RURAL AGGLOMERATED SETTLEMENTS IN
THE EASTERN LAKE SHORE RED CLAY DAIRY REGION
OF WISCONSIN

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In the older and more densely settled parts of the United States an important cultural phase of the landscape is the large number of small rural hamlets and villages which dot the countryside. These rural agglomerated settlements which date from the beginning of white settlement in their respective regions have been relatively neglected as objects of study by geographers. The Eastern Lake Shore Red Clay Dairy Region of Wisconsin, an historically old, densely settled area of 2,500 square miles, makes a very satisfactory unit for such an investigation.¹

Physiographically, the region consists of a preglacial cuesta-form plain modified by the effects of multiple glaciation. The most recent deposits of red till and/or red lake clay have resulted in an extremely low relief and a heavy but fertile red clay soil which are in marked contrast to surrounding regions. Settled for over 100 years, the region has had a long and varied history which has had significant effect on the development of agglomerated settlements. Farms in this highly developed dairy region average less than 100 acres in size. For much of the region there are more than 40 rural persons per square mile, making this the most densely settled area of major size in Wisconsin.

All of the agglomerated settlements included in this study are essentially rural, and are closely related to the agricultural umland which they serve as markets.² None of the 136 towns here considered is exactly like any of the others, yet most of them possess common characteristics. These contrasts and similarities in various combinations of situation, site, morphology, and function permit an orderly classification. The settlements vary in size from small crossroads hamlets of three or four houses


² Four quarry towns and six lake shore towns are being dealt with in separate studies.

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clustered about a church, general store, and tavern to the largest towns of approximately 2,000 people. The primary *raison d’être* and the functional development, both reflected in the present structure and function of the settlements, permit a four-way classification of the towns: mill towns, bridge towns, rural hamlets, and railroad towns.

**MILL TOWNS**

As lumbermen and agricultural settlers began to move into the region after 1834, a pressing need developed for mills to saw the timber that was being cleared from the land and to grind the grain that was grown on newly cultivated fields. Except for military roads, land routes were poorly maintained trails, and long hauls were arduous and hazardous undertakings. Small mills serving a relatively limited area grew up at any point which promised sufficient water power. Frequently, but by no means always, the mill served as a nucleus for a settlement whose fortunes rose and fell with the mill. As the land was cleared, the water table dropped, the rate of run-off increased, and streams which once turned wheels were reduced during dry periods to a mere trickle. Consequently, most of the mills on the smaller streams ceased operation, and any towns which may have been built about them either died or remained stagnant. Other towns can no longer be included in this classification, having grown beyond the simple function of the mill town until the old nucleus is only a minor part of the town or has completely vanished. Although no mill town is incorporated, Mishicot, the largest, has perhaps 200 people. None are located on rail lines.

On the dip slope of the Niagara Cuesta where the relatively steep gradient of the streams provide numerous power sites, seventeen mill towns are located. On the other hand, only one is found in the Fox-Winnebago Lowland, where, except for the industrial region of the lower Fox River, stream gradients are extremely low.

The mill towns have been built on a variety of sites. Some were actually located at a rapids, but many were built at points where the valley sides were steep and high enough to permit

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*Although permanent settlement had begun at Green Bay in 1748, the first major influx of settlers did not take place until the government land office was opened at Green Bay in 1834. Many of the buyers were Yankee speculators interested in timber and probable future town sites. The great influx of German immigrants did not begin until 1850. See maps by Guy-Harold Smith, *Geog. Rev.*, Vol. 18, p. 421, 1928.*
the impounding of water sufficient for a head. The towns may be classified according to three types of sites, (1) valley sites, (2) valley bottoms, and (3) broad, open valleys. Ten of the seventeen mill towns in this area are included in the first group. The valley is wide, yet has definite slopes by which the mill pond is enclosed and on which the town is built. Only two towns are located in a valley bottom. This type is differentiated from the first in that the town is confined to the broader valley bottom and has not spread up the valley sides. Six towns possess sites in broad, open, gently sloping valleys with ill-defined slopes.
Fig. 2. Franklin, Sheboygan County, a typical mill town. The valley bottom is narrow, and the town occupies sloping valley sides. Key: 1, mill; 2, sales establishments; 3, services establishments; 4, taverns; 5, public buildings; 6, cheese factory; 7, dwellings.

Regardless of the detailed morphology, all of the mill towns are focused on the mill, for the universal practice of bridging the stream just below the dam resulted in a desirable convergence of roads at that point. The road which crossed the stream converged with one or more that paralleled the valley, giving to the town the pattern which has persisted to the present. Due to the irregular course of the stream or to the steep grades of the valley sides, the road pattern and the resultant town pattern are more or less irregular, conforming wherever possible to the rectangular pattern of the survey system. Although each town has a pattern peculiar to its own particular site, the town patterns may be grouped into three general classes. One includes five
towns which are built on the road crossing the stream. A second type is composed of six towns which are built on the road paralleling one side of the stream. The third type is a combination of the first two in which seven of the towns have grown so as to occupy both the crossroad and the road paralleling the stream. The mill pond, the dam, the mill, steep valley sides, and the bridge are conspicuous parts of the mill towns. Only two, Mishicot and Hingham, have expanded beyond the primary road pattern to the extent of the developing a grid of secondary streets.

The function of the small mills scattered over the region is almost, but not entirely, over. For example, the mill at Neshoto in Manitowoc County saws about 20,000 to 30,000 board feet of lumber during a period of six to eight weeks each spring. The logs are cut from the swampy woodlots, which are still numerous in the vicinity. Water power is used exclusively both for sawing logs and for grinding feed. Few mill towns are any larger today than they were fifty years ago, and they have had to change their function to agricultural market and service towns to exist at all. Except for Mishicot and Hingham, none are large enough to boast a residential area as such. These towns and Tisch Mills possess a small business section composed of a variety of shops and stores all catering to farm trade. Most of the towns consist of a general store, a blacksmith and machine shop, a garage, a couple of taverns, the old mill, and a half dozen houses. Some include a cheese factory, others a school or church or both.

**BRIDGE TOWNS**

Four rural towns within the red clay region have grown up at points where land traffic must of necessity converge to reach a relatively easy point to cross the Fox River or its tributary, the Wolf. Wrightstown is located on the incised valley of the lower Fox River at a point where narrow bits of riverine terrace lie at the foot of the steep clay banks which border both sides of the stream. To the first low level bridge, these terraces provided easy approaches. Eureka, Omro, and Winneconne are situated in the Winnebago Lowland across which the Wolf and upper Fox

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4 Although frame structures are more common, brick buildings are to be found among the two or three-story mills that have replaced the original timbered, one-story structures. Concrete or masonry dams have replaced the original log barriers.

5 By contrast in 1864 a steam and a water mill at Neshoto produced 3,500,000 board feet of lumber, 50,000 feet of laths, 700,000 shingles, and 24,000 railroad ties. (Plumb, Ralph G., History of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, p. 38, 1904).

6 The present structure, opened in 1935, extends from the east terrace to the west upland.
Rivers flow in a winding sluggish course bordered by expanses of marshland and interspersed by shallow lakes. The towns are located at bridge points where subdued, overidden bedrock or glacial features pinch out the marsh lands and narrow the valley.

Both river and land traffic have provided an impetus for town growth. The old Indian waterway of the Fox-Wisconsin Rivers was of paramount importance to the French fur trade and continued to serve the region as an important route until the advent of the railroads in the Civil War decade. Canoes, durham boats, and steamboats followed in order as a means of travel on the waterway which connects the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River. Before the Civil War the easiest means of reaching the north central part of the state from the northern terminus of the railroad at Fond du Lac was by steamboat via Lake Winnebago, the upper Fox, and Wolf Rivers. With the exploitation of the great Wolf River pineries, enormous quantities of logs were floated down the Wolf and Fox Rivers to mills on the waterway, particularly at Oshkosh.

The earliest travel on land by white men followed the Indian trails which crossed the waterway at the present bridge towns in the Winnebago Lowland. The early military road from Fort Howard at Green Bay to Fort Winnebago at the portage between the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers passed through the site of Wrightstown. With the construction of a road in 1839 from Appleton to the river bank opposite Wrightstown, it became an important road junction. Although the rectangular government survey modified the road pattern, the convergence of traffic on the bridge points persisted. Hoel S. Wright established a ferry at Wrightstown in 1836, and ferries were established at the other bridge towns in 1849. As settlement and traffic increased, the four bridge towns were given more permanent site quality by the construction of floating bridges at Wrightstown in 1840, Omro in 1850, Eureka in 1854, and Winneconne in 1855. These have long since been replaced by more substantial structures.

The structural form of each town is more or less modified by the terrain. Street patterns, essentially rectangular, are partially oriented to the stream course. Built on two levels, the uplands and the stream terraces, Wrightstown is most irregular in structure and in street pattern. Having grown up on both ends of the crossing, all bridge towns present a divided nature, two distinct sections separated by the river. Moreover, with the
Possible exception of Wrightstown, all bridge towns have developed to a greater degree on the right bank of the river, the side on which the business section is located. This can be partly explained by the fact that from 1832 until 1836 the land north and west of the Fox River was Indian Territory from which white settlers were expelled by Federal troops. Indian trading posts therefore developed on the right bank at Eureka, Omro, and Wrightstown. The present site of Winneconne was the designated place of payment of Federal grants to the Menomonee Indians,

Fig. 3. Map of the Winnebago Lowland showing the location of bridge towns at points where the marshes bordering the river are pinched out. Note the convergence of roads at these points. Key: 1, state highway; 2, county highways. Town roads are not shown.
and at this place the blacksmith shop of Joseph Jourdain, who mended arms and implements of the Indians, served as a nucleus for the future town. An additional factor in the unequal development of the two sides of the towns can be found in the impetus supplied by the railroad, which terminated on the right bank at Omro from 1861 to 1868. Since 1868 this terminus has been on the right bank at Winneconne. In the case of Wrightstown the railroad and the now defunct inter-urban line on the left bank have resulted in a development of that side practically equal to that of the original settlement on the right bank.

Agricultural settlement and lumbering in the region took place simultaneously. By 1850 saw mills had been established in each of the bridge towns, and logs rafted down from the Wolf River pineries added to the local supply. A flour mill constructed at Omro in 1856 and a carriage and spoke factory indicate a growing importance of the agricultural umland at an early date. As the Wolf River pineries were depleted and as the railroads gradually replaced the steamboat, the lumber industry and the river traffic declined. In consequence the population of bridge towns in the Winnebago Lowland declined until 1920.

| Table Showing Decline and Rise of Population in River Towns* |
|---------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Town                | 1870| 1880| 1890| 1900| 1910| 1920| 1930| 1940|
| Omro                | 1,838| 1,476| 1,232| 1,358| 1,285| 1,042| 1,255| 1,401|
| Winneconne          | 1,159| 978 | 1,086| 1,042| 940 | 745 | 821 | 981 |

Any port function that may have flourished to cease to exist, and the former river zone is represented, if at all, by old, dilapidated wharves and rotting rows of piling. In all but Eureka, which is not served by a rail line, heavy commercial zones including coal yards, lumber yards, stock loading pens, gasoline bulk plants, and a few industries have grown up along the railroad. Except for their site which has resulted in the concentration of highway traffic at the bridge towns, they are similar in function and appearance to the other rural towns located on railroads. A pea cannery and a condensery are located along the railroad in Winneconne; Omro boasts a feed mill on the river bank and a co-operative creamery. A cheese factory and a general dairy products plant operate in Wrightstown while Eureka has no industries. All trace of the original lumber industry has vanished. Retail and wholesale establishments are all based on the farm

* From the United States Census.
Figure 4. The greater importance of Winneconne during the height of the river traffic is reflected in this vacant hotel.

Figure 5. The right bank of the Wolf River at Winneconne. The railroad station at the left has doors opening on the river to facilitate the transfer of cargo from the boats to the cars. Although the bridge is equipped with a draw it is rarely used. From left to right, the smoke stacks belong to the pea cannery and to the condensery.

Figure 6. The hamlet of Lake Church. Note the church, the school, and the cemetery.
Figure 9. The railroad zone at Chilton. At the left is the aluminum goods plant, behind which is located the pea cannery. The large smoke stack marks the plant of the Carnation Milk condensery, which is located at the edge of town.

Figure 10. The railroad zone at Luxemburg. Note the elevators and the old planing mill on the left, gasoline bulk stations and sugar beet loaders in the distance.

Figure 11. A milk condensery and pea cannery located at the edge of Valders which can be seen behind the trees on the left. These buildings are typical of those for their respective type of industry.

Figure 12. The winding main street of Denmark which follows the line of an early road upon which the town was built.
trade of the umland. The residential sections, in general, reflect
the age of the towns.

RURAL HAMLETS

Rural hamlets are here considered to be those small agglom-
erated settlements commonly located at road junctions in rural
areas and which generally include a garage and machine shop,
a general store, a tavern, a cheese factory, a church, and an in-
definite number of houses. Functioning mainly as local retail
markets and service towns, the rural hamlets are distinguished
from other towns by a general lack of industry other than cheese
making. The rural hamlets lack the heavy commercial establish-
ments characteristic of rural towns located on railroads. Although
the rural hamlets are small, size is not a distinctive feature of this
type of settlement, for mill towns, in general, are comparable in
size. Stockbridge, the largest and only incorporated rural hamlet,
has a population of 377, a figure which exceeds that of some rail
towns.

Most of the 70 rural hamlets in the region are located east of
the Fox River and Lake Winnebago. There is at least one in
almost every civil town,7 and some civil towns have as many as
three hamlets. Sixty-six of the rural hamlets are located at road
junctions. With few exceptions, all are located on level to gently
rolling land which has provided no particular site quality not
possessed by other localities that might have been selected for a
settlement. Some rural hamlets, such as Mills Center, have grown
up around a mill, but they have long since become rural hamlets
in function and appearance. No trace of the mill remains.

Such names as St. Johns, St. George, Holy Cross, Lake Church,
and New Bethel Kirche bespeak the origin of a surprising num-
ber of rural hamlets. Such towns are usually the center of an
agricultural community which was settled as a unit by some
foreign group. The bands of immigrants were frequently led by
a clergyman, and generally the group built a church on a centrally
located site at a relatively early date. Because historic data are
lacking for most of the rural hamlets, it is difficult to determine
just how many of them were built around a church nucleus. Ap-
parently some grew up about an early general store or cheese
factory, and still others are former mill towns. Of the 70 hamlets
in the region, 37 have a centrally located church, which may or

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7 In Wisconsin the civil units of rural government are called towns.
may not have provided the nucleus, since many are not of known origin. The remaining 33 hamlets have either outgrown the original church nucleus or were not organized around such. Many began as stopping places along the old military roads which were built in the 1830’s. The greatest percentage of hamlets are located at road junctions, where business has been able to attract farm trade from several directions. Business places have sprung up at church sites, to which large numbers of people are attracted every Sunday. Store keepers say that even now the major part of their business is done on Sunday mornings, though this predominance of Sabbath Day business has decreased of late years, since the automobile has made possible quick trips to the store at any time.

In a region with such low relief, the road pattern appears to be the dominant factor in the morphology of the settlement. Except for Bay Settlement, Stockbridge, Brothertown, and Quinney, all of the rural hamlets were organized after the Federal Land Survey was made and so conform to the rectangular road pattern of the survey. Only where a road has followed a pre-survey trail or where some topographic feature has interrupted the regular pattern do the town plans deviate from the rectangular. The various patterns and their frequency of recurrence are shown in Figure 7. Only two rural hamlets, Stockbridge in Calumet County and Kellnersville in Manitowoc County, have expanded to the point of developing a rectangular grid of secondary streets. Where the church is present it generally dominates the hamlet, especially in the case of Catholic churches and to a lesser degree, Lutheran churches. Large brick buildings with high steeples are most common. Both of these denominations commonly support a parochial school. The church, the school, the parsonage, and the sisters’ home or school teacher’s residence comprise the most imposing part of the hamlet. The cemetery commonly adjoins the church property. (Fig. 6.)

Other than a residence for local business men and retired farmers, the main function of the rural hamlet is that of a local market and service center. Even in the largest hamlet professional services are not available. The small cluster of business places in all hamlets, regardless of whether or not they contain a church, include one or more taverns, a feed store, a blacksmith shop, and a garage. Frequently the horseshoeing and car repairing are done by one man, and farm machinery is commonly sold either by the blacksmith or the garage operator. Hardware
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Fig. 7. A table showing the recurring patterns of rural hamlets.

stores, meat markets, harness shops, tin shops, and barber shops are frequently found in the larger hamlets. Faded old signs and vacant stores tell of an ever narrowing of the market scope of the rural hamlets. Some hamlets possess a small fire station;

*An extreme example of declining functions is to be found in a vacant store whose faded sign advertises caskets and undertaking supplies in Cooperstown.*
others are the site of the town hall. Stockbridge has a drug store, and is one of the three hamlets having a bank.

As a general rule, the only manufacturing carried on in the rural hamlets is cheese making. Cheese factories are located in 58 of the 70 rural hamlets. Although other distinctly local industries do exist in six of the 70 rural hamlets, they are declining and all indications point to a gradual extinction.

RURAL TOWNS LOCATED ON A RAILROAD

The most distinctive feature of the towns included in this group is that they are located on railroads which dominate both morphology and function and are responsible for the growth of the towns. Unlike the rural hamlets, the towns located on railroads possess distinctive zones of heavy commercial and industrial establishments, and the functions are consequently broadened.

The sites of the rural towns located on railroads vary in accordance with the origins of the towns. Some of these towns, such as Forest Junction and Hilbert, owe their origin to the railroad. Many of the towns that grew up along the line of a newly completed road took the names of company officials. Others existed as mill towns or rural hamlets prior to the building of the railroad.

The fact that towns existed prior to the building of the railroad has resulted in many cases in a dual site and a bi-nuclear settlement with a second center at the railroad, connected to the original by a strassendorf development.10

Because of their more complex development, it is much more difficult to generalize about the structural form of the rural towns located on railroads than it is to do so for the rural hamlets. The greatest similarity of the towns is found in the presence of a heavy commercial zone along the railroad. Other morphological factors vary as to site and degree of development of the settlements. Of the 39 towns in this class eleven are bi-nuclear. In nine of these, one part is centered on the railroad and the second

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9 These include feed mills at Nuren and Cahemetville, portable saw mills at Eaton and Wayside, and permanent steam driven saw mills dating back 60 years at Rosecrans and Kelmersville. If local demand arises, the saw mills employ from four to eight men sawing the logs of surrounding farmers one to three weeks in winter.

10 Francis Creek developed about a tavern on the portion of the old military road between Manitowoc and Green Bay. A secondary nucleus, now connected to the first by a strassendorf, developed later about the station of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. See Folger, Louis, History of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, p. 343, Chicago, 1912.
nucleus of the town is located at a highway junction. In some instances the highway nucleus preceded the railroad, and in others it has developed as a result of modern automobile traffic on major highways. In the latter cases, the business places are of the type that cater to the passing traffic. The present incorporated limits of Waldo include the railroad nucleus of the town proper and the mill town formerly known as Onion River. The original bi-nuclear arrangement of Chilton has been engulfed by the growing town, but the pattern is retained in the dual busi-
ness section of the town. The bi-nuclear arrangement is lacking in towns in which the railroad passed through the original center. In such instances the original site has played an important part in the present morphology. Casco, as an example, originated as a waterpower site, but since the railroad follows the valley, the linear arrangement of the town along the valley bottom has been maintained.

Towns vary greatly in size and degree of development, both of which are reflected in the structural form. They vary in size from a mere cluster of buildings to the incorporated municipality of Chilton with 2,203 people in 1940. Fifteen of the 39 towns have not grown beyond the primary road pattern upon which the town was developed. The following patterns, strassendorf, diagonal crossroads, double crossroads, and double T road junctions are each represented by one of these towns. Four possess a radial pattern, and a similar number form a T pattern. Three are located on crossroads. Of the 24 towns which have developed beyond the primary road pattern, 18 have developed a grid of secondary streets. The pattern of this grid varies considerably from the true rectangular, which characterizes ten of the towns, to an extremely irregular pattern. Forest Junction, which is wedged between a diagonal railroad junction, and Valders are characterized by a modified triangular grid. Oriented to the railroad, Collins has a rectangular grid, which is superimposed diagonally over the rectangular grid of the land survey. Other than that it conforms to the street pattern, no generalization can be made regarding the outline of the towns.

Like all towns in the region, those located on a railroad, in addition to being places of residence, are primarily local agricultural market and service towns. They carry on heavy commercial activities that are lacking in non-rail towns. The heavy commercial establishments include grain elevators, coal yards, lumber yards, pickle stations, sugar beet loaders, and stockyards.

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11 Both physiographic and historical factors entered into the development of Chilton and the present structure of the town. Moses Stanton, a negro, and his Indian wife settled at a waterpower site on the Manitowoc River, where he built a sawmill in 1846 and a grist mill in 1848 which served as a nucleus for the development of a village called Stantonville. Gravesville was laid out less than a mile to the northeast by LeRoy Graves in 1849. A year later he too erected a sawmill on the Manitowoc River. When the county was fully organized, a heated political battle developed between the neighboring settlements over the location of the county seat. Stantonville, later renamed Chilton, won the contest, and continued to grow while Gravesville declined. When the railroad was constructed between the two towns, Chilton spread eastward until now its former rival is but a suburb. (See Watrous, Col. J. A., “Chilton’s History, a Frontier Epic,” Milwaukee Sentinel, April 11, 1910.)
Twenty-four of the 39 towns have grain elevators, and four of them have more than one. Three of the towns have a cheese warehouse each. In the larger towns manufacturing is an added function. Like the heavy commercial establishments, the manufacturing plants are for the most part based on a local source of raw material or on the local market. Twenty of the towns have cheese factories, six have milk condenseries, and thirteen have canning factories. The other industries include the manufacture of soil pulverizers, furnaces, aluminum goods, shoes, beer, and concrete blocks. Three towns have planing mills, one of which has been recently closed. A veneer plant is located at Rio Creek. Commercial lime kilns are located in or on the edge of three towns. In the larger towns, in addition to a greater variety of technical services, professional services are available. Retail business of the towns, as in all towns in the area, definitely caters to the farm trade.

Functional areas are best developed in the larger towns, but all towns located on a railroad have three such zones which are more or less well defined: a heavy commercial zone, a retail commercial zone, and a residential zone. The most-characteristic is the industrial and heavy commercial zone along the railroad. Included within this zone are the long low sheds of the lumber and coal yards, the towering concrete or frame grain elevators, stock loading pens, sugar beet loaders, warehouses, and other heavy commercial establishments. Within the railroad zone of the larger towns are to be found one or more industrial plants (Fig. 9). The most typical and most common are the condenseries and canning factories, generally located along the railroad on the edge of town (Fig. 11). Both establishments are large and require a considerable amount of ground, which, except on the edge of town, was not generally available at the late date of their development. Industries less common are the older industries dating back to the development of the settlement such as wood-using industries and foundries or machine shops, which are located in the railroad zone in the built-up older parts of town (Fig. 10). Some more modern industries, such as the shoe factory at Belgium and the aluminum goods plant at Chilton, are located within the built-up zone if and where sufficient land is available (Fig. 9). Also along the railroad on the outer edge of town are to be found one or more batteries of gasoline storage tanks legislated to a safe distance by city ordinance.
Only in the larger towns is the business district a zone of continuously built-up business places. Much more commonly, dwellings are interspersed with the retail establishments. Generally centered at the town's main intersection, the retail commercial zone consists mostly of two-story and fire-proof buildings, but there are many frame buildings. The large towns have one or more banks; office space is rented above the stores by men offering professional services. Garage and implement stores are present in every town.

The third functional zone, common to all towns regardless of classification, is the residential area. The quality of the area depends on the size and prosperity of the town, but in every town there are a few houses or a cluster of houses which are modest yet comfortable and well kept and belong to the wealthier businessmen. As a general rule, however, the bulk of the houses are second rate. The shady streets are generally gravelled, but unpaved. Cement sidewalks are general. In this zone are located the churches and schools of the settlement.