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THE NON-PENNSYLVANIA TOWN: DIFFUSION OF URBAN PLAN FORMS IN THE AMERICAN WEST*

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ABSTRACT. Wilbur Zelinsky's classic 1977 account of the Pennsylvania town as a cultural place type—the urban component of the nationally influential Pennsylvanian culture region—acknowledged that it was not exported intact across the successive western frontiers of the United States. But, aside from Edward Price's specialized study of courthouse squares, we know little that is systematic about how town-planning ideas diffused across the continent. This investigation offers evidence from the Willamette Valley in Oregon of the eventual variety and geographical distribution of town-platting conventions that developed in this Pacific Coast “destination” setting and the possible provenance in the Ohio Valley of certain early Oregonian town-plan features. The evidence raises questions about the resilience of town-planning conventions in light of the distance carried, cultural time lags, and changing ideas about best practice and local suitability. *Keywords:* cultural diffusion, Oregon, place identity, town planning, urban morphology, Willamette Valley.

This study is a delayed response to Wilbur Zelinsky's celebrated article on the Pennsylvania town, a groundbreaking attempt to typify, statistically and otherwise, and map a strong regional urban type that has yet to be replicated with similar specificity for any other cultural region of comparable size in the United States. According to the model, the essence of the Pennsylvania town lies in its “dense aggregation of spatially mixed functions in regionally distinctive structures, closely spaced and often built of brick, set along a generally rectilinear lattice of arboreal streets and well-kept alleys frequently focused on a diamond-shaped central square” (1977, 138). Geographers and other scholars have long understood U.S. cities and towns to be the loci of progressive economic and social development and modernity within the nation. Consequently, the analytical emphasis has been much more on seeing them as components of a growing functional system—displaying a unitary, hierarchical, and homogeneous character—than as an array of regionally distinct urban place types. Yet, for all the obvious functional similarities between cities large and small across the land, regional urban traditions have long existed and

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