

PATTONSBURG IS DEAD, LONG LIVE PATTONSBURG! SENSE OF PLACE IN THE FACE OF DISASTER

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ABSTRACT: *In 1993, the town of Pattonsburg in north-central Missouri experienced not one, but two floods. After the second flood, townspeople voted to accept federal money to relocate the town out of the floodplain where the town had been for over a century. While it was a massive undertaking, townspeople were able to physically relocate their town. This paper investigates a more difficult question: is it possible to relocate a community and a sense of place based on generations of experience at the old location? Is Pattonsburg still Pattonsburg, or is it someplace else altogether?*

INTRODUCTION

In June 1993, Pattonsburg, Missouri experienced a devastating flood. Lying in the lowlands with Sampson Creek to the west, Big Creek to the east, and the Grand River to the south (Figure 1), flooding was nothing new to the town, having been inundated at least thirty times in the past century and a quarter. Indeed, after the first flood, the spirit of cooperation was strong among the residents. They had been through it all before, they reasoned – thirty-three times in the twentieth century. They had even staved off a threatened human-made flood – the Army Corps of Engineers had proposed a dam in 1966, and again in 1974 and 1986 that would have flooded the town (Dvorak, 1993; O'Malley and Crowl, 1998: 65). They could do it again. But then in July came a second flood, eight inches higher than the first. In the words of one resident, the second inundation “whipped us good.”

Townspeople accepted assistance — \$11.5 million — from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help them move the entire town to higher ground a few miles away. Eighty-nine percent of the population voted in favor of the move. The process of moving and planning the town was long. Over the course of several years, a new business district, a new school, two churches, and many new homes were built. In addition, many residents had their old homes moved from the

floodplain up to lots in the new town. The population today is 261, down from 414 a few years before the flood. Many moved away because they did not want to go through the hassle of moving, or because they could not bear to try to rebuild the town where they had lived for decades. Ironically, Pattonsburg had moved once before, in 1877, down into the floodplain to be near the newly constructed railroad – a line that was eventually abandoned.

While uncommon, such an event is far from unique. In fact, many other towns were similarly moved by FEMA after the 1993 floods (Mansur, 1994a), with over \$100 million spent by the agency in Missouri alone (FEMA, 2002 www.fema.gov/doc/reg-vii/mo_buyoutreport.doc). There are also those that suffer deliberate inundations, for example, Ozawkie or Clinton, in Kansas, flooded by the Army Corps of Engineers in the dam building frenzy of the 1950s and 1960s and moved to higher ground, not to mention the nearly two million villagers being displaced by the Three Gorges Dam in China.

DISASTER AND SENSE OF PLACE

Our interest was specifically in the implications of the town move on residents' sense of place. Study of place and sense of place have a long tradition in cultural geography, usually traced to Yi-Fu Tuan's seminal *Space and Place* (1977), but with a lineage that stretches back to John K. Wright's Presidential Address to the Association of American

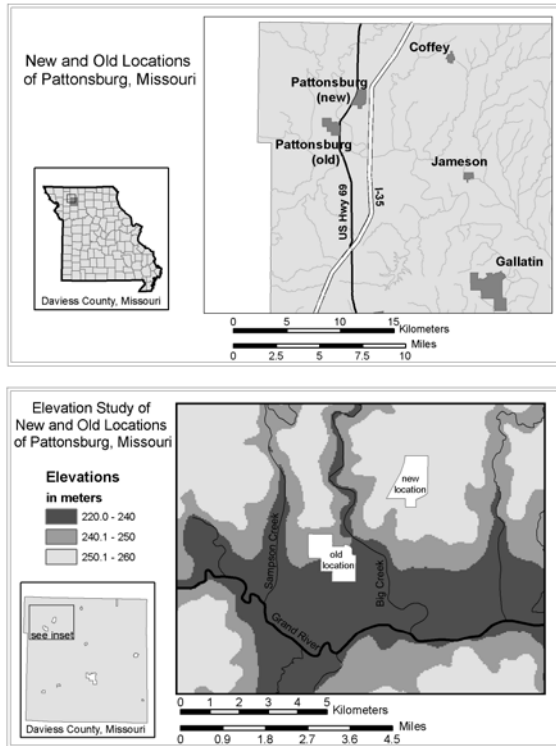


Figure 1. a) Location map and b) elevation map of study area.

Geographers (Wright, 1947). Recent scholarship in the field has heralded a renaissance in the area of “place studies,” moving the subjective concepts of place front and center in social analysis (e.g., Adams et al., 2001; Foote, 1994). What’s more, studies of place have moved from the abstract, philosophical discussions of the 1970s to more in-depth explorations of individual places today.

Often, studies of subjective landscape meaning have focused on highly symbolic landscapes, memorials, and other specific loci of meaning (see, e.g., Cosgrove, 1989; Harvey, 1979; Foote, 1997). Much less common have been studies of the general sense of place found in a place (see Ryden, 1993 for an excellent example). Rarer still have been discussions of the ways in which sense of place can be shaped by disasters and other transformative events. Yi-Fu Tuan (1997) discussed landscapes of disaster and fear in a generalized way, while Kenneth Foote (1997) explored the ways in which we deal with violence and tragedy in the

landscape. To our knowledge, however, nobody has investigated the implications for sense of place and community when the place itself has to be moved in the face of disaster. War and natural cataclysms have uprooted millions globally, so such questions are of more than academic interest. Pattonsburg serves as an ideal case study to begin an examination of these broader issues. What relationship exists between the senses of place and community in the old town and the new town? Is today’s Pattonsburg still Pattonsburg? Or is it someplace else entirely?

To explore the sense of place of Pattonsburg, we carried out in-depth, open-ended interviews with 30 town residents. Such conversations are, we feel, the most effective way to understand the complex web of meaning, history, experience, and identity that make up sense of place. Other methods (such as surveys and questionnaires) are generally unable to effectively explore the richness and texture that characterize sense of place (Western, 1992)¹.

THE LANDSCAPE, NEW AND OLD

What first drew us to Pattonsburg was the utterly surreal feel that the new town has. Located on hilly land high above the floodplain, virtually devoid of trees, with widely dispersed houses, a downtown that looks like two strip malls on opposite sides of a strangely broad main street, and a school that looks like it came out of a science fiction movie, new Pattonsburg has a feel unlike any other place we had been (Figure 2).

Meanwhile, a few miles away, down in the floodplain, a ghostly network of streets still marks the skeleton of the old town. A few scattered houses – of folks who did not want to make the move or those who lived outside the town limits and could not get disaster relief – remain. The old city hall still stands, as do the old churches (one of which is still operational). The old school and water tower (emblazoned with the town name) also punctuate the flatness of the floodplain. Surrounding these scattered structures, however, there is nothing but cornfields. Most of the old buildings and houses have been moved or demolished. Nothing remains along Main Street, except for a lone caboose amidst the fields of corn stubble (Figure 3).



Figure 2. a) Downtown new Pattonsburg and b) new Pattonsburg school. Photographs by authors.



Figure 3. Scenes from old Pattonsburg a) church and b) old Main Street. Photographs by authors.

The old town has been preserved, indirectly, however. In 1998, the movie "Ride With the Devil," directed by Ang Lee, used old Pattonsburg as a stand-in for Civil-War era Lawrence, Kansas. The film takes place during the border wars between Kansas and Missouri, and revolves around William Quantrill's sacking and burning of Lawrence, the bastion of free-state sentiment. Set designers remade the flood-ravaged Pattonsburg with plank sidewalks, dirt streets, and fixed-up storefronts, and many locals were extras in the film. The faux-Lawrence met the same fate as the real Lawrence, and was put to the torch (with the help of smoke machines and propane jets). After filming, the last remnants of the downtown were demolished (as required by FEMA after the buyout), leaving few traces behind (Butler, 1998a; 1998b; 1998c).

CREATING A NEW TOWN

Prior to the floods, Pattonsburg was a typical small agricultural service center in decline. Once a thriving regional center of 2000 residents, Pattonsburg's population had dropped in every census for the last century, and the town's population had been halved since 1970 (Lerner, 1997: 214; Mansur, 1994a; U.S. Census). As with many agricultural service towns, consolidation of farms and the increasing scale and mechanization of agriculture has taken its toll. The town was managing to sustain itself with business from traffic on Highway 69 (a narrow, dangerous road known as the Ho Chi Minh trail by truck drivers), which passed through town (Lerner, 1997: 214). In the 1970s, however, Interstate 35 was completed, several miles to the east of Pattonsburg. The reason for avoiding Pattonsburg was the threat (never realized) of an Army Corps of Engineers dam that would permanently flood the Pattonsburg area with a reservoir (O'Malley and Crowl, 1998: 65). As with countless other towns bypassed by the high-speed highways, Pattonsburg declined rapidly. Businesses folded, and younger residents left for greener economic pastures. The 1993 flood was another blow to an already struggling town. Although many businesses from the old town successfully made the transition to the new, Pattonsburg lost its last grocery store and drug store in the process, along with a pizzeria and the county library.

Once townspeople decided to move the town, a lengthy planning process ensued. In December 1994, lured by the prospects of government assistance, the City Council signed a “charter of sustainability,” which declared the town’s commitment to building in an energy-efficient and ecologically sensitive fashion. (Lerner, 1997; Mansur, 1996). A team of experts, funded by the U.S. Department of Energy, was assembled to visit Pattonsburg to assist townspeople in planning their new town using sustainable development principles (O’Malley and Crowl, 1998: 66). Robert Berkebile, a prominent green architect in Kansas City helped to coordinate the effort (Lerner, 1997: 217). His team spent a three-day planning session in Pattonsburg in 1994, brainstorming with residents about the features that they most wanted to preserve about their old town. Townspeople made clear that they enjoyed the “small town feel” of the old town, and loved the ability to walk everywhere and to shop on a real Main Street and not in a strip mall. Above all else, they wanted a town, and not a subdivision (Kelsey, no date www.sustainable.doe.gov/articles/Pattonsburg.shtml).

With these ideas in mind, the design team set out to create a more environmentally sensible town. They decided to keep the natural contour of the land as much as possible to avoid the need for a storm sewer system. Finally, a human-constructed wetland would capture the runoff, instead of letting it flow into nearby waterways. Their vision also included streets with east-west orientations so that houses could take advantage of passive solar design. The town would be laid out so nobody was more than a five-minute walk from downtown (Dvorak, 1995; Lerner, 1997; Mansur, 1994b; 1994c).

The reality of the new Pattonsburg ended up substantially different from the original plans. The town, for its part, put some of the environmentally friendly design ideas into the city building code, which was designed to promote energy-efficient building designs, for example, requiring that all buildings would be designed “so as not to interfere with the reasonable use of adjoining properties for solar applications” (Lerner, 1997: 224). The idea of passive solar design, however, was soon discarded. “The regional planners had already designed a suburban cul-de-sac community – the streets were laid out in the wrong direction to take advantage of the sun – and they refused to change their plans” (Lerner, 1997: 219). When touring the town after

construction, architect Berkebile “could only shake his head at what had happened. The new Main Street looked more like Branson than Pattonsburg. . . . There were no brick fronts, like in the old town, no covered sidewalks or trees as planned. What’s more, the town’s leaders decided to move the municipal building away from the town’s center. In its place will be a funeral home.” (Mansur, 1996). The overall effect is exactly the sort of subdivision look that residents emphatically declared during the planning process that they did not want, with wide-apart houses and curvilinear streets that discourage walking and encourage driving. The new school buildings are more energy efficient than their predecessors, and businesses on Main Street all have heat pumps for their heating and cooling needs. Some of the never-realized projects were cut due to lack of funds. Nonetheless, it seems that outsiders interested in promoting sustainable development were much more interested in the idea than the townspeople themselves. Certainly, in our interviews, the sustainable character of the town (what remains of the original plans, anyway), was almost never mentioned; one would expect that it would be a matter of pride to residents if they were truly behind the original plan.

The new location, from an economic standpoint, is definitely better. The town is now fairly close to the Interstate. A billboard along the highway entices travelers to buy old-time antiques and crafts in “The Newest Town in the U.S.A.” — a curious strategy, to say the least. The owners of several of the shops downtown do say that they are definitely better off in the new location than they were in the transportation backwater of the old town.

So far, the success of the town’s attempts to attract new industry as a result of their new location have been limited. There is now a for-profit jail run by an outside company – but it employs few residents. There also was a baseball cap factory, but this went out of business several years ago. Many individuals too have entered into serious debt. The government paid to move their houses, but it did not pay to move outbuildings, or for water, sewer lines, utilities and other infrastructure necessities. So people that had never been in debt in their lives found themselves in debt, and wonder if they will live long enough to pay it off. When people have second thoughts about having moved to the new townsite, as often as not, it revolves around the debt issue.

COMMUNITY AND SENSE OF PLACE IN NEW PATTONSBURG

When we asked residents about the sense of community before and after the flood, we got widely varying answers. Some argued that the sense of community is stronger than ever today. The trauma of the flood and the giant task of creating a new town from scratch bound people together in a way that they had never been before. As one resident put it, "if we hadn't worked together, we wouldn't be up here now, would we?"

Others disagree. While some were energized by the prospect of creating a new town, they say, others simply retreated. They see a town where people are more isolated and less willing to take part in community events. One woman observed that, "overall, people are more segregated, and they've become more passive. You know, they just sort of have an "I don't care" attitude when you ask them about anything concerning the town. They don't get involved as much anymore. I think people are just tired from all of this." In the words of one prominent citizen, "you can move a town, but it's tough to move a community."

Even more tenuous than the community ties, however, was the sense of place of old Pattonsburg, the web of memory and history, and the sense of connection and continuity that defines a place. Clearly, the town residents felt that their identity as Pattonsburg would survive the move – a proposal to officially name the moved town "New Pattonsburg" never made it very far. Although the main realty company in town is called "New Town Realty," the café on Main Street, conversely, is called "Old Memories Cafe." After the move, however, feelings about the new town itself are definitely split. Some are insistent that they really can not see any substantial difference between the old town and the new town (an assertion that we have a hard time believing). By and large, though, most agreed with this sentiment: "It will never be the old town; it's still not home here to a lot of people, and it never will be. The entire atmosphere has changed." As one man put it, it "feels kind of like an army base." Down in the old townsite, trees were plentiful, but in the old farmer's field purchased for the townsite, only scrappy young saplings provide relief from the hilltop winds.

One of the stranger things to many people is that old familiar houses are still here, but are completely out of context. Home lots in the new town were assigned through a lottery drawing. Generally, seniors chose lots closer to the center of town, while most families chose larger lots and houses closer to the edge of town (Kelsey, no date www.sustainable.doe.gov/articles/Pattonsburg.shtml). The end result still has strange effects on people years after the move. Said one, "you'll be looking at an old house, a house that was in the old town forever, and you won't even recognize it! Because all the things that are around it are different." Another told us that "our house is turned the opposite direction from the orientation it had in the old town. The hardest thing for me is that the sun comes up in the west every morning now!" What's more, as one elderly woman noted, "the people that used to be your neighbors aren't your neighbors anymore." Thus, as the spatial layout has changed, the social dynamics of the town were greatly disrupted. The spatial patterns of people's daily lives that brought them in contact with neighbors were severed.

The layout of the new town has added to the disruption. An observation made by many is that, compared to the old town, people seem to stay in their houses more, rather than walking around downtown or through the streets. Both the downtown and the two churches are on the periphery of town. As a result, by most accounts, people drive much more often than they used to. In fact, there are not even sidewalks in a number of areas of town. As a result, they are more isolated as the chance encounters of a pedestrian lifestyle are restricted.

Ironically, this is the opposite of what planners and residents envisioned. They purposely designed the new town so that nobody was more than five minutes' walk from downtown (Lerner, 1997), and they intended this district to be the heart of the community. Nonetheless, our observations bore out those of our interviewees – seeing somebody out walking, even in the lovely May weather, or hanging out downtown, was a rarity. People can walk, but they don't. It does not help that the main area where people go to drink coffee and socialize is not downtown, but rather found in a service station some distance away, closer to the Interstate. The main café downtown closes at three o'clock, and when that closes, there is really nowhere for people to congregate. The senior center serves as a gathering

place for the older residents of the community, much as it did in the old town. And, as in many small towns, the school is a center for younger families. The churches as well are vital. But each of these is a segmented sphere of the community, not a center for everyone.

Some were dismissive of the new downtown's character as well. Planners had tried to recreate the look of the old downtown by planning two strips of businesses (instead of disconnected buildings) with different shaped fronts on each one. The end result, however, feels more like two strip malls on either side of an oddly-wide four-lane, median-divided street. Sitting at the far edge of the residential area, the business district looks plunked down. It has less of an organic feel than older downtowns, which, of course benefit from a century and a half of additions, subtractions, remodellings, and from a bit of decrepitness that lends a patina of time and rootedness to the businesses housed therein. Said one resident, "in the old town, the businesses were all unique; here, you walk in one, you've seen them all, they're all built exactly the same. So the town just doesn't have the same character as the old historic town with all those old buildings. . . . Overall, even though these are newer and nicer, they just don't have the same feel." Planners made some effort to create uneven storefronts that mimicked the feel of the old downtown, but in the end, it still feels like a new strip mall.

Nonetheless, many — especially relative newcomers to town — are enthusiastic, taking a sense of pride in the sheer willpower that it took to make Pattonsburg the Second a reality. "We've got a chance to have a fresh start — how many towns can say that?" Indeed, few question that new Pattonsburg is in much nicer condition than the old town. The line between tattered character and depressing decay is, after all, a fine one. Said another resident, "truth be told, it was a good thing, as much as I hate to say it. A lot of the old town was getting sort of run down. But it was hard for all those old people especially, all their memories were down there. But it's also kind of exciting, having a whole new town, you know?" For them, the newness itself and the sense of a common goal and a common dream gives a strong psychological anchor and attachment to the new town. As the mayor — himself a newcomer since the flood — put it, the rebirth of Pattonsburg is a long ongoing project. "It looks nicer this year than last,"

he told us, "and it will look nicer next year than this year." Most of the store owners we interviewed shared this sentiment, and saw great possibilities for their businesses as a result of their proximity to the Interstate.

It will be impossible, however, as long as today's generations live, for new Pattonsburg to escape the shadows of memory of old Pattonsburg. Indeed, the ghostly remains of the town down in the valley are a disquieting and disorienting presence that most try to avoid. It is, in Kenneth Foote's (1997) phrase, shadowed ground. With most of the buildings gone, it is difficult for long-time residents to even figure out where they are. As one woman explained, "when we go down to the old town site, we can't even find where our old house was! Last year, there was a cornfield there." Most others agreed. "When I go down there, it just doesn't seem like Pattonsburg. There's nothing there, except the MFA and the Christian Church, but most everything else is gone. I don't go down there at night, it's spooky, with no lights. And it used to be lit up, with people all over the place." "It's really dreary, dark, and desolate," said one. "It's really sad to go back down there, because you know all those people that lived down there, you know that they lived in this kind of house, you know all kinds of stories that happened there, but now, it's like they never existed." Some said that they would have preferred to stay down in the old townsite, but knew they would not be able to deal with the sense of abandonment. "Once everybody else left, I didn't want to be down there with the snakes, the possums, the coons and the skunks" (Figure 4).

Part of what binds a community together is a sense of a shared past, and much of that feeling was wrapped up in the buildings and landscapes of Old Pattonsburg. This blending of memories, history, and landscape is in many ways the essence of sense of place. Our interviewees stressed over and over the importance of the vanished landscape of the old town to their sense of self and their sense of Pattonsburg. "If those walls could talk — well, you sure wouldn't want folks to know all that they had seen."

Even if those walls still exist, however, having been moved to the new site, something is lost in the new setting; the tapestry of place has been unraveled. A certain mournfulness pervaded our conversations with many long-time residents. "All the old memories are gone now," said one woman.



Figure 4. Boarded up houses in old townsite.

“Well, not gone, but the place where they happened is. All those old stores, the old houses, the place where various parts of your life happened. So that nostalgia part of the town is gone. But it’s still Pattonsburg, we still have our community. Everybody still goes to the coffee shop — except now it’s up at the filling station.” Some in town are trying to preserve a sense of continuity with the old town. Historic Pattonsburg, Inc., a group of local history enthusiasts, took the long-abandoned train depot (from which the last train left in 1939), moved it to the new town, and is restoring it as a historical museum.

Many younger residents, however, do not have the same pangs of memory pulling at them. In fact, for people who have not spent their entire lives in Pattonsburg, the town they recall is, as likely as not, a town of run-down buildings, empty storefronts, and declining population. These tended to be the people who see the most exciting possibilities for the new town.

One distinctive understanding that we came to during our interviews was the power of memory in sustaining a sense of place, even after the reality of that place has changed. When long-time residents recalled the town before the flood, what they described was almost never the town that was destroyed in 1993. Old Pattonsburg — with a vibrant downtown at the heart of a community that pulsed with life as people left the double-feature at the theater — was long gone well before that. As one of our interviewees admitted, “what I miss most about Pattonsburg was already gone when the flood came. .

. . In 1939, you know, it was a really busy place, you couldn’t get down the streets on a Saturday night. There was a movie theater, three grocery stores, and a place for entertainment; we had two railroads, and three or four taverns.”

What kept this Old Pattonsburg alive were the buildings themselves. Place — and the distinctive landscapes that make it up — can serve as powerful triggers. Spurred by the sight of an old house, an abandoned business, or a tree, memories can come flooding in, and the vanished town is, in a sense, reborn. The Grand River washed away these mnemonic hooks on which the memories of Old Pattonsburg hung; the places and spaces in which the memories of past decades had taken shape. With those places gone, or altered beyond recognition, memories will fade much more rapidly. And so too will the sense of place of Old Pattonsburg, for sense of place is a fragile, ever-shifting idea, one that can be destroyed or changed irrevocably by disaster. With time, of course, new Pattonsburg will achieve the same depth of memory and place attachment as old Pattonsburg. Today, however, it is a blank slate.

ENDNOTES

1. While a whole school of research into sense of place has evolved (in non-geography fields) that uses quantitative scales to assess the strength of sense of place and the factors that affect it (see, e.g., Nanzer, 2004; Stedman, 2003, and, for a Pattonsburg-specific example, Fannon, 1997), the depiction of sense of place that emerges from these studies is quite sterile, and does little justice to the topic’s complexity. Fannon deals with sense of place in Pattonsburg, but through her analysis, we get little sense of how this sense of place has changed, and what impacts the move has had on residents’ sense of place.

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