

The Camp Meeting Movement as a Lean Archetype

POSITION PAPER

The Camp Meeting ground is a land-use form particularly American, evolved to create community, integrating architecture, nature, and urban design using innate rules of human behavior. Camp Meeting grounds are the source for uses as diverse as resort villages, bungalow courts, trailer parks, condominiums, home owner's associations, land trusts, even some town centers. They are also about self-building, occasional prefabrication, and compact, human-scaled structures. The ideas and social experiments, construction know-how and urban layouts have influenced the country for hundreds of years. The lessons still hold.

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Context

Just after the founding of the United States, as early as 1794, a movement toward religious discovery resulted in the creation of

- Communities built as vernacular expressions of people coming together in nature for religious awakening
- Land-use covenants and group land ownership concepts
- A social structure on the frontier of the first modern democracy
- Vernacular urban layouts that supported a sense of community and influenced town creation
- Vernacular building ideas based on a strong sense of craft and making do with less
- An understanding of creating a community that persists in camps even when little is left of the original buildings and where the initial layout has been corrupted.

The Camp Meeting and its meeting ground is the origin of settlements and arrangements as diverse as resort villages, bungalow courts, trailer parks, home owner's associations, land trusts, and some town centers. It is also about self-building, occasional prefabrication, and compact, human-scaled structures. It differs from the 19th century Utopian movement it paralleled, as people usually did not live at campgrounds permanently. The ideas and social experiments, as well as the construction and urban layouts, were absorbed and transferred to the everyday world and vice versa.

The rules were simple; the results are still powerful today. At the height of this movement there were more than 3,000 of these camps; today there are more than 1,000 sites, many of them with their structures intact and still used, some after more than 150 years. The aspects of these places that created tight-knit communities still work.

How they started

Many, but not all, camp meetings, originated with Methodist Revivalist doctrine about Man in relationship with Nature. This abstract idea, combined with simple realities of a central area for a speaker and audience, plus overnight camping, was the generative concept that found expression in many and varied camps, but community is the real gift of these places.

Some of the first Revivals (late 1790s) were set in local churches, but the enthusiasm for religious experience quickly made it impossible to house so many people in wagons and tents at a village church. Religious leaders sought out land with ample water supply and fortunate topography. An amphitheater shape and enough land to pasture stock animals were ideal, but that ability to lay out a camp was also set by the "rules" for campsites created by some of the circuit riding preachers. Rules for conduct in the dense camps grew out of the need for large numbers (as many as 10,000) to work as a community.

Typically, once the land was purchased, it was chartered by the state legislature as a land trust, though the terms varied. In New Jersey, most camps were chartered as "religious municipalities", later ruled unconstitutional, but only in 1979 when it became a land trust.

Camp meeting planning is an example of generative design. In the early years was a "brush arbor" set up for a speaker and a generally radial layout for attendees. Early attendees slept in wagons or set up tents. The form needed some organization for stock animals and latrines, as well as cook fires. Ministers and organizers of the camp had to create layouts, walks, order. The first camps were little more than an exaggerated campfire, and circular layouts were common. The knowledge about



Luminaria; pedestrian street at Wesleyan Grove, Oak Bluff, MA; 10' wide cottage.
Credit: Sara Hines

military camps was not even fully developed—as it would be so well by the end of the 19th century.

The early camp layouts then expanded into secondary areas to accommodate growth, usually the result of available land, tree locations and the desire to create secondary spaces with the same communal power of the original. The camp grounds developed in the early 1800s are organic and intuitive in style but the concept of community was a driving factor. They were inventing the form. The generating concepts came from forts, camp fires, speaker circles, and of course preserving trees.

The post Civil War era saw campgrounds laid out by formulas and experience from earlier campgrounds, as well as the experience of the War itself. There were even people who expressly designed camps. Geometric and sometimes religious concepts were overlaid onto land, while mid 19th century realities about rail travel instead of horse and wagon travel evolved the design process. Pitman Grove Camp (NJ) is designed on the concept of the Twelve Apostles radiating from a central Tabernacle, all while a block away from the train station and a main street. This became Pitman, NJ.

The Land trusts owned the Land and granted leases to camp site holders, with an agreement to follow the rules or be asked to leave, often in the middle of the night if necessary, removing their tent or cottage.

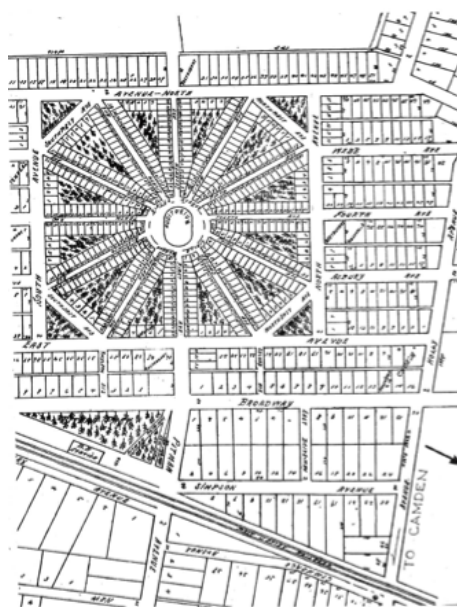
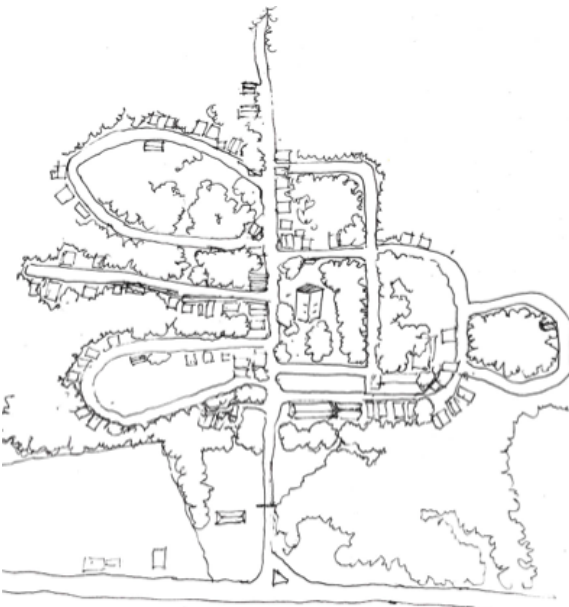
Social Structure

In some early cases a Revival would go on for weeks even a few months, such was the intensity of the experience. A Camp Meeting experience was bonding at many levels and it is logical to expect that the physical layout would expand that experience.

In the beginning the Camp Meeting was about religion and ecstatic conversion, but more often it served the role of social exchange, shared values, expanded friendships, and a strong sense of community. On the frontier, in Kentucky and North Carolina (1794), these meetings drew thousands of people when the population of a county might have been 500. This was a unique organizing event, expanding the experience of the new nation.

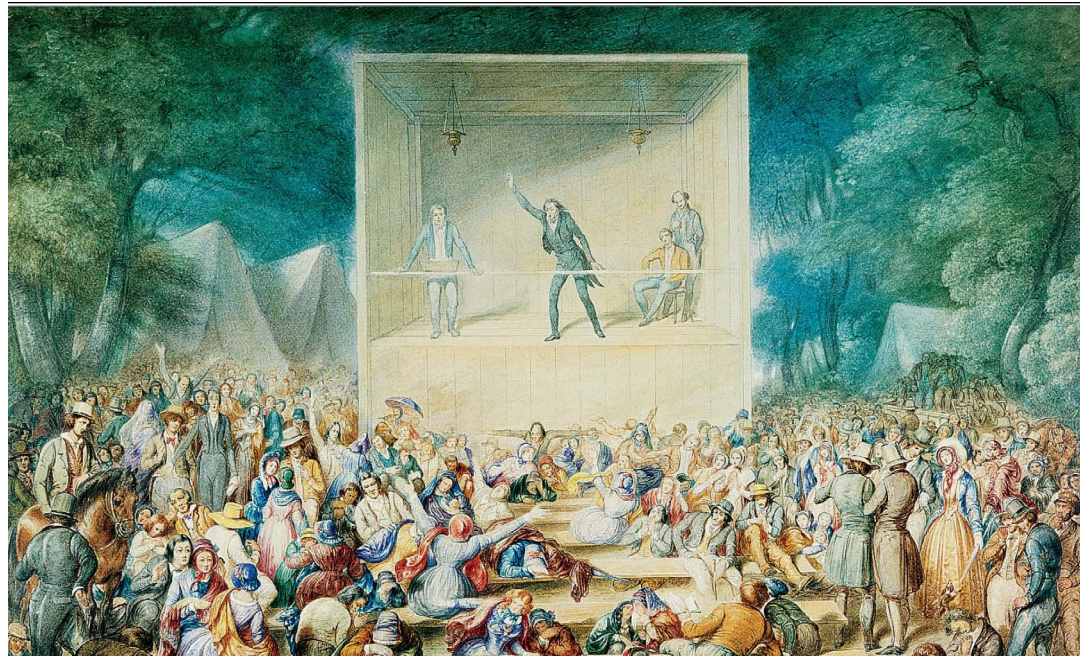
Early 18th century illustrations show that not all is rapt attention to a speaker, though religious experience of speaking tongues or collapsing in response to the intense preaching was both common and perhaps expected. When some revivals were in high gear, there are reports that there would be preaching all day and then people would go into the woods and sing all night. Clearly this must have produced extreme religious highs. It also created bonding of the community and the tradition of multi-generational experience of Camp Meetings was established.

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Site Plans: Camp Etna, ME, and Pitman Grove, NJ.
Credit: Sara N. Hines left and Library of Congress, right.

Early camp meeting.
Credit: Library of Congress



The Post Civil War era brought a time of national mourning and activity at Camp Meetings became more about preaching, learning, and social interaction, less about ecstatic Revival. The Chautauqua movement which involved education and study for “Sunday School Teachers” became a real force in the early creation of distance learning and home school courses. This was a critical way that the society transformed itself in the latter Victorian Age and adapted to the Industrial Era and the rise of towns.

Tents and Cottages

Camp meetings created rules for land ownership and usage, laid out campgrounds and set up simple and logical rules for operation, and generated structures both simple and elegant. Early Camp structures were actual canvas tents, and as they evolved they progressed from simple to expressive. Where decoration was used, it reflected the often ecstatic experience of the worship, using inherently simple materials, in sometimes sophisticated ways.

One owned a “tent,” leased the land, and paid an annual fee for the site. This form is still in existence, but governance has sometimes been converted to condominium, or fully deeded and sold off. Each form of governance has different impacts on cost of cottages, viability of the community, and interface with local government restrictions. In the best cases, the land is held as a non-profit trust(non-tax) and the cottages, simple as they are, remain quite affordable. In popular vacation areas, it is difficult to keep the trust intact and when cottages are sold off, aesthetic control is lost and property values can become very high. Sometimes complicated qualification requirements in religious trusts keep resale difficult, and this can also result in abandonment and decay. Local municipal opposition can result in degra-

dation and loss of cottages and building codes today make restoration or new construction of cottages almost impossible. Historic Designation acts to protect the campgrounds but also freezes them against any future change which was always part of camps. These are real challenges with the movement today

In rare instances, with cooperation of local building officials, new cottages are built, but the requirements of current building codes can make the compact form, often with narrow and steep stairs, lower heights and smaller rooms nearly impossible to duplicate. What I have not seen is the layout of a new campground based on old patterns.

The evolution of the camp cottage started with the tent. Then, tenters began to build more solid structures, first with canvas roofs, usually double fly style with elaborate canvas scallops covering the gap between layers. Wood walls were added but finally entirely wood cottages replaced the tents retaining many of the aspects of the original tent form, steep roof pitch, gable oriented toward the street, minimal structure and attention to retaining trees.

The most common early wooden cottages or “tents” as they are still called in parts of the south, were simple post and beam with tongue and groove vertical board siding, ideally of a hard pine where the sap would harden giving them great strength with walls only 1” thick.

Windows would be mounted to the interior of the boards with a hole cut in the siding, sometimes preserved as a shutter to protect the cottage over the course of the winter. Trim around a window was usually decorative and limited to the public face only. Cottages were narrow, a common dimension is 12’-4” wide by usually 28’-34’. There are also a class of cottages that are only 10’ wide,



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**Rock Springs
Camp, Denver, NC**
— empty and during
the season.

Credit: Sara Hines

yet seem to be an ideal, normal size, fully scaled to look “right.” Roofs are steep and gables always face the street.

Stairs are usually narrow and steep, but surprisingly they are designed to fit proportionally with the way people climb stairs and the narrow width seems to support one. Balloon framing with knee walls and steep pitch roofs seems to make the upstairs seem roomier than one would imagine. Often novel lean details to suspend structure, or railings that act as trusses, and brackets that support floors, show how to build elegantly and affordably.

Many embraced the influence of nature in designs, while the general desire to cut no tree often led to trees being incorporated into cottages or meant that cottages would be cut back as large trunks expanded — it is still common to see a cutaway eave where a tree had grown larger.

This represents the common form found in the north. As time went on, wealthy owners built large Victorian style houses, though still in dense proximity to the older, simpler cottages, close to the narrow streets. It is notable when these big cottages push back from the street the sense of community is damaged.

Southern Camps

In the South, camps can seem like agricultural stock pens, sometimes without windows and arranged like a fortress around a central area, austere when unpopulated. Populated, they form nearly continuous front porches with no windows, only ventilation slots. Nature is almost completely excluded from these southern camps in favor of an extended ramblas between rows of tents, allowing constant interaction. Widths of the paths and distances are uncannily arranged for private conversations and then with a slight raising of one’s voice, for a chat with someone on a porch swing. The quick sense of how to adjust one’s voice is apparent even to small children. This community resides in awareness, acceptance, and interaction at many levels. This aspect

of community is so uncommon in 21st century life that I think we are starved for it.

The experience of community is enriched by the walkways and proximity of cottages, by street widths and relationships, by re-use of such vernacular styles as dog-trot cottages, grand sheltering tabernacles, and all manner of scales for buildings, passages, spaces for communal experience; this reinforces the sense of inclusion, of direct interaction, structured.

Who Built Cottages?

Cottages were self-built by leaseholders, but others were built by carpenters from nearby — cottage building also influenced design used outside the camps. Gothic cottages, often described as a merging of a church with a house is a typical form, easily rendered in the simple post and beam form. Cottages were not “attached” to the land—they could pull these houses around with horses—a common thing about camp meeting cottages is that they were always being moved and adapted. The relationship of dwelling to dwelling user was significantly different from the mindset of the homeowner today in a way that is hard to grasp now.

The phenomenon of Neshoba County Fair Grounds, which had original layout and structures based on Camp Meetings, but was always an agricultural fair proved that the spatial rules of a good camp meeting could produce community around secular interests with as much intensity as the original revivalism.

We emerge with a knowledge that we can achieve a wonderful, human-scaled, community, designed using simple rules, developed and tested through camp meeting grounds, along with simple and often ingenious carpentry skills that allow for self-building on a manageable scale. We know that the land trust is a tool, not to participate in the game of real estate markets, but a Lean way to keep the cost of living affordable and community strong. We know that this kind of building has worked for more than two centuries, and can be repeated today.



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