

## WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT IN CHESHIRE\*

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**ABSTRACT.** The purchase and subsequent demolition of Cheshire, Ohio—located in the shadow of the General James M. Gavin Power Plant—has attracted national attention. According to a *New York Times* report, “the deal . . . is believed to be the first by a company to dissolve an entire town.” In this article we consider historical precedents for the case, explore the thirty-year history of community-plant relations in Cheshire, and recount the series of incidents that ultimately led to the town’s sale. We discuss the impact that the town’s sale has had on the local community and the larger implications of American Electric Power’s actions. *Keywords:* American Electric Power, coal, company towns, environmental justice, Ohio, power plants.

*In Loving memory of the Little Village of Cheshire, who was slain in the name of progress by the Purveyors of greed. Although dear Cheshire, you were never big or famous, or you were never really beautiful, you overcame all these things, because to us you were home. You were a comfort to the elderly and a haven for your weary children, you were a source of girlhood fantasies and boyhood dreams. Although your children travelled the world over in war and peace, they always returned to you and your comforting rural ways. In years gone by you proudly withstood flood and disaster but this time, it was far too much even for you. So now as you lay [sic] torn and buried all the fond memories of you will live forever in our hearts. Rest in peace, Proud Cheshire. Sadly missed by Countless Survivors.*

—Author unknown, ca. 1973

On 16 April 2002 American Electric Power (AEP), the nation’s largest utility, announced that it was buying the town of Cheshire (Figure 1), located on the Ohio River adjacent to the General James M. Gavin Power Plant, for \$20 million (AEP 2002a). For months, Cheshire’s residents had been locked in a contentious battle with AEP over the plant’s noxious emissions. According to newspaper reports the trouble started when “clouds of sulfuric acid”—what AEP referred to as “plume touchdowns”—descended on the village more than a dozen times during June and July of 2001 (Downing 2001). The “blue clouds” actuated a community response that ultimately led to the town’s sale. Now the battle was over. Within hours, journalists from around the country were making their way to rural southeastern Ohio to cover the story. By the fall of 2003, most of the town’s 221 inhabitants had departed. Since then, homes and commercial structures have been razed to make room for a new barge-unloading facility (AEP 2002a). A *New York Times* report, echoed in

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