter of taste, we would prefer not to have any flowers, but they would, no doubt, be in accordance with the popular taste, and as you are obliged to cater to the taste of the majority to some extent in a commercial enterprise, you may decide to have some flowers.” It is apparent from the photographic record and the florist’s annual bill to the town council for the petunias, impatiens, and marigolds planted in the parklets and Village Green that McMurtry chose to cater to popular taste. The only trees that McMurtry planted were poplars—the fastest growing variety available. Flowers were certainly cheaper to buy in the short run than the shrubs and “Oriental plants” that the Olmsteds suggested.

Minor conflicts between McMurtry’s conceptualization of the new town and the Olmsted and Eliot plan were relatively easy to resolve: he bade the landscape architects to make small modifications or he ignored their suggestions. And Olmsted and Eliot said little in favor or against this: as good consultants, they listened to and incorporated their client’s wishes into the plan. They were less reticent, however, when the board demanded that changes be made to several major design features of the plan. At no time was this more apparent than when, less than a month after presenting the initial town plan, increasing space requirements for the mill dictated that Olmsted and Eliot reduce the size of the Village Green. To Olmsted and Eliot, the hallmark feature of the Village Green design was its symmetry. This arrangement was enhanced by the axial placement of the opposing anchors of the Green—the railroad station and the courthouse. The Western Pennsylvania Railroad and the steel company, however, rejected the location proposed by Olmsted and Eliot for the station because it would require a sharp and undesirable bend in the route of the main rail line and would not allow sufficient room for a switchyard for the mill’s sidings. Solving the problem meant either rearranging the mill or moving the station. Keeping in mind Apollo Iron and Steel’s desire to build the most spacious and well-designed mill that they could, McMurtry believed that the station site would have to be moved.

Since the first consultation with McMurtry, Olmsted and Eliot had considered the Village Green “an essential feature of the village, as giving it a suitable centre of focus.” They were now faced with the task of salvaging the Green while incorporating the mandated changes into the plan. Their early modifications were rejected by Apollo Iron and Steel because they would require “heavy excavation and filling.” Ultimately, the size of the common was greatly reduced. The
designers confessed “that we feel very much dissatisfied with the plan as it stands.” They urged McMurtry to try to convince the WPRR to adopt a different track plan. McMurtry either was unsuccessful or he ignored Olmsted’s and Eliot’s plea. The modified plan stood (fig. 3.2).30

Fig. 3.2. Modified plan of the Village Green. From the lower left to upper right: the Kiskiminetas River, the WPRR, the Vandergrift station (flanked on either side by green space), the Village Green, the Washington-Lincoln park, and the town hall (the Casino Municipal Building) site. Had Olmsted and Eliot prevailed in their disagreement with McMurtry and the steel company over this part of the town plan, the railroad station would have been downriver on land shown as mill property, which, if one imagines a transecting axis, would have rotated the Casino (right) end of the axis to the upper center of the image. This would have placed the Casino in the heart of the present-day business district instead of at its edge. (Plan reproduced courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, N.Y. Frederick Law Olmsted Architectural Drawings and Plans, file #462.)

After this incident, a rift grew between company and designers, with Apollo Iron and Steel becoming increasingly critical of the plan and its cost. In turn, Olmsted and Eliot were persistently disgruntled by the company’s attitude. During several visits, John C. remarked in his work notes that his hosts talked disparagingly about the great expense of the entire venture. Apollo Iron and Steel’s preoccupation with cost reflected the fact that the town of Vandergrift was for
them a business venture and not a philanthropic exercise. In order to recoup their more than $200,000 investment in the town, Apollo Iron and Steel shareholders insisted that the prices of the residential property in Vandergrift be affordable to steelworkers. The expense stemmed in part from the retention of the premier U.S. firm of landscape architects, but also from McMurtry’s insistence that sewers, water mains, and gas lines be constructed before residential and commercial lots were sold. Although the directors recognized the possible benefits that would result from these expensive aspects of town planning and building, they nevertheless tried to cut construction costs by using local, and sometimes inferior, materials and less-than-competent employees.

Early in the planning process, Olmsted and Eliot warned Apollo Iron and Steel that they did not specialize in civil engineering. They recommended that to complement their expert surface design, the directors employ an equally expert engineer of national reputation to complete the subterranean improvements. However, James I. Buchanan, J. J. Vandergrift’s personal secretary and fellow Apollo Iron and Steel board member, found a Pittsburgh civil engineer, R. G. Collins. Collins had worked with the Olmsteds when they designed the Chicago fairgrounds, and he mentioned this connection to Buchanan when trying to land the job. Collins’s task would be to complete the topographic surveys, oversee the regrading of the property, design the “public improvements,” and consult with the building contractors. His hiring was a choice the company later regretted. In May 1896, nearly a year after the ground breaking, McMurtry complained to Olmsted that Collins did unsatisfactory work and was “himself distasteful and uncooperative.” Apollo Iron and Steel eventually fired Collins and replaced him with another local, but more competent, Pittsburgh firm—Wilkins & Davison. The new engineers spent six months trying to redo the faulty work of their predecessor.31

Apollo Iron and Steel was understandably intent on recouping their huge capital investment in the town, and therein lay the basis for another major modification of the Olmsted plan. A profitable real-estate venture depended upon the firm’s ability to attract people and businesses to the new town. On the one hand, the directors hoped that employment opportunities in the steel mill would be all of the inducement needed for buyers. On the other hand, they knew that prices inflated by the costly design and improvements might keep some people away. In turn, Apollo Iron and Steel sought a balance between terms that were low enough to sell lots and high enough to cover the costs of development. The company’s solution was twofold. First, to be competitive in the local real-estate mar-
ket while covering improvement costs, the company based the prices for lots “on the average sales in Apollo during the past five years.” Residential lots would sell for twenty-five cents per square foot, commercial lots for seventy-five and eighty-five cents per square foot. Second, to ensure the sales needed to cover the rest of the improvements (as well as to make the venture profitable), the lot widths were reduced by one-half, from an average 50 by 120 feet to an average 25 by 120 feet. Accordingly, average lot prices dropped from $1,500 to $750. The concern for a successful real-estate venture thus took precedence over the concern for the morally uplifting advantages of a detached house on a spacious lot. Olmsted lamented that “with 25 ft. lots much rurality must go” and that “a large part of the value of our plan was destroyed by reducing lots from fifty to twenty-five feet frontage.”

Buyers did not seem to care that these changes had been made to the plan: nearly three hundred lots were sold when they were put on the market in June and July 1896. Six months later, McMurtry’s secretary, Bache, and J. J. Vandergrift’s secretary, Buchanan, remarked to Olmsted that McMurtry and Vandergrift were satisfied with the “state of the sheet.” They told Olmsted that having sold almost two-thirds of the residential lots at the average price of $750, the company had nearly recouped the entire cost of the venture. Numerous inquiries from prospective buyers nevertheless prompted some Apollo Iron and Steel directors to question why more lots were not available for purchase. Looking for answers, they focussed upon the curvilinear streets and the oddly shaped, oddly sized, and difficult-to-subdivide lots that had been created by the Olmsted and Eliot plan. Bache, apparently tired of being badgered on the subject, in turn wrote to the landscape architects and asked them to outline the “advantage accruing [sic] to us from the town having been laid out on the curved plan instead of the square plan usually followed in this part of the country.”

Olmsted and Eliot had, by this time, seen two of the most important aspects of the design—the Village Green and the large lots—substantially modified to suit the economic requirements of the steel company. Obviously angered by questioning of a design feature for which the firm was famous, and possibly fearing that this too would be altered, the landscape designers testily replied that McMurtry already knew the advantages of curvilinear streets “as he doubtless employed us merely, if not solely, on account of our supposed skill in making such a plan.” To comply with Bache’s request, however, they continued: “It seems to us that the only answer that you need is, that a village laid out on such a plan (if well carried out in all details) would be more attractive and that, there-
fore, it will be easier to sell lots in it rapidly and at good prices than if the streets were all straight."\textsuperscript{35} Lots were selling within the curvilinear design when these letters were written, and it is unlikely that this aspect of the Olmsted and Eliot plan was ever in jeopardy. The issue of creating additional lots, however, lay at the heart of yet another conflict between the company and the designers.

The perceived shortage of lots prompted Apollo Iron and Steel to plan and sell lots in a second settlement platted on their property about one-half mile away from the southern edge of the Olmsted and Eliot plan (fig. 3.3). Known as “The Heights,” it contrasted poorly when compared with the Olmsted plan. Instead of wide, curvilinear streets and irregularly shaped lots, the Heights plan mirrored Apollo and most steel towns in western Pennsylvania. The rectilinear street plan did not follow natural contours, and straight streets were run against the grade. Furthermore, the company planned to build only a water-supply system for the settlement. Sewers were not included. The expensive elements of the Olmsted and Eliot plan were abandoned at the Heights, but a greater number of lots affordable to lower-paid, semiskilled operatives were made available to interested buyers.

For the Olmsted firm, the criticism about the curvilinear street plan and lot shortage was the final blow to their deteriorating relationship with Apollo Iron and Steel. In May 1896, when McMurtry tried to pass the blame for the poor engineering of the town to the Olmsteds, John C. Olmsted remarked that he thought it was a ploy to rely less on the landscape firm: “Partly too he [McMurtry] may have felt that in the beginning he was green to this work but that now he knew enough about it to get along with the engineers’ aid only.” In December, John C. returned to Pittsburgh and to the town site in order to hasten the completion of the firm’s end of the project.\textsuperscript{36}

Overall, Olmsted and Eliot found their revised plan to be a “considerable disappointment.” The Village Green was smaller and the symmetry was much less effective than what they had envisioned. The “amplitude of house sites” had been reduced and the resulting landscape looked much more crowded than intended (fig. 3.4). In presenting the final plan to Apollo Iron and Steel, John C. also worried that the firm would be associated with the rectilinear Heights plan. Writing to Bache he said “we have not thought it best to show upon our plan more than the edge of the subdivision known as Vandergrift Heights, since, owing to back grades and other defects, it is not a plan in which we wish to have it supposed we had a part.”\textsuperscript{37} Notably, the landscape firm insisted that on the final
Fig. 3.3. Plan of Vandergrift Heights. (Westmoreland County Register of Plans, Book 1.)
Fig. 3.4. Detail from the modified Vandergrift town plan. Note the high density of lots northeast of the railroad cut that arcs across the right-hand side of the image. Compare with lot densities in figure 3.5. (Plan reproduced courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY. Frederick Law Olmsted Architectural Drawings and Plans, file #462.)
Fig. 3.5. The landscape architects’ face-saving “filler”—a Vandergrift residential landscape that never was. Notable are sizeable lots (compared with the area closer to the mill) and the exaggerated lobes within the street pattern. Note, too, the deliberate omission of the Vandergrift Heights grid. Contrast this plan with the street pattern in figure 6.1 that was created as part of Park and Realty plans in the late-1900s/early-1910s. (Plan reproduced courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, N.Y. Frederick Law Olmsted Architectural Drawings and Plans, file #462.)
copy of the plan, in a space that had to be filled, they be allowed to use a portion of their original design (fig. 3.5). In the space between the Heights and the lower portion of the town where Apollo Iron and Steel had required so many modifications, Olmsted drew in what he and Eliot had really wanted for both settlements: large residential lots sitting astride streets that meandered gracefully across the map as well as a ravine serving as the convenient path for a parkway and place where steelworkers could convene with nature. This part of the plan was never built, and in the late 1910s the area became a standard rectilinear grid. For most of the early twentieth century, residents and the steelmill used the ravine as a garbage dump.

Large differences can be seen on this rendering between the Olmsted firm’s earliest plan and the final product, but for Apollo Iron and Steel the new settlements appeared to hit the spot. The final plan provided ample room for the mill site and a place to house workers. The social-reform aspects, infrastructure, and innovative features of the town’s design were strong selling points and they reflected positively on the steel company.38 By late 1896 the scheme was also proving to be a viable real-estate venture. But was it attracting the “right” kind of people? Would it live up to the social agenda that McMurtry developed after the Apollo strike and lockout? Would environmentalism and home ownership quell labor’s desire to organize, especially during hard economic times? As it stood, it would be impossible for McMurtry and the company to answer these questions until the residents had moved in and started to create their social community.