

**THIS LAND IS MY LAND! ... THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND?  
SAY, WHOSE LAND IS THIS ANYWAY, THIS SHINING CITY ON A HILL?  
What a 17th Century Puritan Preacher Knew That The World Has Forgotten.**

Whose land is this, this "shining city on a hill", this America? That's a question worth fighting over; and if that, also worth some serious thinking over. America is (or perhaps has been, we'll see) suffering a foreign invasion; that's a fact whether one applauds it or deplors it. The social, civil, and political disruptions consequent to that invasion raise several very insistent questions, only beginning with whose land this is (or, in the context of this commentary, ending with that question as earlier generations of Americans understood it). Let's return to that long forgotten understanding of whose land this is as a starting point for answering the current questions, for the void left by that missing understanding has been filled with warped and self-destructive notions.

One day in the Year of Our Lord 1630, a small group about to sail to the North American wilderness to found a new colony listened attentively to two sermons. Those two sermons are the best benchmarks I know of to help answer the questions now swirling around us. Though the sermons have the same starting place, following them out leads us to two conclusions; not contradictory, but complimentary ones forming a more perfect understanding. For the sake of clarity I am treating these two sermons separately as Parts I and II, and we will see how they fit together in the end.

Many of the following paragraphs are excerpted from previous writings of mine, as noted at the end. Because these paragraphs are taken out of a larger context they may seem a bit choppy in places, but this is information not often seen today, and for those who haven't seen it, well worth the reading.

## PART I

The claims of the Indians ... were held in little regard by the average white settler for reasons that ranged from the simple desperate need to survive, to bad blood built up over generations of war, to complex reflections on philosophy and religion.

The more reflective observers, especially among the Virginia and New England elites, pondered theories of ownership. The Enlightenment, chiefly the opening up of the Bible to the common man, had brought about new ways of thinking about ownership of property. It had long been held, even taught by the Church of the Middle Ages, that the title deed to all creation was given individually to Adam and his absolute title passed down to emperors and kings — land was theirs to distribute as they saw fit. That didn't seem to square with the Bible however.

One of the first and clearest expositions of this new theory of ownership, one that offered hope to the common man, was delivered in a sermon to

Gov. John Winthrop and his party of Puritans just before they set sail to found the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the year 1630. The preacher was the Rev. John Cotton who, like the others, was a dissenter from the Church of England and would soon be forced to flee for American shores himself. In America, he would found a line of famous preachers, including early America's most influential preacher, his grandson Cotton Mather.

This is a brief excerpt from Rev. Cotton's detailed exegesis of the Biblical view of land ownership (in my own slightly modernized English, and with scripture quotations rendered into the King James Version from an earlier version used by Rev. Cotton).

...it is a principle in Nature, that in a vacant soil, he that taketh possession of it and bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it, his Right it is. And the ground of this is from the grand Charter given to Adam and his posterity in Paradise, Gen. 1:28: *“Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it”*. If therefore any sons of Adam come and find a place empty, he hath liberty to come, and fill, and subdue the earth there. This Charter was renewed to Noah, Gen. 9:1: *“Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth”*. So that it is free from the common Grant, for any to take possession of vacant countries. Indeed, no nation is to drive out another without special Commission from heaven, such as the Israelites had, unless the Natives do unjustly wrong them, and will not recompense the wrongs in a peaceful way; and then they may right themselves by lawful war, and subdue the country to themselves.

This placing of people in this or that country, is from God's sovereignty over all the earth, and the inhabitants thereof: as in Psalms 24:1: *“The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof”*.

This was the seed of hope for white settlers and of doom for Indians who, in a land that now easily supports over three hundred million souls, continually tried to drive out the dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of European settlers who came here to be fruitful, multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it.

It is a testimony of the sovereign will of God, that the Indians were unable to drive them out, and were in a very few generations vastly outnumbered by the Europeans; and that largely from the astonishingly rapid increase of descendants of the early white settlers rather than a rapid influx from Europe which began later, after America had become a great nation.

John Locke, the English Enlightenment philosopher (born in 1632), formalized the new philosophy of ownership that was most influential with America's Founding Fathers. According to Locke, God had given the creation to man in common, but in a “state of nature” — that is, in a wild and undeveloped state. Men, he asserted, had a God given “natural right” to acquire property existing in a state of nature.

One acquired ownership of property by putting labor into it — 'sweat equity' purchased property from nature's common endowment. That principle became enshrined in American law, most notably in the Homestead Act of 1862, but it existed long before it the Homestead Act. It was a principle enshrined in English Common Law through Blackstone's 1765 *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, the 'Bible' of English and American law for generations.

President Andrew Jackson very forcefully made that point in his first Address to Congress, what we would call his first State of the Union Address in 1829, in arguing for his Indian Removal Act, signed into law the next year. He called it "*visionary*", or we may say 'a pipe dream', that Indian claims be allowed on tracts of country on which they have "*neither dwelt nor made improvements, merely because they have seen them from the mountain or passed them in the chase.*"

To this formula of 'sweat equity ownership' we need to add one more variable, the common real estate principle of "highest and best use". A realtor is under an ethical, if not legal, obligation to sell or develop a property to its highest and best use; that is, maximizing its value. We see that principle active throughout human history, and it seems to stem from God's command to Adam, "*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it*". But North American real estate was very noticeably underdeveloped.

... even as early as 1751 the very astute Benjamin Franklin was writing about a new phenomenon observed in the colonies... the explosive population growth of Anglo-America ... .

"*In countries full settled...*", Franklin noted in his treatise, ***Observation Concerning the Increase of Mankind***, "*all lands being occupied and improved to the height; those who cannot get land must labor for others that have it; when laborers are plenty, their wages will be low; by low wages a family is supported with difficulty; this difficulty deters many from marriage, who therefore continue servants and single...*". In those days, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness depended upon the acquisition of a little land. God's first command to man, "*Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it...*" required the acquisition of land. Without it was to labor and die a servant, alone and unremembered. Here in America, land was to be had, and Americans married and had families - large families, as the children survived, despite the hardships, at a much higher rate than in the old world. Americans counted those as blessings of God Almighty.

The term 'land hungry' is used today as a condemnation of our pioneer settlers, but the desire for a little piece of land to water with their sweat and blood was the foundation of the great nation we have enjoyed for so

long. To acquire land was to live in the full sense, and was worth any risk and any sacrifice.

Franklin continued: "*America is chiefly occupied by Indians, who subsist mostly on hunting. But as the hunter, of all men, requires the greatest quantity of land from whence to draw his subsistence (the husbandman subsisting on much less, the gardener on still less, and the manufacturer requiring least of all), the Europeans found America as fully settled as it could well be by hunters...*".

In this light, it was not the Indians themselves who posed the obstacle, for they were a tiny population in an immense land, but the Indian's inefficient hunter/gatherer economy. If this distinction between Indian and Indian culture was lost on most white settlers, it was not lost on governments, nor was it lost upon the Indians themselves. Underlying and intensifying the struggles over the next few decades between the European powers, the white Americans, and the Indians was a literal 'culture war' among the Indians - could they adopt the White Man's ways, settle down to agrarian life and give up their vast hunting preserves to white settlement — or not?

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*Bound For The USA: The Fourteenth And Fifteenth British Colonies*

Related to this subject, *Bound For The USA* contains the most complete historical background in one place of the 'Trail of Tears' that I am aware of, information that should be known to American students.

I also dealt with this subject more extensively in Appendix 1 of *Pious to Progressive: A Century of American Public School Readers*.

## PART II

I might have offended some people with the description of America as "a shining city on a hill". Many Americans (though few who would likely be reading my commentaries) take that phrase as a vulgar boast of 'American Exceptionalism', an undeserved pride, jingoism, chauvinism, and a hundred other popular insults against the American character. And the phrase has often been used in that way. It was President Ronald Reagan who most notably added "shining" to the description of America simply as a 'city on a hill' that goes back to the early days of our country. His addition of "shining" to the original 'city on a hill' image is significant, and I believe Reagan understood that better than many other Americans do. But let's delve a bit deeper into the history and real meaning of this phrase. As a word of caution, at its base, this 'city on a hill' reference isn't boasting at all, but a warning. How we deal with that warning may determine our future far more than any of the threats we are so concerned with at this moment.

In His Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:14), Jesus issues the warning "A city on a hill cannot be hidden." Yes, thought of as a caution rather than an exaltation, it does sound ominous. The cautionary nature becomes more explicit when seen in context: *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its savor, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the earth. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."*

A city that should be a shining light, but emanates darkness instead, a darkness that cannot be hidden either from the world or from God, can expect to be cast out and trampled by men; that's the pretty clear meaning. How, though, did that dire burden of being a 'city on a hill' come to rest on our shoulders? In 1630, the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, speaking to his fellow colonists about the great task they were undertaking, invoked that passage definitely as a warning that they were embarking on a highly perilous spiritual aspiration as well a highly perilous earthly expedition:

"... we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are a going.

I shall shut up this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. Beloved there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his Ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship and serve other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it."

Whether we like it or not (and we should be thankful for it) the United States of America is rooted in the compacts with God made by our Puritan forefathers.

Winthrop made it clear to the colonists that their claim on the land was conditional; a gift of God, but conditioned upon their behavior. And so we come back around to God. If we believe in God, the God revealed in the Bible, then we must believe in His sovereignty, as Rev. Cotton said: *"This placing of people in this or that country, is from God's sovereignty over all the earth, and the inhabitants thereof: as in Psalms 24:1: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof"*.

If God is not sovereign, He is not God. If He is sovereign, then the settling of America was according to his will — not because of the skin color of the settlers, nor entirely because of their faith I think, which was very uneven, but because after thousands of years of failure in this continent, God's first directive was at last being carried out: *"Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it"*.

So, have we Americans of this age dealt falsely with our God? That is the first question we should be asking. And I believe the answer is 'yes' — haven't we been seduced by the diabolical delusion that 'there are too many people, and they (we) are destroying Mother Nature'; haven't we made a mockery of the sacred bond of marriage; haven't we slaughtered our children by the tens of millions, haven't we confused, abused and mutilated them, haven't we denied them the wisdom and comfort of the Word of God in public schools and the public square, don't we allow them to die in the streets from 'cosmic confusion' and its loneliness, and despair? And haven't we, through our government and popular culture, forced those sins upon the world?

But is that 'guilty' plea the final answer? Perhaps God is giving us, the Americans of this age, a second chance; a chance, perhaps to heal the huge scar where a hundred million or more Americans were cut off. Perhaps that is the proper light by which to answer the question of "Whose land is this?" Perhaps it belongs to those who come here to *"Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it"*, and those who will contribute to building a 'Shining City on a Hill'. How we distinguish those among the millions who poured in haphazardly through our open borders may be the key to our future.

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