

BIOGRAPHICAL ALBUM
POLK COUNTY, IOWA
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ERNEST B. GASTON, who resides at University Place, Polk County, is proprietor and editor of the Suburban Advocate, a seven column quarto, published in the interest of the north and west suburbs of Des Moines. The Advocate was first established in May, 1887, by J. D. Bottenfield, who sold out to Charles McCanon in October, 1887. He continued the publication of the paper until August 20, 1889, when Mr. Gaston became the editor and proprietor. The paper is independent in politics, is rapidly increasing in influence and circulation.

Ernest B. Gaston is a native of Illinois, having been born in Knox County, November 21, 1861. His parents, James E. and Catherine E. (Estep) Gaston, were both natives of Pennsylvania, whence they emigrated to Illinois, where they made their home until their removal to Des Moines in 1865. The death of the father occurred at his home in the city, June 1, 1888, but the mother still survives and makes her home in Des Moines.

Our subject began his school life in the capital city and completed his education in the Drake University, graduating from the commercial department in 1887, with the honors of his class. On leaving school he entered upon his business career as a real-estate dealer in University Place, where he built a number of houses.

On the 24th of November, 1887, Mr. Gaston led to the marriage altar Miss Clara Mershon, a native of Jones County, Iowa, and a daughter of C. H. Mershon, of Des Moines. Their union was celebrated in Des Moines and has been blessed with one child, a daughter, Frances L. The parents are both members of the Christian Church and take an active part in forwarding its interests. In politics Mr. Gaston is a Republican, having supported that party since attaining his majority. He has been honored with a number of local offices, served two terms as Justice of the Peace, one as Town Recorder, was a member of the City Council of University Place for two years, which office he held when University Place was annexed to Des Moines. Socially, he is a member of the Legion of Honor. His public and private life are alike above reproach and he deserves no little credit for the part which he has taken in the advancement and upbuilding of University Place.

(Copied by C. A. Gaston, April 11, 1974.)

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GASTON, ERNEST BERRY (November 21, 1861-December 21, 1937) was the principal architect and founder of the Fairhope, Alabama, single-tax colony (1894—). For over forty years—as colony secretary and editor of the community newspaper—he was Fairhope's major leader and spokesman, a record unequalled in the history of American communitarianism. Fairhope is significant as the first and largest colony based on Henry George's single-tax philosophy and as one of the longest-lasting experimental communities.

Born in Henderson, Knox County, Illinois, Gaston was the youngest of four children of James Estep Gaston (1809-1888) and Catherine Estep Atkinson Gaston (1819-1900). Each had previously married, reared a family, and been widowed. James Estep Gaston, a descendant of French Huguenots whose great-great grandfather came to America in the early 18th century, moved to Des Moines, Iowa, in 1864 as

pastor of the First Christian Church. E. B. Gaston grew up in Des Moines, attended its public schools, and graduated with class honors in commerce from Drake University in 1886. On November 24, 1887, he married fellow Drake student Clara Leah Mershon (1864-1934) of Fairview, Jones County, Iowa. They had five children: Frances Lily (1889); James Ernest (1890); Cornelius Alonzo (1891); Leah Catherine (1894); and Arthur Fairhope (1896).

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Editor of a newspaper in University Place, a Des Moines suburb, active in local politics and building construction, Gaston was alarmed by the poverty, industrial violence, class conflict, and political turmoil that appeared to him to be the handmaiden of rampant individualism and industrial progress. In 1890 he spearheaded an effort to establish a cooperative colony based partly on the

ideas of Edward Bellamy. The plan failed and Gaston shifted his reform energies to the Populist movement, serving as an editor of General James B. Weaver's Farmers Tribune and as an officer of the state party.

Discouraged by poor results at the polls, he turned again to communitarianism, to design a self-contained, alternative society that would provide the leverage for change politics denied him.

The resulting Fairhope plan differed both from Gaston's earlier socialist model and from other contemporary colony schemes. Emphasizing what he called "cooperative individualism," he made Henry George's philosophy the centerpiece of his design. George believed that poverty would be eliminated, the economy more stable, and society more harmonious if government did not confiscate the earnings of labor and capital but, instead, collected for the benefit of

all people those values created by the community.

He believed land values were community-created values; all revenue therefore should come from a single tax on land values. Adapting George's theory to the Fairhope community, Gaston provided that all property except land and public utilities would remain in private hands. He hoped that communal decisions concern^{ing} the setting and spending of land rents, along with complete democracy in colony government, would lead to cooperative ventures and attitudes without curbing individual initiative.

In November, 1894, Gaston led a small group to the colony site, a beautiful plot on a bluff overlooking Mobile Bay. Only twenty-eight persons, eight of whom were children, were in the founding party. Before the first year was out the colony was rocked by a power struggle, but Gaston's leader-

ship was strengthened, new members recruited, more land acquired, and steady growth blossomed into a flourishing experiment. There were one ~~h~~ⁿundred Fairhope residents in 1900; 850 by 1920; and about 1,800 when he died in 1937.

Gaston's four decades of unrivaled leadership has been variously explained. His occasional detractors stressed his political shrewdness, but most shared the judgment of Joseph Fels, a wealthy Philadelphia soap manufacturer, single-tax philanthropist, and Fairhope's principal benefactor, that Gaston's "rare ability and unselfish character" accounted for his esteem and the colony's steady growth. A long-time associate recalls that, more than anyone he had ever known, Gaston "had the capacity to work for a principle." A Mobile attorney was drawn to his "honest and earnest" commitment to

a cause he knew could not triumph in his own lifetime.

Another contemporary believed it was the commitment to principle along with the ability to articulate it eloquently and apply it practically that accounted for Gaston's uniquely enduring role in the community.

"Abstractions attract the attention of relatively few," Gaston once wrote. "Definite, concrete illustrations of results appeal to almost everyone." In the history of reform, he believed, "those who make good theories work and prove the value of proposed social solutions by practical demonstration will do far more to move the world than the wisest and most brilliant theorists." He soon came to look on Fairhope as a place where "good theories work." As a laboratory of social theories, Fairhope tested not only the single-tax doctrine but also progressive education theories in the School of Organic Education, founded by Marietta Johnson in 1907. It also became a winter haven for

northerners and a magnet for a modest number of reformers, authors, artists, and craftsmen who gave the community a special ferment and creative ambience.

With no geographic or economic advantages, Fairhope soon outstripped older, neighboring settlements.

Gaston attributed both the material progress and the unique sense of community to the application of ^{the} "good theories" on which Fairhope had been founded. In this sense he regarded the experiment as a success. However, he died aware that such a successful demonstration had converted neither his county nor his state to the single-tax and he passed away with private fears about the future of the community itself.

Bibliography. Several boxes of E. B. Gaston's correspondence and a complete file of the Fairhope Courier are in the archives of the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation and are the best sources for a study

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of his life. The colony archives also include minutes, pamphlets, financial records, articles about Fairhope, photographs, and memorabilia. Fairhope and Gaston's role in it are discussed in Paul E. and Blanche R.

Alyea, Fairhope, 1894-1954: The Story of a Single Tax Colony; Arthur N. Young, The Single Tax Movement in the United States; and Arthur P. Dudden, Joseph Fels and the Single Tax Movement.

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