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OUT OF THE FOLD.

"Oh, dreadful! They dwell in peace and harmony, and have no church scandals.  
They must be wiped out."

VOLUME XXVIII, NUMBER 2, FALL 1993



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY  
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES  
COURIER

VOLUME XXVIII

NUMBER TWO

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ON THE COVER: This cartoon, by Joseph Keppler, appeared on the cover of the 26 February 1879 issue of *Puck*, America's first purely comic weekly paper.

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# Foreword

WHEN IN 1962, I first visited the rare book collection of the Syracuse University Library to begin researching the history of the Oneida Community, I explored the foundation of what is now a distinguished and growing body of material related to America's most complex communal venture. That foundation had been laid when Lester G. Wells, then curator, acquired a full run of the Community periodicals and a substantial body of pamphlets. The "O. C. Collection" as outlined by Wells in his 1961 bibliography\* provided me with enough data to grasp the details of Community life reported in their own periodicals. Since then many researchers have journeyed to Syracuse to mine those periodicals and pamphlets (in 1973 they were made available on microfilm to other libraries), and I am sure that scholars will continue to explore the primary sources gathered by Mark Weimer and opened in 1993.

There has never been a shortage of interpretations of the Community, and the essays in this volume reflect the growing sophistication of writers about Oneida. That was not always the case. For some earlier commentators the Community's leader, John Humphrey Noyes, was either saint or satyr; and the Community itself either on the flying edge of the future or regressing into another century. The approaches taken in these essays stand on a body of source material grown richer over the years; on scholarly work that has treated Noyes seriously and has regarded the Community within a wider pattern of social reform and a narrower one of personal development; and on a continuing debate in scholarly circles about the meaning and import of the Oneida Community.

Michael Barkun was among the first scholars to focus on the millennialist thought of Noyes and the impact of a "Last Days" theology on the membership. By placing Oneida within the Millerite context, he has been able to draw attention to the importance of

\*Lester G. Wells, comp., *The Oneida Community Collection in the Syracuse University Library* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Library, 1961).



millennialist notions not only for the Oneida Community but for other utopian communities, past and present. Both Louis Kern and Lawrence Foster have, in their distinctive ways, forced students to look closely at the intellectual character of Noyes's theology and social theory. John Humphrey Noyes thought of himself as a serious thinker, and he pondered the meaning of sexuality in closely reasoned pamphlets and "Home Talks" to the society. His views on "complex marriage" emanated from a theology shaped by a century of debate over the meaning of "perfection", by a society struggling to define its own boundaries and to reach consensus about the meaning of community and individualism. Oneida—for Barkun, Kern, and Foster—was part of a larger social and intellectual struggle, and there is still much to be learned from it today.

Yet Oneida was not just an abstract idea, as both Janet White and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell amply demonstrate; it was a growing and contradictory community. For all their talk about equality and freedom between the sexes, the members maintained some traditional domestic routines and barely reshaped the work agenda. How men and women related to one another was at the core of the Oneida experiment. Klee-Hartzell's close probing of work assignments and attitudes is part of a "gendering" process that measures social rhetoric against reality. White has been drawn to the architecture of Community life and finds that the building plan at Oneida, developed under Erastus Hamilton's hands and John Humphrey Noyes's eyes, closely resembles the plan of a medieval monastery, its spatial arrangements being dictated by religious and social logic.

Spencer Klaw's fascination with the Oneida story and his progress through Community documents that led to the publication in 1993 of *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community*, shows how powerful a magnet the Perfectionists have been for researchers who try to comprehend not only the Community but also its place in nineteenth-century American society. With the opening to the public of additional source material in 1993, Mark Weimer reminds us that the story and the personalities—both major and minor—will continue to intrigue scholars.

The Oneida Community has remained for me a constant source

of wonder and interest—wonder because it succeeded in such a bold manner for so long, and because it was able to transform itself on several occasions; interest because of its many facets: it played an important role in our culture’s intellectual history and an inspirational role in the history of social settlements. It contained both believers and skeptics; it was both a conservative system and a radical one. The contradictions it embraced continue to fascinate historians of religion, sociologists of small groups, and political scientists of democratic institutions. The writings drawn together here raise key questions, key issues. More will be written.

ROBERT FOGARTY  
Professor of History and  
Editor, *The Antioch Review*

# Preface

SEVENTY YEARS AGO—in reply to a letter from Hope Emily Allen that was full of trepidation about the handling of the Oneida Community’s legacy, especially by one Mrs. Smith—George Bernard Shaw wrote:

I agree with you that only a symposium could do justice to the Oneida Creek Community’s history: but the difficulty seems to be that the witnesses wont sympose. This being so, there is nothing for it but to let Mrs. Smith tell her history and provoke retorts, so that we shall get the symposium in different covers instead of in one book.<sup>1</sup>

Hope Allen, a respected medievalist, was born in the Mansion House a few years after the breakup of the Oneida Community. She became the Community’s archivist after her return as an adult to Oneida. Shaw’s keen interest in the Oneida Community was most fully articulated in his essay “The Perfectionist Experiment at Oneida Creek”, which appeared as part of “The Revolutionist Handbook” appended to *Man and Superman* (1903).

Neither Shaw nor Allen lived to see the first Oneida Community symposium, organized in 1984 by Hope Allen’s grandniece, Sister Prudence Allen, R.S.M., and entitled “The Oneida Community: What Are Its Lessons for Today?”<sup>2</sup> Nine years later, on 3–4 April 1993, a fuller symposium such as that envisioned by both Shaw and Allen took place as “family” members or descendants of the original Community, Mansion House residents, friends and neighbors, and committed scholars gathered in the Big Hall of the Oneida Community Mansion House to share experiences, memories, and scholarship.

1. The full text of the extant Hope Emily Allen–George Bernard Shaw correspondence is published here in “From the Collections”.

2. An “Evening Dialogue” presented on 24 May 1984 in Washington, D.C., under the auspices of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Smithsonian Institution.



The 1993 meeting, organized by Mansion House Director Richard Kathmann and funded, in part, by the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, was a celebration not only of the Community's history but of its surviving archives and, perhaps most significantly, the acceptance by this generation of Community descendants of their ancestors' unique vision and experience.

The connection between the Oneida Community and Syracuse University began in 1879 when the University hosted a convention of clergy whose stated goal was the complete eradication of the Community (see *Puck* cartoon on the cover). With that beginning, relations could only improve, and over the past forty years they have done just that.

In 1983 the Oneida Community descendants who were entrusted with the Community's historical records transferred them to the Syracuse University Library to ensure both their preservation and their future accessibility to scholars and "family" members.

The Syracuse University Library now holds the largest collection of Oneida Community records in existence. Gathered together by my predecessors, especially Lester G. Wells and Jack Ericson, and augmented by the remarkable manuscript material received in 1983, the Oneida Community Collection contains every surviving book, newspaper, pamphlet, and example of job-printing. In addition, the George Wallingford Noyes Papers contain more than 2000 pages of typed transcripts of manuscripts that were intentionally destroyed in the 1940s by Community descendants who feared that public knowledge of the Community's history might hurt the image of the silver company. Photographs, diaries, business records, letters, sketchbooks, and stenographic reports of meetings and talks give us a vivid picture of life in the Community that is far richer than the extensive yet mostly secondary sources that had been available to scholars before 1983. Over many years the Library has provided access to the Oneida Collection not only in the reading room of the Department of Special Collections but also through microfilm and other technologies, including electronic transmission: scholars around the world can now retrieve selected digital images through the Internet.

Furthermore, Syracuse University Press has published and con-

tinues to make available critically important works relating to the history of the Oneida Community. Given this close relationship with the University, it is appropriate that selected papers from the 1993 Oneida Community Seminar appear now for the first time in this issue of the *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*.

In 1924 Shaw was disappointed that the symposium would come out “in different covers instead of in one book”. Yet many books have been and will be written, because the Oneida Community raised fundamental and universal questions about humanity in relation to love and to work and to God. Those who live in the Mansion House, visit the museum, and study the archives continue to ponder these questions. The papers gathered here will, I feel, prompt further investigations, fascinations, and celebrations of the Oneida Community. This is not *the* symposium, but rather a new chapter in an evolving and enlarging multivolume study made possible because finally, in our time, the witnesses *will* sympose!

MARK F. WEIMER  
Curator of Special Collections,  
Syracuse University Library, and  
Guest Editor, *Syracuse University  
Library Associates Courier*

Note: The editors would like to thank Gail Doering, Curator of the Oneida Community Mansion House, for her help in selecting and providing background information about the photographs in this issue.

# John Humphrey Noyes and Millennialism

BY MICHAEL BARKUN

WHEN JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES was twenty, he was obsessed with knowing the nature and timing of the Last Days. As he recalled later, “My heart was fixed on the Millennium, and I was resolved to live or die for it”.<sup>1</sup> His fascination with the end of history was neither novel for his own time nor for ours—indeed, the recent events at the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Texas, suggest that we are in the throes of a period of millenarian fervor every bit as intense as that of the 1830s and ’40s. Although we can see Noyes as representative, gripped like many of his age-mates with apocalyptic dreams, in his case the dreams were refracted through a quite untypical psyche.

Two psychological crises that Noyes endured in the mid-1830s turned his fashionable millenarian expectations into something very much his own. Noyes was concerned with conventional religious themes: the Second Coming of Christ, a harmonious millennial kingdom ruled over by Christ and his saints, and the abolition of human sinfulness. But for Noyes these ideas were embedded in a series of distinctly paranormal experiences that occurred during 1834 and ’35—episodes of delirium, divine voices, and startlingly dramatic visions—which would probably be referred to in contemporary language as altered states of consciousness. These experiences took place before the formation of either the Oneida or Putney communities, but nonetheless left their mark on the later Noyes.

The first breakdown came in 1834. After a period of depression, Noyes had a visionary experience on 20 February—subsequently referred to as the “High Tide of the Spirit”—after which came yet another extraordinary visitation when, he later recalled, “On my

1. John Humphrey Noyes, *Confessions of John H. Noyes. Part I. Confession of Religious Experience: Including a History of Modern Perfectionism* (Oneida Reserve: Leonard and Co., Printers, 1849), 2.



bed that night, I received the baptism which I desired and expected. Three times in quick succession a stream of eternal love gushed through my heart and rolled back again to its source.”<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately for Noyes, this period of exaltation was quickly followed by a complete breakdown over a period of three weeks that spring—the so-called “New York experience” about which he later wrote at great and vivid length. He described his restless nocturnal wanderings, his inability to sleep, and his hallucinations.<sup>3</sup> His letters of the period display a fractured syntax totally out of character for this fluent author.

Noyes emerged from these lost weeks only to suffer what appears to have been another breakdown exactly a year later, when he turned up at his sister Joanna’s home in New Haven looking dreadful and making little sense.<sup>4</sup>

There were ample witnesses to Noyes’s problems, particularly during the extended sojourn in New York, and it did not take long for his family to begin their own investigation. His brother Horatio, who tried to be optimistic, wrote to his sister, “Had I trusted to stories [I] should have believed him a downright madman”, but he concluded, “[I] believe him still to possess his right mind”.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, by the time Horatio saw him, John was in New Haven and presumably more coherent. Joanna heard the New York stories and concluded, “We have reason to suppose . . . that he has been deranged”. She saw him in New Haven after the second breakdown in 1835, and wrote that “he seems rational now”, but she thought him “deranged on the subject of religion”. She wrote the family that “he would not reason at all, but denounced every-

2. J. H. Noyes, *Confessions*, 18.

3. *Ibid.*, 38.

4. This is a particularly obscure episode, for which the only testimony is a letter of his sister Joanna. The original correspondence, like many other letters by and about Noyes, was destroyed, but a typescript copy remains among the George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library.

5. Horatio Noyes to Mary Noyes, 17 June 1834, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.



John Humphrey Noyes in his late twenties. This earliest known image of Noyes is from a badly scratched daguerreotype.

thing and everybody. He looked haggard and care-worn, and I felt positive after he left that he was deranged.”<sup>6</sup>

So apparently did the people of Putney, where Noyes went for rest and renewal. He was well enough by then to retain a sense of humor about his scandalous reputation: “Rumors of my fantastic

6. Joanna Noyes Hayes to her family, 23 June 1835, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

performances in New York had preceded me”, he wrote Horatio. Neighbors crossed the street to avoid having to confront him. “They seem to have entered a combination to avoid conversation with me. . . . I am at present living under an embargo”.<sup>7</sup>

Noyes’s psychological problems were not simply regarded as idiosyncratic, personal travails. They were seen by him and by those around him in terms of two larger factors: the first was the long-standing belief that excessive religious zeal produced insanity. The belief in a link between insanity and “enthusiasms” went back at least as far as the seventeenth century and was far from dead in Noyes’s own time. Indeed, as late as the mid-1860s, we find a writer in the *American Journal of Insanity* asking, “In those whirlwinds of passion and frenzied excitement which have too often gotten up under the sacred name of religion, is there no danger to the timid, the nervous, the sensitive, and especially to those who are hereditarily and constitutionally predisposed to mental derangement?”<sup>8</sup> Noyes, as we shall see, believed there was such a danger, and later in life was anxious to show that, although he seemed to be insane, his breakdowns were only superficially pathological. This distinction was critical, for aberrant behavior in the religiously committed was usually blamed on the intensity of an individual’s spiritual excitation.

The other factor was the movement known as Millerism. The Millerite movement—named after the itinerant lay preacher William Miller—had congealed around Miller’s belief that Bible prophecy, correctly read, pointed to the occurrence of the Second Coming sometime between 21 March 1843 and 21 March 1844. No one knows how many Millerites there ultimately were. Miller himself estimated 50,000 committed adherents. What is clear is that the movement swept New York and New England in the early 1840s and cut an especially wide swath through the abolitionist and reform circles in which Noyes moved. The twenty-first of March

7. John Humphrey Noyes to Horatio Noyes, 2 July 1834, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

8. “Twenty-first Annual Report of the Managers of New York State Lunatic Asylum, for the year 1863”, *American Journal of Insanity* 21 (1864): 250–51.



1844 passed, of course, without incident, but most Millerites—undeterred—rallied 'round a new date, 22 October 1844. When prophecy failed a second time, in what came to be known as the “Great Disappointment”, the movement collapsed—although stalwarts within it later became the nucleus of Seventh Day Adventism, from which, by a series of schisms, the Branch Davidians in Waco eventually came.

Millerism confronted Noyes with three distinct problems. In the first place, the Millerites were the objects of much ridicule in the popular press (“mad” millenarians made excellent copy in the first great newspaper circulation wars of the early 1840s). Yet Noyes himself had had religious visions the content of which was like that of Millerism, and he feared being similarly stigmatized. Second, the Millerites were competing for Noyes’s small band of followers, several of whom left the Putney Community to follow Miller’s standard. Finally, the sensational character of Millerite predictions strengthened the old association between millenarian religion and madness. In light of the psychological tumult Noyes had experienced in the 1830s, any link between him and Millerism inevitably raised questions about his own sanity.

The Millerites’ preoccupation with the date of the Second Coming was an issue that Noyes had been concerned with for a full two decades before Millerism. By 1833 he had resolved the question of the Second Coming to his own satisfaction by deciding that Jesus had returned and appeared to the apostles in the year A.D. 70 at the time of the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. As he put it in an 1840 letter: “[If] an angel from heaven, bearing the seal of ten thousand miracles, should establish a religion, which should fail to recognize the truth which blazes on the whole front of the New Testament, that Jesus Christ came the second time at the destruction of Jerusalem, I would call him an impostor”.<sup>9</sup> This was not merely rhetorical overkill on Noyes’s part. In effect, just such an angel had already appeared to him, during the episodes of the 1830s described earlier.

9. John Humphrey Noyes to Loren Hollister, 7 March 1840, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

Noyes had in fact “anticipated” Millerism by almost a decade through visionary experiences of an imminent Second Coming. During the 1834 breakdown, Noyes was preoccupied with apocalyptic imagery and Adventist expectations. At this time his belief that the Second Coming had already occurred in A.D. 70 was suddenly challenged by powerful visionary experiences that at least temporarily convinced him that the Second Coming was just around the corner. In a breathless letter to his mother in the spring of 1834 he wrote:

It is like the time when Jerusalem was approaching its predicted destruction. Wars and rumors of wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes, signs in the sun, moon and stars, universal commotion and universal expectation seem to characterize the aspect of the moral world. Amidst it all for me, I have no fears. Do your hearts fail? [I] tell you another coming of the Son of Man is at hand.<sup>10</sup>

When Noyes wrote later about this period, in the *Confessions* of 1849, he acknowledged that during the “New York experience”, “I received a baptism of that spirit which has since manifested itself extensively in the form of Millerism”. Not once but several times during those three weeks in New York a spirit came upon him that “produced an irresistible impression that this manifestation [a physical Second Coming] was about to take place”.<sup>11</sup>

Even stranger was his sister Joanna’s report that during the second breakdown, in 1835, John began to talk—in her words—“about his suffering for the world, and that he is immortal . . .”<sup>12</sup> That he briefly believed the Second Coming was imminent is clear from his own testimony. Did he also come to identify himself with Christ and see himself as the vehicle of a Millerite-style Second Ad-

10. John Humphrey Noyes to his mother. Although the typescript date is “May 1835”, the style, contents, and surrounding material argue strongly for a date of May or June 1834. George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

11. J. H. Noyes, *Confessions*, 39.

12. Joanna Noyes Hayes to her family, 23 June 1835, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

vent? We can never know, for the evidence concerning the 1835 breakdown is too fragmentary.

Millerism itself produced a rich body of folklore, much of it without foundation. Millerites were said to have sold off their property in expectation of the great day; to have donned white “ascension robes”; to have stood on hills and rooftops waiting to be lifted to Jerusalem; and, finally, to have gone mad when Jesus failed to arrive. Nevertheless, Noyes regarded Millerism with the utmost seriousness. During its heyday, he lost more than a third of the members of the fragile Putney Community, and we know that some left for Millerism. More to the point, the folklore of Millerite madness raised new questions about the psychological consequences of Noyes’s own religiosity.<sup>13</sup>

Noyes’s response was twofold. First, he “repackaged” the events of 1834–35. He was not a madman. Rather, he was a “spiritual voyager”, as he put it, an explorer of inner domains, who took the risks of madness in order to gain precious religious insights. He went to the edge of sanity so that he could bring back truths that more timid souls were afraid to seek. Second, in the *Confessions*, he refined the concept of insanity by distinguishing genuine insanity from behavior that mimics insanity. The former required two conditions, “an external spiritual cause”, and a “morbid state of the brain to which that cause may attach itself”. That, he said, was not his situation at all, for “my mind was sound”. Instead, he was like a hypnotic subject, whose healthy brain was “exposed to disturbing influences” that made him appear insane to others, but “I had the objective, but not the subjective condition of insanity”.<sup>14</sup>

We may speculate that Noyes’s preoccupation with a structured, ordered community was in reaction against the turbulence in his youth. With himself as paterfamilias, the Oneida extended family, articulated by and controlled through complex marriage, ascending

13. The fullest discussion of Millerism and insanity appears in Ronald L. Numbers and Janet S. Numbers, “Millerism and Madness: A Study of ‘Religious Insanity’ in Nineteenth-Century America”, in Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 92–118.

14. J. H. Noyes, *Confessions*, 38–39.

and descending fellowship, and mutual criticism, were all bulwarks against the dangers of undisciplined spirituality.<sup>15</sup>

The recent events in Waco remind us of how volatile millenarian beliefs can be, especially when they are accompanied by communal withdrawal from the larger society. Why, then, did Noyes and Oneida escape these dangers? As Carol Weisbrod's work demonstrates, the relationship between the Community and the larger society was conflict-prone, but it was neither violent nor confrontational.<sup>16</sup>

Many of the differences, of course, are differences between the America of the mid-nineteenth century and the America of the late twentieth century. But there are other, more concrete factors. For example, if the Noyes of 1834–35 had been at the community's helm, its course might have been vastly different. The Noyes of those years seems closer to David Koresh—or at least to what we know thus far about Koresh—than the Noyes of the Oneida years. By the late 1840s, the oscillations between exultation and despair, the altered states of consciousness, and the religious megalomania had passed.

As different as the Branch Davidians<sup>17</sup> in Waco are from the communitarians at Oneida, they are linked by the thread of antinomianism, the belief that the age during which humanity needed to subordinate itself to divine law has ended and that such restraints as human conduct still required would come directly from God.

Antinomianism was implicit in Noyes's Perfectionism, with its doctrine of sinlessness, and in the institution of complex marriage, which made the forbidden permitted. Movements like Oneida and

15. In "complex marriage", all the men and women were considered to be married to each other, and the children of any birth parents were considered to be children of the entire "family" thus created. In "ascending and descending fellowship", the more spiritually advanced members were paired with those less spiritually advanced. For the latter, the fellowship was ascending; for the former it was descending. During "mutual criticism" sessions, members gathered to point out the spiritual failings of one individual and to give advice.

16. Carol Weisbrod, *Boundaries of Utopia* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

17. For a more extended discussion of the Branch Davidian case, see my "Reflections after Waco: Millennialists and the State", *The Christian Century* 110 (2–9 June 1993): 596–600.



The Oneida Perfectionists are gathered on the lawn of the Mansion House, ca. 1863. John Humphrey Noyes is in the right foreground.



the Branch Davidians are drawn towards antinomianism for two reasons: first, antinomianism is a hallmark of genuine charismatic leadership of the kind that—albeit in very different ways—John Humphrey Noyes and David Koresh both exemplify. The gifts that followers recognize in the charismatic leader give him or her an authority that transcends custom, convention, or law. What passes for law under charismatic rule is whatever the leader pronounces. Thus, David Koresh, when asked whether he was above the law, responded, “I am the law”—a response which to him, as to earlier charismatic figures, must have seemed not arrogant but simply self-evident. In much the same way, Noyes’s pronouncements overruled all other appeals.

Second, antinomianism exercises strong attractions over groups that believe themselves to be already living in the millennial age. They are apt to view law as appropriate to an unredeemed time, when sin and weakness required external controls. The millennium, by contrast, needs no distinction between the virtuous and the sinful, the permitted and the forbidden; for in such a time, the saintly by definition can only act sinlessly. To do what society forbids—particularly in areas hedged about by strong taboos, such as sexuality—is both to burn one’s bridges to the corrupt world outside, and to acknowledge in one’s very flesh that the rule of the saints has come.

The dangers of antinomianism are, of course, clear: the openings it offers to uncontrolled passion and violence. Noyes’s organizational genius lay in his ability to build millennial antinomianism into the daily life of Oneida while instituting various procedures and forbearances that kept destructive energies in check, although sometimes just barely. It is tempting to speculate that Noyes’s virtuosity in introducing and then largely controlling antinomianism was a product of his own early experiences with unrestrained millennialism and the personal disorganization it had caused.

We need look no further than the confrontation outside Waco to see the dangers of antinomianism unleashed among millenarians living communally. In failing to appreciate these dangers, which Noyes knew so well, the religious entrepreneur can all too easily

release energies that neither he nor his followers can control. The vivid spiritual crises of Noyes's young manhood left him acutely aware of the need to balance expectations of dramatic future change with social structures that could contain and channel anarchic religious impulses. The Oneida Community, with its complex apparatus of social controls, constituted both a partially realized millennium in miniature—a circumscribed realm of earthly harmony—and a structure that could prevent outbursts of destabilizing millenarian fervor.

# Building Perfection: The Relationship between Physical and Social Structures of the Oneida Community

BY JANET WHITE

ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY has traditionally focused on formal aesthetics and the monuments of a "high culture". This approach accedes no place in the canon to the buildings of the Oneida Community. While they tend to be nicely sited, spacious, and constructed of handsome materials, they are not architectural masterpieces. The main complex combines elements from a jumble of styles; it has awkward joints where the products of three different building campaigns were unskillfully linked; and its towers are either stubby and ungraceful or capped by overwrought roofs (fig. 1).

It is, however, possible to approach the study of architectural history from another direction. One can focus not on the building as objet d'art, but on the interaction between built form and the society that produced and inhabited it. This approach asserts that buildings are interesting (though perhaps in differing degrees) because the built form a society creates for itself both reflects and influences the beliefs and behaviors of that society. Study of *any* building of a particular culture therefore holds out the possibility of illuminating, affirming, or challenging our perception of that culture.

This relationship between builder and built is most immediate when both the social structure and the physical environment are self-conscious creations of the same individuals, as is the case with the utopian settlement created by the Perfectionists at Oneida.<sup>1</sup>

1. This article assumes a basic familiarity with the beliefs and practices of Perfectionism. For readers not familiar with the sect, I offer the following brief summary: John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida Community, preached that human beings could reach spiritual perfection on earth, that he himself was

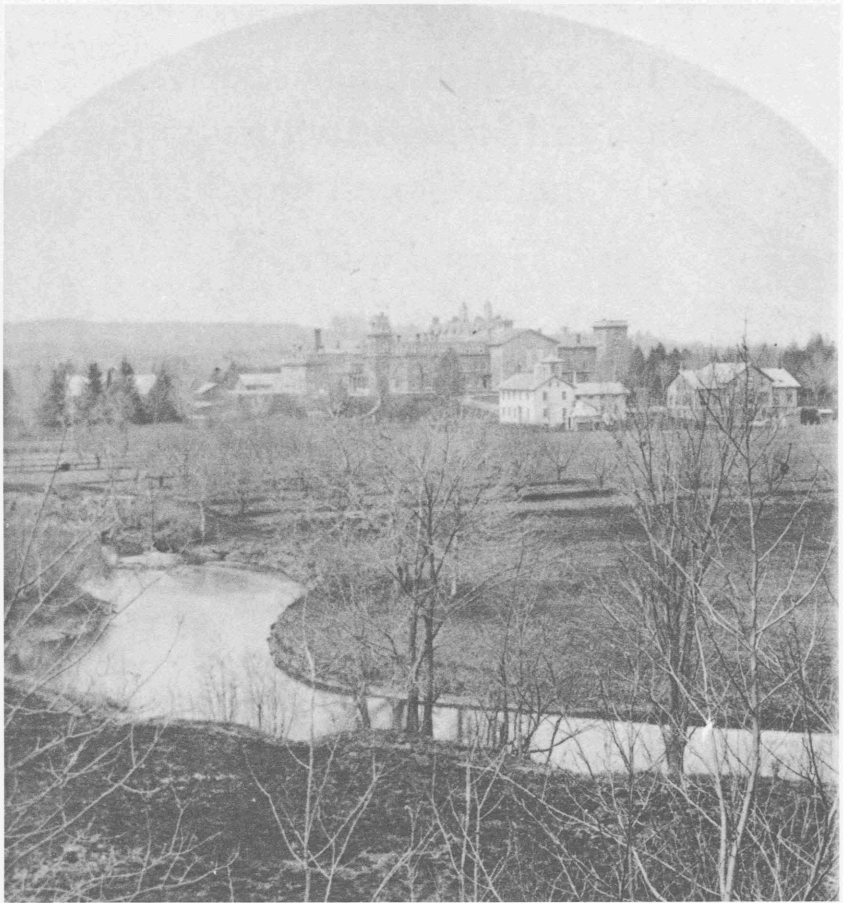


Fig. 1. View of the Oneida Community domain from across Oneida Creek, ca. 1878.

The Perfectionists were engaged in both constructing a new social order and devising “plans for a building which shall be in all re-

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free from sin, and that by following him others could ascend to the same level. Achieving this perfection required a return to the practices of the first Christians. As interpreted by Noyes, this meant living in Bible Communism, working communally, and holding all property in common. His doctrine of “complex marriage” extended this communal principle to marital and parental relationships: all Perfectionist men and women considered themselves to be married to each other, and children of any birth parents were considered to be children of the entire “family” thus created.

spects adapted to a Community like ours”.<sup>2</sup> By reconstructing the building history of the Community and examining it alongside the social history, it is possible not only to “read” the evidence of one to illuminate the other, but also to discover ways in which the two influenced each other.

Moreover, by comparing the social environments of one micro-society, the Perfectionists, to those of another micro-society based in the same western European culture, a cloistered community of Cistercian monks, we can begin to explore a larger question: whether the presence of particular characteristics in a social structure can be causally linked to the presence of particular types of spaces.

When we begin reconstructing the history of Oneida’s physical environment, we find that its form evolved significantly from 1848 to 1881, the years the Community existed as a Perfectionist commune. Its inhabitants built, demolished, remodeled, and rebuilt with extraordinary frequency. This, as Dolores Hayden suggests, is in keeping with the tenets of Perfectionism: they extended their belief in the perfectibility of the individual to the built environment.<sup>3</sup>

Within this framework of almost continual change, four major building campaigns can be distinguished. Each accompanied a significant stage in the Community’s social development. First, between 1848, when the Perfectionists relocated their main settlement from Putney, Vermont, to Oneida, New York, and 1853, when the first campaign ended, construction was undertaken primarily to meet the basic needs of the newly founded settlement. Second, between 1860 and 1864, their financial status having improved, they focused on the accommodation of “complex marriage”. Third, during 1869–70, they replaced and expanded space

2. “Community Architecture”, *The Circular* (9 November 1853), 166.

3. Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism 1790–1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), 197. This is still the only comprehensive treatment of architecture and community in American utopian settlements. Though I do not always agree with her conclusions, I am much indebted to Hayden for first suggesting the connections between architecture and social structure at Oneida.

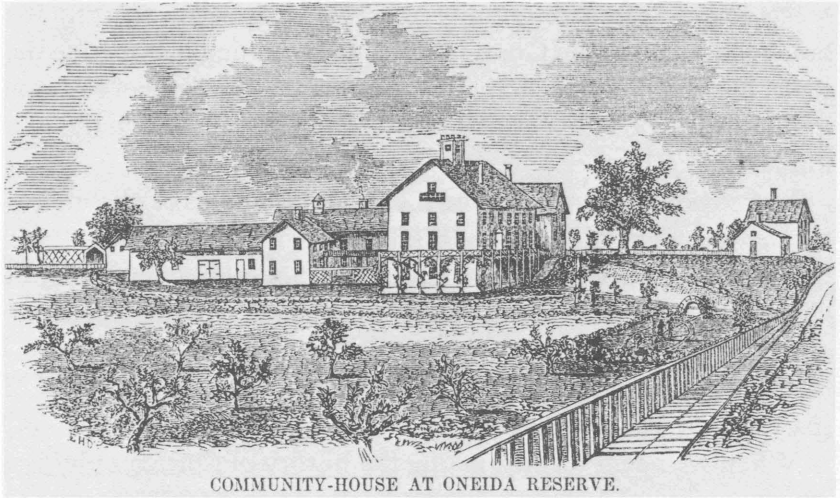


Fig. 2. Woodcut of the Old Mansion House, based on a sketch by Charlotte Noyes Miller. The “White House”, one of the pre-existing structures purchased with the property, is at the far right. The southeast corner of the first Children’s House can be seen behind the main block of the Mansion.

allocated to children in anticipation of the stirpiculture experiment.<sup>4</sup> During the final campaign, 1877–78, they expanded the facilities to relieve overcrowding when the internal tensions that would eventually destroy the Community were beginning to be felt. This article will deal with only the first two campaigns, and with only one product of each: the Old Mansion House, a wood frame structure built in 1848, belongs to the first campaign; the first block of the New Mansion House, built in 1861–62, belongs to the second.

In 1848 John Humphrey Noyes moved his base of operations from Vermont to a site on the Oneida Creek in upstate New York. A small group of his followers already lived there, operating a farm and a sawmill. Others relocated to join him, living at first under very crowded conditions in the few pre-existing structures on the

4. The stirpiculture program was an attempt to produce spiritually superior beings by selective breeding. Spiritually “ascended” men and women were encouraged to produce offspring, in pairings approved and sometimes proposed by a central committee.

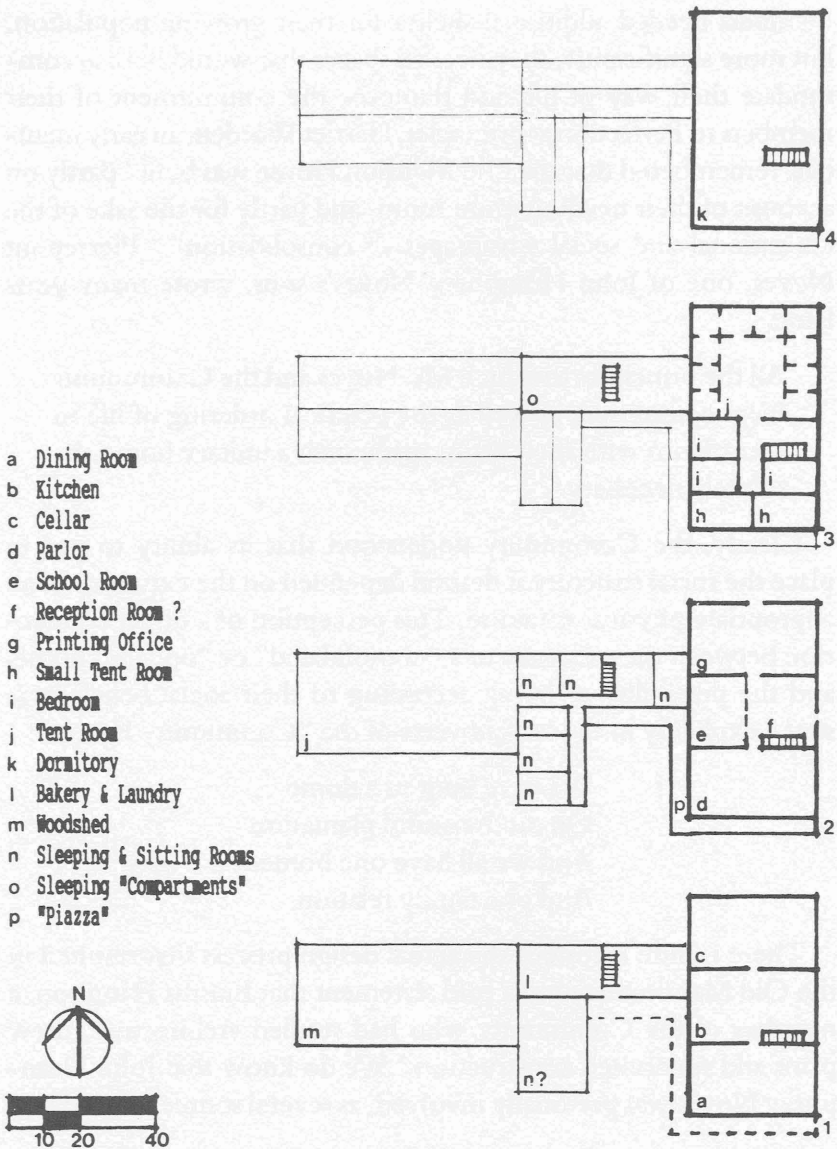


Fig. 3. Plans of the Old Mansion House as reconstructed by the author.

property. Despite straitened financial circumstances, they immediately began building what came to be known as the Old Mansion House (figs. 2 and 3).

The motivation for constructing this building was threefold: the



members needed additional shelter for their growing population, but more significantly, they needed spaces that would both accommodate their way of life and reinforce the commitment of their members to Perfectionist principles. Harriet Worden, an early member, remembered that the Old Mansion House was built “partly on account of their needing more room, and partly for the sake of the educational and social advantages of consolidation”.<sup>5</sup> Pierrepont Noyes, one of John Humphrey Noyes’s sons, wrote many years later:

All the principles to which Mr. Noyes and the Communists were committed, as well as the practical ordering of life in accordance with their plans, made such a unitary home absolutely necessary.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the Community understood that its ability to put in place the social structure it desired depended on the existence of an appropriate physical structure. This perception of a direct connection between the existence of a “consolidated” or “unitary” home, and the possibility of living according to their social beliefs, was stated explicitly in the second verse of the “Community Hymn”:

We have built us a dome  
On our beautiful plantation  
And we all have one home  
And one family relation.

There is little record of the actual design process that resulted in the Old Mansion beyond a bald statement that Erastus Hamilton, a member of the Community who had studied architecture, drew plans and supervised construction.<sup>7</sup> We do know that John Humphrey Noyes was personally involved, as several sources record that

5. Harriet M. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories* [essays published in *The Circular* during 1871–72 (Utica, N.Y.: The Widtman Press, 1950), 7.]

6. Pierrepont Noyes, *My Father’s House: An Oneida Boyhood* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), 10.

7. George W. Noyes, second-generation Oneida family member, quoted in Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851–1876* (1970; reprint, Syracuse N.Y.: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1981), 13.



Fig. 4. A June 1863 photograph showing the New Mansion, the first Children's House, and the Old Mansion.

he and Hamilton together staked out the ground for the foundations. Hamilton was ostensibly the architect for many of the later buildings as well. However, the more detailed information available for the later campaigns suggests that he functioned primarily as a recorder, using his architectural training to convert the results of Community decisions into floor plans and elevations. Given the nature of the relationship between Noyes and his followers in these early years, it is very likely that Hamilton's role was largely a matter of producing what today would be called construction documents from an architectural program<sup>8</sup> determined by Noyes.

However it was developed, the plan of the two lower floors was straightforward, with both levels simply divided into thirds. On the lowest floor were a cellar built into the hillside, a kitchen, and a dining room. The second floor housed the printing office, school room, and meeting parlor. The *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association* also lists a reception room; possibly the school room was divided to create a reception area behind the door on the east fa-

8. In modern architecture, a *program* is the list of functions to be incorporated into the design and the approximate square footage assigned to each.

cade (figs. 3 and 4). The third floor was originally to have been divided into a number of double bedrooms, with the attic left undivided as a dormitory. A lack of money and the need to finish the building before winter set in led instead to the creation of the original, much celebrated “Tent Room”, in which a number of double sleeping compartments opening onto an open sitting area were created by hanging curtains on wires eight feet above the floor. As more members arrived, three wings were added; these housed primarily housekeeping facilities on the lower floors with sleeping space above.

The second-floor parlor space was the heart of the daily life of the Community, and of its spatial strategies for reinforcing desired beliefs and behaviors. The Community reasoned that a family spends its evenings together in a parlor; they defined themselves as a family; if they met in a parlor in the evening, it would make everyone feel more like a family; therefore, they needed a space large enough to hold the entire assembled membership. The space that made possible this evening ritual was actually called a parlor in the Old Mansion. In the New Mansion it came to be called “the Hall”, probably because it was so much larger than a single family parlor that the term could no longer support the exaggeration.

The parlor or hall thus became symbolic of the self-identification of the Perfectionists as one large family. Explicit statements to this effect abound in Community publications, such as the 1867 *Handbook*, which records that the members gather in the Hall “in the same manner that a family gathers around the hearth”,<sup>9</sup> and the 1871 version, which refers to the space as the “Family Hall”.<sup>10</sup> The meeting itself provided a crucial “social and educational advantage”, making it possible for all members of the Community to meet and participate in a shared spiritual and community life. The symbolic importance of the evening meeting and its role in melding Community members into one psychological unit is also frequently recognized in Community publications. One such article explained that the evening meeting called on the individual “to as-

9. *Handbooks of the Oneida Community 1867 & 1871 Bound with Mutual Criticism* (New York: AMS Press, 1976), 5.

10. *Handbook 1871*, 10.

sume his public or organic character”, to participate in a communal act that was “partly social, partly intellectual, partly industrial, and partly religious in character”.<sup>11</sup> The gathering was, in fact, a major component in the social glue that held the Community together. This function was so important from the very beginning that, at a time when some members were still sleeping in the shanties and the log cabin, when private space was severely limited, an entire third of a floor in the Old Mansion was devoted to the evening meeting “parlor”.

While the space given to the parlor reflected an internal objective, the printing office embodied the external objective to which John Humphrey Noyes devoted the majority of his time: conversion of the world to Perfectionism. Noyes and others of the Community produced a steady flow of newspapers, pamphlets, and books designed to spread the good word. Again, the amount of space allocated is a clue to priorities; the Printing Office occupied as many square feet as the parlor.

The plan of the Old Mansion House can also be “read” for evidence of the degree to which the Perfectionists’ professed commitment to Bible Communism and complex marriage was actually put into practice in the new settlement. Fully communal housekeeping was a reality. The single large kitchen and dining room in the original block, and the laundry with huge hot water boilers and a bakery with an eight-by-ten-foot brick oven in the wings, were obviously sized for collective use.

The physical evidence also makes it clear that with the completion of the Old Mansion, communal child raising was fully implemented. There was no space in the new structure for children to live with their birth parents. The written record tells us that when the adults moved into the Old Mansion, children and their designated attendants remained in the pre-existing structures till the next year. The physical record agrees; a separate communal dwelling, the first Children’s House, was erected in 1849.

Surprisingly, given that it was introduced among Noyes’s Putney followers before the relocation to Oneida, we do *not* see phys-

11. “Community Journal”, *The Circular* (10 February 1859), 11.

ical evidence suggesting that complex marriage was being practiced in 1848. There are no single bedrooms such as would later appear in the New Mansion House.<sup>12</sup> Although shared sleeping spaces would not necessarily make it impossible to implement complex marriage, the physical environment of 1848 gives no indication of its having been designed with the multiple interactions of complex marriage in mind.

The floor plan could easily have been reorganized to facilitate complex marriage by dividing the Tent Room and attic into smaller, single compartments. But despite a demonstrated willingness to remodel the Old Mansion to accommodate other changing needs,<sup>13</sup> there is no evidence that the sleeping accommodations were rearranged. The physical evidence, therefore, strongly suggests that full integration of complex marriage into the social environment was a considerably longer process than much of the written record implies.

By the time the New Mansion House was built in 1861–62, we *do* find the Community producing a physical environment conducive to the practice of complex marriage. Indeed, it is likely that part of the motivation for building the New Mansion derived from the fact that the social environment had evolved in this regard, and that the Community therefore no longer found comfortable the “fit” between itself and its physical surroundings.

Full implementation of complex marriage, was not, of course, the only motivation. There was sheer population pressure: *The Circular* had been discussing the need for more residential space since 1855, when the Community population had reached 170. Certainly the success of the Community’s industries after the mid-

12. Moreover, the double bedrooms and Tent Room compartments on the third floor are specifically described, both in the *First Annual Report* and in Harriet Worden’s later account, as being for “married pairs”. Unmarried females shared compartments in two smaller tent rooms, and “unmarried men and boys” slept in the attic dormitory. This use of the terms “married” and “unmarried” in an official publication also suggests that complex marriage was not yet a fully accepted part of the social environment.

13. See for example the extensive reorganization of the cooking and dining facilities described in “Community Culinary Department”, *The Circular* (13 September 1869), 206.

A Principal Entrance  
 B Wing  
 C Tower  
 D Second Entrance  
 e Tower Entrance

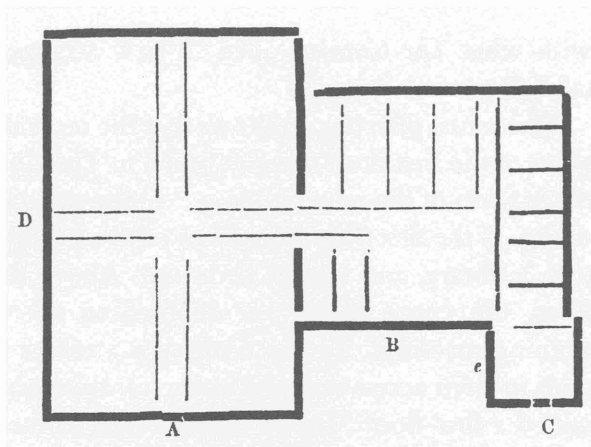


Fig. 5. Diagrammatic plan of the first floor of the New Mansion House, which appeared in an 1861 issue of *The Circular*.

1850s was a major factor. The new affluence made it financially possible not only to build a new home, but also to build it on a larger and grander scale (fig. 4).

We know a great deal more about the design process for the New Mansion House than we do for the Old. As early as 1856 the whole Community was involved in discussion of how to create what *The Circular* called “Community architecture—a style of building which shall be adapted to the character of our institution, and which shall represent in some degree the spirit by which we are actuated”.<sup>14</sup> Harriet Worden reported that the design of a New Mansion was hotly debated in the evening meetings. Many specific plans and diagrams were put forward, some of them “amusingly elaborate”.<sup>15</sup>

Some of these schemes were described in *The Circular*. They fall into two general types. One group proposed various sizes of octagonal or round buildings, all with a large domed central space ringed by rooms for sleeping and other uses. Another group proposed a plan like that of the Old Mansion, generally making it larger and

14. “Community Architecture”, *The Circular* (9 November 1856), 166.

15. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 105.

with what *The Circular* called “a new arrangement of inside details”.<sup>16</sup>

The actual plan (fig. 5) shows that the second group won. A diagram of the first floor was published in *The Circular* with a detailed description of the new building.<sup>17</sup> In the main block (designated A on fig. 5) the first floor housed an office, a reception room for visitors, a library, and a guest bedroom. Above these, on the second floor, the entire space was devoted to the two-story Hall for evening meetings. To the north was a tower forty feet high (C), with its own access stair and entry (e). Between them a wing contained a first-floor “family sitting room flanked on three sides by private apartments” (B). Above it was located a double-height sitting room of the same size flanked by two stories of private apartments, access to the third floor rooms being provided by a balcony that overlooked the second-floor sitting room.

After all the community-wide discussion that generated this plan, the only real “new arrangement of inside details” is the change from sleeping spaces shared by two or more individuals, to private bedrooms for all adults. The other changes were merely expansions to a more lavish scale of elements already present in the Old Mansion: a bigger meeting hall with an elaborately painted ceiling; two more tent room configurations, in which sleeping spaces open onto a sitting area; a suite of reception spaces; and a library instead of just a school room.

The only programmatic change—the introduction of individual private rooms—created an environment obviously more conducive to the smooth functioning of complex marriage. With the double bedrooms went the last remnants of dyadic marriage customs; individuals were now spatially free to conduct their sexual lives without inconvenience or embarrassment to others.

This switch to private rooms may also be indicative of a gradual realization that the occasional opportunity for individual privacy was a necessary safety valve in the intensely communal life of a Perfectionist settlement. In 1852 *The Circular* proclaimed:

16. “Community Architecture”, *The Circular* (9 November 1856), 166.

17. “An Oneida Journal”, *The Circular* (5 September 1861), 123.

It is our policy in everything, to favor and make attractive the common gathering place, rather than the private retreat. The balance of inducement should always be toward aggregation and not separation.<sup>18</sup>

By 1869, however, the tone had changed: while “it is not usual for individuals to make a sitting room of their private dormitories, still it would be perfectly proper for them to do so if they chose”.<sup>19</sup> The plan of the New Mansion suggests that by 1861 the Community had come to appreciate the need for privacy, and therefore included this policy modification in the program for its new physical environment.

To summarize, comparison of the plans of the two Mansions suggests that four significant changes occurred in the social environment between 1848 and 1861: the Community got bigger, it got richer, it fully accepted complex marriage, and it developed an awareness of the need for individual privacy in the context of communal life.

It seems clear that social and physical environment were related at Oneida—but what was the nature of the relationship? Did the physical and social environments exist in a relationship of mutual causality? Might not human microsocieties possessing similar social structures tend to develop similar architectural programs? Are there instances of parallel behavior in communities that have evolved similar physical environments? I have approached these questions by identifying a second physical environment—which contains many of the same elements found in Oneida’s architectural program—and then asking whether the microsocieties that inhabited the two environments also shared elements of social organization.<sup>20</sup>

Initially it may seem surprising to yoke a celibate microsociety with one in which members had multiple sexual partners; nevertheless, I have found that the architectural program for a monastery

18. “The Tent Room”, *The Circular* (25 April 1852), 94.

19. “The Upper Sitting Room”, *The Circular* (11 January 1869), 347.

20. This is not a cross-cultural argument; the working assumption is that the social structures of different cultures are inherently so different that this type of comparison would not be valid, though the possibility opens up another area of research.



of a Roman Catholic cloistered order strongly resembles that of the Oneida Community. Though individual monastery designs are affected by such factors as historical circumstances, location, ritual requirements of a particular order, and climate, the architectural program of Christian cloistered monasteries has been remarkably constant over time and geographic range. This generic program shares a remarkable number of elements with that of the Oneida Community.

The plan of the Cistercian Fountains Abbey in northern England illustrates this similarity. At its peak the population of the Abbey may have been twice that of Oneida at its highest point,<sup>21</sup> so although the amount of space allocated to each function is often larger at Fountains, the catalog of functions is similar. Despite the difference in size, I chose Fountains Abbey from among the many possible examples because it is located in a part of England where the climate is similar to that of upstate New York, because much of the original fabric of its buildings is still in place, and because the functional program of its rooms and spaces is well established.

The first task is to demonstrate that the plans of a typical monastery and of the Oneida Community do indeed contain many analogous program elements. A point-by-point comparison of the program and plan of the Mansion House complex after 1878 (figs. 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3) with those of Fountains Abbey (figs. 7.1 and 7.2) is presented in Table 1, which also serves as a key to the plans.<sup>22</sup>

Many of the shared elements, such as dining rooms, kitchens, sanitary facilities, and laundries, are common to most human housing arrangements and so not particularly relevant for our purposes.

21. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Fountains may have housed five to six hundred, while Oneida's highest count (in 1878 and including only the adults) was 309. The Fountains figure is from R. Gilyard-Beer, *Fountains Abbey* (London: HMSO, 1989), 9; the Oneida number is from Robertson, *Autobiography*, 23.

22. The plans shown in figs. 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3 are essentially the plans published by Hayden in *Seven American Utopias*. I've corrected them in some places. The plans shown in figs. 7.1 and 7.2 are from an untitled pamphlet on the Abbey published by English Heritage (the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission of England) for the National Trust in 1986 and reprinted in 1989.

However, the two plans also share a number of elements that are not merely concomitants of communal living.

Both plans include reception areas that create a threshold and serve as places for interaction with the world outside. Monasteries have a porter's lodge, guest parlors, and overnight accommodations. Oneida had the office where one of the older women waited to receive visitors, a reception parlor, and a guest room (respectively labelled I, J, and K on both figs. 6 and 7). While these elements are also common to the plan of a boarding school, as is the library (L), the boarding school derives directly from the medieval monastery and replicates specific aspects of its social order. We can therefore allow for correspondence in their physical environments in areas where their social purposes overlap.

Monks and cloistered nuns gathered (and still do) daily in a Chapter House to hear the Bible read, learn of changes in work assignments, and discuss the affairs of the community. The Perfectionists had their Hall, in which they did many of the same things (F). Fully vowed members of orders and Oneida adults were typically assigned private rooms or cells (M), while both religious novices and Oneida children slept in dormitories (N) under the surveillance of novice masters or mistresses, or Children's House attendants. The private spaces in both cases are small, plainly furnished, and undecorated. The collective environments are both more elaborately decorated and more generous in scale.

In both cases the accommodations of the leader are exceptional. The abbot or abbess had more space, often with more direct access to the outside, than did the rest of the community. The abbot's quarters at Fountains, a suite of several rooms with its own stair, are located on the second level, across the reredorter from the cells of the monks. It should be no surprise to learn that John Humphrey Noyes first occupied one of the three noticeably larger rooms located in the tower of the New Mansion, which had its own entrance and access stair, or that after the 1868 construction of the Children's House wing he moved to a second-floor suite covering more square feet than a communal sitting room, next to a stair leading directly to the new side entry (P).

Both the typical monastery and Oneida include an open space

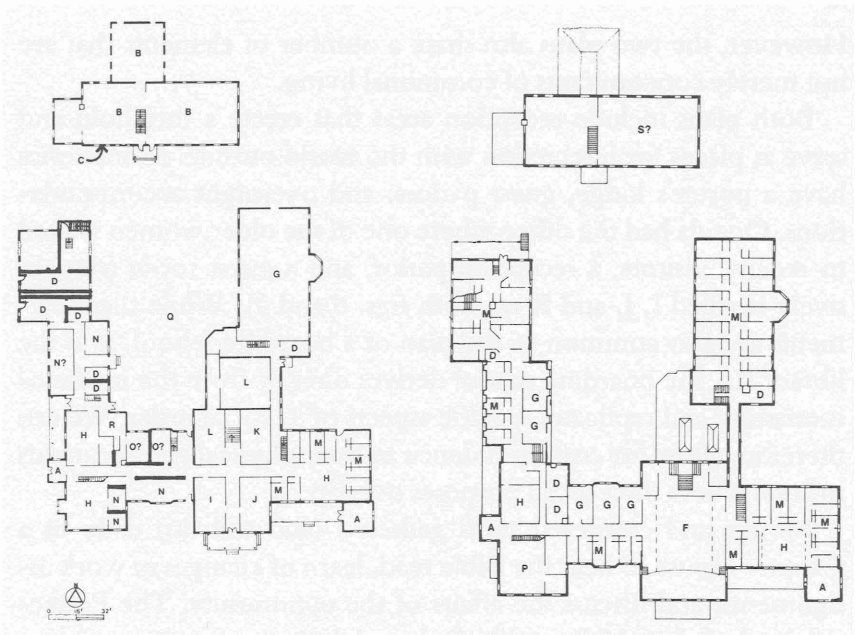


Fig. 6.1. First-floor plan of the Mansion House after 1878.

Fig. 6.2. Second-floor plan of the Mansion House after 1878.

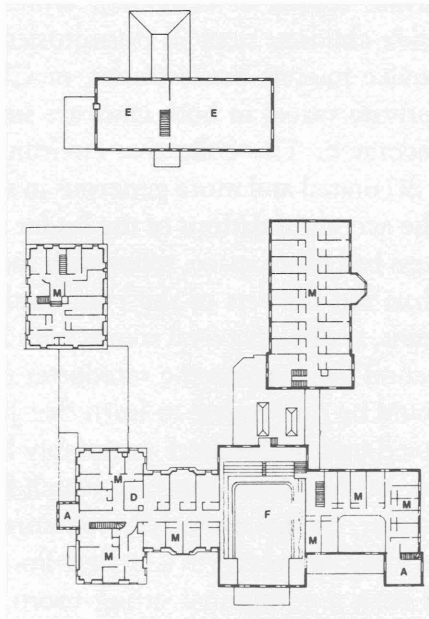


Fig. 6.3. Third-floor plan of the Mansion House after 1878.

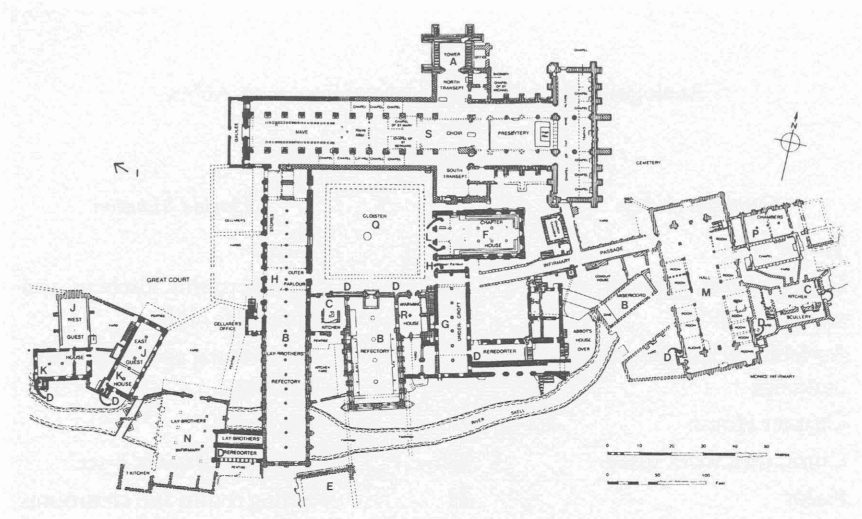


Fig. 7.1. First-floor plan of Fountains Abbey.

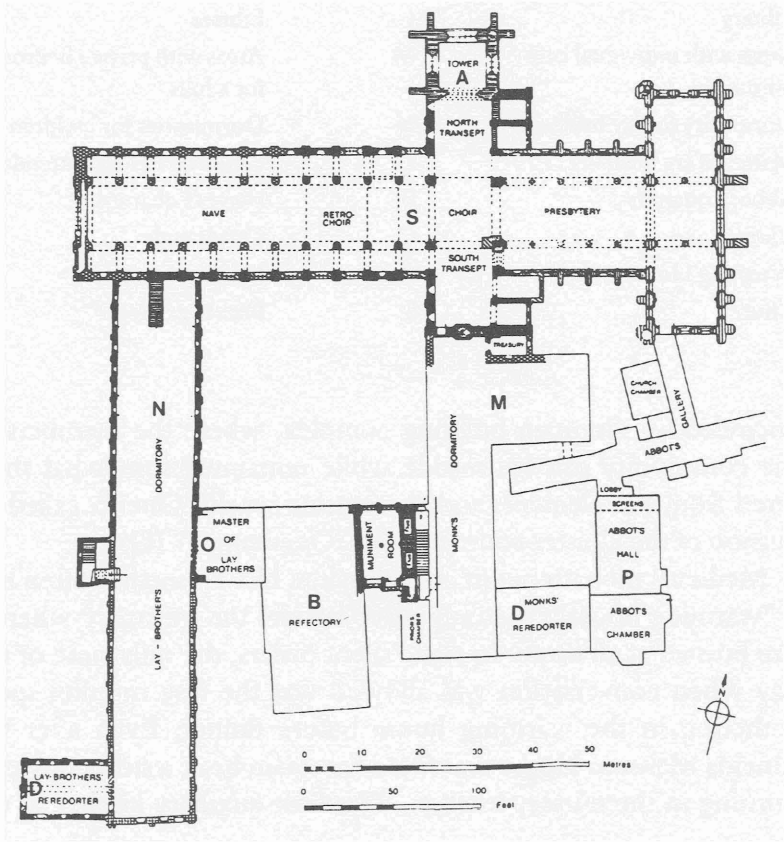


Fig. 7.2. Second-floor plan of Fountains Abbey.

Table 1  
 Analogous elements in the plans of Fountains Abbey  
 and of the  
 Oneida Mansion House complex

| <i>Fountains Abbey</i>                          | <i>Key</i> | <i>Oneida Mansion</i>                           |
|---|------------|---|
| Tower   | A          | Tower   |
| Dining rooms, kitchens, and sanitary facilities | B,C,D      | Dining rooms, kitchens, and sanitary facilities |
| Agricultural and industrial buildings           | E          | Agricultural and industrial buildings           |
| Chapter House                                   | F          | Big Hall  |
| Communal work space                             | G          | Communal work space                             |
| Parlor  | H          | Sitting rooms and classrooms                    |
| Gatehouse, guest parlors, and guest rooms       | I,J,K      | Office, reception parlor, and guest room        |
| Library   | L          | Library   |
| Areas with individual cells for monks           | M          | Areas with private bedrooms for adults          |
| Dormitory for lay brothers                      | N          | Dormitories for children                        |
| Master of lay brothers                          | O          | Children's House attendants                     |
| Abbot's quarters                                | P          | Noyes's quarters                                |
| Cloister  | Q          | Quadrangle                                      |
| Warming House                                   | R          | Nursery kitchen                                 |
| Church  | S          | Printing office                                 |

encircled by the main building complex, where the members of the community can be outside while remaining somewhat sheltered from the elements and the outside world. Oneida called its version of the cloister courtyard the “Quadrangle” (Q).

Medieval monasteries in cold climates, like Fountains, often had a “warming house”, the only place besides the infirmary where a fire burned at all times. In some silent orders, the only time of the day when conversation was allowed was the few minutes spent gathering in the warming house before dinner. Even after the Oneida Mansion House was fitted for steam heat, a stove was kept burning in the nursery kitchen. This little auxiliary kitchen at the

junction of the New Children's House and the adults' quarters was furnished with sofas and rockers, and was a favored place for conversation (R).

There is of course one element of the program of a monastery that is conspicuously missing at Oneida: the church. The Perfectionists set aside no space as consecrated or sacramental, just as they observed no holy day; Sunday was a day like any other. For the members of a cloistered order, the church is not only a ritual space, but also the place in which they do their most important public work. While a monk or cloistered nun has personal devotions and duties related to the ongoing operation of the House, his or her primary purpose is to pray for the well-being of the world. Perfectionists were also involved with their own spiritual development and with daily operations, but they too had a larger goal: to show the world the path to perfection by spreading the word in their publications. Might not the church be seen as a functional equivalent to the Oneida Printing Office (S)?

If one accepts that there is a high degree of congruence between the two architectural programs, the next step is to compare the social practices to see whether they too exhibit similarities. This does indeed turn out to be the case.

Fundamental to the social structure of both microsocieties is the discouragement of attachment between individuals in favor of attachment to the collective. In religion it is called "particular friendship"; at Oneida it was "special love". In both instances it was severely criticized. Mechanisms that worked to prevent it were found in both types of community, including rotation of work assignments, and rules governing individual social interactions.

Both built into the social system the modification of deviant behavior by means of group critique. Perfectionists judged to be in spiritual error were called to face a session of "mutual criticism", in which members of the Community discussed the individual's failings and offered spiritual advice. An erring member of a cloistered order might be called to admit his or her error during a "chapter of faults". In both environments this public critique and spiritual guidance by other members of the community could also be undertaken voluntarily.

Questions of property were dealt with in much the same way by the two groups. Upon entry to either, individual holdings were put into a common pool of capital and goods. The original sum was returned when an individual left either community, unless, in the monastic case, full vows had been taken.

Full membership in both communities was granted only after a period of study by the applicant and approval of his or her spiritual progress. In religion this took the form of the novitiate, while the Perfectionists required applicants to study by correspondence before they could be accepted into the Community.

There are further parallels: a member of an order and a woman of Oneida were both immediately recognizable by their distinctive clothing; few personal possessions were allowed in either type of community; and most members spent their days on the grounds of the institution unless sent out with a mission. Two final issues deserve special attention: political organization and sexuality.

Politically, the cloistered order and the Oneida Community were structured similarly, each having a leader who held nearly absolute authority but was advised by a council. An interesting difference emerges, however, when we look at the transfer of leadership. In cloistered orders a new leader was elected by a vote of all members who had taken full vows. This practice promoted cohesion, as the majority of the community must have declared themselves to be in support of a candidate before he or she assumed office. John Humphrey Noyes did not follow this pattern, attempting instead to name his oldest son as his successor. His attempt to establish a dynastic succession generally has been recognized as one of the causes of the Community's ultimate dissolution.

On the question of sexuality, at first glance it hardly seems possible to find two communities more *un*-alike than Oneida and a cloistered monastery. Stepping up a rung on the abstraction ladder, however, changes the view. In both cases control of individual sexuality was given over to the collective. Conformance to a nonstandard group norm was required, so that both communities existed in the context of a larger society that did not share that norm. The practice of celibacy and the sanctioning of multiple sexual partners are both behaviors unacceptable to society at large, though perhaps

for rather different reasons. As Lewis A. Coser points out, successful utopian communities—into which category fall both the generic monastery and Oneida—recognize that dyadic sexual relations threaten allegiance to the collective, and either eliminate or strongly de-emphasize attachments between individuals.<sup>23</sup> Roman Catholic monasticism and Noyesian Perfectionism chose different mechanisms for accomplishing analogous goals.

There are in fact so many commonalities, both in architectural program and in social structure, that one is tempted to ask just how much John Humphrey Noyes knew about medieval monasticism. There is no evidence that he ever studied or visited monasteries, however, which makes it unlikely that these similarities stemmed from an intentional recreation of the monastic model. Instead, it seems clear that they resulted from what might be called convergent evolution. As the social structure and the architectural program of both groups evolved, both found that certain ways of arranging the physical environment were most successful in accommodating and reinforcing the behaviors mandated by their social environments. Just as the desired behaviors are congruent, so are the spaces that house them.

A monastic community and the Oneida of the Perfectionists had the same ultimate goal: making it possible for members to devote their lives to a vision of spirituality, whether that be called saintliness or perfection, in order that they might work toward their own and the world's salvation. To achieve this goal, both found it necessary to create a nonnormative social environment in which untypical social behaviors were required of members. There are numerous parallels in the structures of these social environments. Though they evolved independently, the architectural programs of the institutions created to house both groups also share many elements. Without sliding into environmental determinism, we can conclude that there is a component of mutual causality in the relationship between the social and physical structures developed by the two groups. Both chose to include particular elements in their physical environment because those elements were the ones that,

23. Lewis A. Coser, *Greedy Institutions: Patterns of Undivided Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 138.



out of the nearly infinite possibilities, best reflected and reinforced the common elements of their social environments. These make up architectural programs of striking similarity, because they are “in all respects adapted to a Community like ours”.

# Women, Family, and Utopia: The Oneida Community Experience and Its Implications for the Present

BY LAWRENCE FOSTER

EFFORTS TO DERIVE contemporary lessons from the past are always fraught with difficulty. Seldom has this been more true than in the case of John Humphrey Noyes and the community he founded in mid-nineteenth-century New York State. The Oneida Community and its system of “complex marriage”, which both Noyes and his critics somewhat misleadingly described as “free love”, have been the focus of extraordinarily wide and divergent interpretations over the past century and a half. These have ranged from extreme treatments arguing that Noyes and Oneida were part of the vanguard of sexual liberation and women’s rights to comparisons of Noyes with Hitler, arguing that he and his community were highly repressive and destructive of human potential.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that most treatments of Noyes and his com-

Note: This essay incorporates some information that first appeared in my article “Free Love and Feminism: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community”, *Journal of the Early Republic* 1 (Summer 1981): 165–83.

1. Among the analyses suggesting that Noyes and Oneida may have been a prototype for the future, see Robert Allerton Parker, *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1935); Victor F. Calverton, “Oneida: The Love Colony”, in his *Where Angels Dared to Tread: Socialist and Communist Utopian Colonies in the United States* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941), 245–87; Mulford Q. Sibley, “Oneida’s Challenge to American Culture”, in Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie, eds., *Studies in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), 41–62; and Richard A. Hoehn, “The Kingdom Goes Joint Stock: Learning from Oneida 100 Years Later”, *Christian Century* 98 (28 January 1981): 77–80. Among the critical accounts, see especially Erik Achorn, “Mary Cragin: Perfectionist Saint”, *New England Quarterly* 28 (1955): 490–518, which compares Noyes to Hitler; Ernest R. Sandeen, “John Humphrey Noyes as the New Adam”, *Church History* 40 (March 1971): 82–90; Marlyn Hartzell Dalsimer, “Women and Family in the

munal experiments at Oneida can best be compared to a Rorschach test or to a mirror reflecting the hopes, fears, or preoccupations of the writers.<sup>2</sup> The Oneida experience was so complex and multifaceted that it seemingly can generate as many interpretations as the famous elephant that the blind men of Hindustan attempted so imperfectly to describe.

This brief essay in no way claims to identify what the significance of the Oneida Community experiment for the present really is or should be. Rather, I am drawing upon twenty-five years of reflection on the Oneida Community to present what to me have been some of the most salient issues raised by the Oneida experiment, which may have implications for dealing with our present sense of crisis in community life and relations between the sexes. I hope and trust that these brief thoughts will stimulate further sharing of the rich and divergent perspectives of others who have also sought to understand the Community and its ongoing significance. Although some of the specific *forms* Noyes introduced at Oneida may not be especially appealing to many of us today, even to Community descendants, I believe that the *philosophy* underlying Noyes's efforts at religious and social reconstruction may still have considerable contemporary resonance.

The most striking feature of John Humphrey Noyes's career to me was his keen sense of the responsibility of the intellectual or creative person for the social consequences of his ideas. Noyes was breaking down old and outmoded beliefs and ways of action, but he did not leave his followers to drift without guidelines. He provided new, if highly unconventional, standards and practices, and he took responsibility for seeing that these worked, or if not, that they were discarded or modified. Viewed externally, Oneida contained many bizarre or even dangerous features, tending toward

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Oneida Community, 1837–1881” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1975); and Louis J. Kern, “Ideology and Reality: Sexuality and Women’s Status in the Oneida Community”, *Radical History Review* 20 (Spring/Summer 1979): 181–205.

2. Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1991), 75–76.

antinomianism and the breakdown of all social controls. But from the internal perspective, Oneida, with its restraints and necessary emphasis on the subordination of the individual to the common good, revealed a strong stress on authority, security, unity, and self-control, and an internal consistency in its continuing search for a middle ground between the untenable extremes of libertinism and repression that were then agitating external society. Because Noyes commented shrewdly and with great perspicacity on the strengths and weaknesses of almost all the major efforts of his day at achieving religious and social reconstruction, his writings provide an unusually sensitive barometer of contemporary social and intellectual concerns. Whitney Cross is correct in asserting that Oneida “is veritably the keystone in the arch of burned-over district history, demonstrating the connection between the enthusiasms of the right and those of the left.”<sup>3</sup>

From this starting point, let me reflect on some of the perspectives that John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community may provide on utopia, family, and women.

Underlying Noyes’s whole life and sense of mission was a deep-seated concern to overcome the social and intellectual disorder he experienced both in his own life and in the world around him. The areas of New England and western New York where Noyes had his formative emotional and intellectual experiences were undergoing rapid economic growth, unstable social conditions, and sharply conflicting religious movements. As a precocious and strong-willed yet socially maladroit and painfully shy child, Noyes was particularly jarred by the cacophony of ideas and causes that surrounded him. Ultimately, he reached the extraordinary conclusion that he was uniquely responsible for achieving a new religious and social synthesis—both for himself and for others. As he declared in a letter in 1837, “God has set me to cast up a highway across this chaos, and I am gathering out the stones and grading the track as fast as possible.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1950), 333.

4. George Wallingford Noyes, ed., *Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes*,

Although Noyes rejected using the term “utopian” to apply to his efforts, since he argued that he was engaged in a practical, not impractical, effort to help establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth,<sup>5</sup> Noyes’s emphasis on the “millennium” is clearly “utopian”, if the term is not used pejoratively. As Noyes put it, the first order of priority was to establish “right relations with God”, a common set of values or principles.<sup>6</sup> In a striking statement in 1853 about the “principles” that he and his followers held, Noyes observed: “Our fundamental principle is religion”.<sup>7</sup> Note that this statement does not say anything about the specific *content* of their religious principles—including specific beliefs about God, Christ, or other topics—but refers only to the *form* of those beliefs. In effect, he is saying that his followers believed in “*having* a religion”, that is, in having a common basis of belief. A spirit of solidarity and unity might be deemed essential—or, to put it differently, some common basis for social order had to be accepted as a given—but the specific ways in which core religious and social principles were to be expressed in practice could vary greatly, depending on circumstances.

The essential principle underlying Noyes’s religious approach

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*Founder of the Oneida Community* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 308. This was part of Noyes’s controversial letter to David Harrison of 15 January 1837 that was published in *The Battle-Axe and Weapons of War*, a countercultural newspaper of the 1830s. For the context of Noyes’s early life, see also John Humphrey Noyes, *Confessions of John H. Noyes, Part I: Confession of Religious Experience, Including a History of Modern Perfectionism* (Oneida Reserve, N.Y.: Leonard, 1849); Parker, *Yankee Saint*; and Robert David Thomas, *The Man Who Would Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the Utopian Impulse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977).

5. For Noyes’s criticism of the Fourierists for their impractical “utopianism”, see George Wallingford Noyes, ed., *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community* (Oneida, N.Y.: The Author, 1931), 168.

6. Noyes outlined the fourfold and integrally interconnected problems he was attempting to correct in “The Bible Argument Defining the Relations Between the Sexes in the Kingdom of Heaven”, in *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association* (Oneida Reserve, N.Y.: Leonard, 1849), 27–28.

7. *Bible Communism: A Compilation of the Annual Reports and Other Publications of the Oneida Association and its Branches* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Office of *The Circular*, 1853), 6.

was what he described as the “anti-legality of the Gospel”, or in other terms, the notion that faith has higher priority than works. The article “Paul Not Carnal”, printed shortly after Noyes’s conversion to “perfect holiness” in New Haven in February 1834, conveys this belief, which underlay the rest of his life.<sup>8</sup> Like Luther, Noyes had driven himself to try to achieve impossible standards of legalistic perfection; and like Luther, Noyes eventually came to the conclusion that the perfection God demanded was based not on external works but on internal attitude. Actions in and of themselves were neither good nor bad, except in terms of what they meant to individuals and to God.

Such beliefs left plenty of room for misunderstandings and self-deception, as Noyes discovered during the next decade of struggling with the resultant problems in himself and among other Perfectionists who wanted to be freed from moral restraint without taking responsibility for their lives. At Brimfield, Massachusetts, in 1834, for example, the Perfectionists Mary Lincoln and Maria Brown decided to show that their piety could overcome carnal desires by sleeping chastely in the same bed with a visiting evangelist. Noyes, who had been at Brimfield earlier with the same evangelist, had felt so threatened by the atmosphere there that he had left precipitously before the “Brimfield bundling” scandal broke, making his way home some sixty miles through bitter cold and snow to his home in Putney, Vermont, in less than twenty-four hours.<sup>9</sup>

As early as 1839, Noyes recognized the necessity for adequate controls over behavior, cautioning: “Observe that the doctrine here delivered, is not that ‘believers under the Gospel dispensation, are delivered from the obligation of personal obedience to moral law’ but that the *external* application of the moral law, which worketh, not obedience, but wrath, is exchanged for the internal admin-

8. *The Perfectionist* 1 (20 October 1834): 11. This article is most readily available as reprinted in John Humphrey Noyes, *The Berean: A Manual for the Help of Those Who Seek the Faith of the Primitive Church* (Putney, Vt.: Office of the *Spiritual Magazine*, 1847).

9. For treatments of the Brimfield episode, see G. W. Noyes, ed., *Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes*, 195–210; and Parker, *Yankee Saint*, 35–38.



Oneida Community members at their Summer House, ca. 1866.

istration of it, which secures its fulfilment.”<sup>10</sup> In effect, both at Putney and Oneida, external social restraints were eventually given less importance than internal self-restraint, though complex means of control also were instituted.

If one sets aside the specific practices at Oneida and focuses instead on the basic philosophy that underlay the Community, Noyes’s stress on setting up a common value base first and on being flexible in attempting to realize underlying values in practice seems compelling to those interested in profound and long-lasting social

10. *The Witness* 1 (25 September 1839): 78.

reconstruction. Although Rosabeth Kanter in *Commitment and Community* has argued that successful communities are characterized by effective “commitment mechanisms”, this argument largely puts the cart before the horse in my opinion.<sup>11</sup> The first order of business, instead, must be to find a common sense of mission and priorities. Only then can an individual or group seek effectively for ways to implement those priorities. Similarly, in implementing a set of priorities, it is essential to keep always in mind the underlying spirit rather than rigidly to follow preconceived schemes about what must be done. Even during its last decade, when one might have expected the Oneida Community to have ossified, external observers such as Charles Nordhoff commented about the extraordinary flexibility of the Community in everything from work assignments to recreation to meal schedules, and its strong desire to avoid getting locked into routines.<sup>12</sup> This was one of the Community’s greatest strengths. It was always ready to find the best possible way to achieve its underlying goals in practice.

A second topic on which Noyes’s thought and the experience of Oneida can inspire present-day reflection has to do with the issue of “family”. When Noyes talked about “family”, he meant far more than the word normally denotes. Not only for Oneida, but to a considerable extent for the other millenarian groups I have studied such as the Shakers and Mormons, the word “family” was expanded to include the entire face-to-face, *Gemeinschaft*-type community.<sup>13</sup> Noyes argued that the nuclear family by itself was too limited. He saw himself, instead, trying to create an “enlarged

11. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972). For a discussion of the limitations of Kanter’s criteria for “success” and “failure” of communities, see Jon Wagner, “Success in Intentional Communities: The Problem of Evaluation”, *Communal Societies* 5 (1985): 89–100.

12. Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875), 286.

13. For a summary of this argument, see Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), 237–40.



family”, overcoming the isolation and selfishness that were an almost inevitable concomitant of the nuclear family in a highly individualistic society.<sup>14</sup>

As Noyes put it so eloquently: “Our Communities are families, as distinctly bounded and separated from promiscuous society as ordinary households. The tie that binds us together is as permanent and sacred, to say the least, as that of marriage, for it is our religion. We receive no members (except by deception or mistake) who do not give their heart and hand to the family interest for life and forever. Community of property extends just as far as freedom of love.”<sup>15</sup> And as the Community hymn put it: “[W]e all have one home and one family relation”.<sup>16</sup> Abel Easton was exaggerating but little when he described Oneida as “a home the like of which has not been seen since the world began”.<sup>17</sup>

One of Noyes’s most intellectually provocative articles was his 1854 piece on “The Family and its Foil”.<sup>18</sup> In it, he asserted that “marriage”, in its present form, was antagonistic to the “family”. By this rather startling statement, he meant that existing patterns of marriage, which grew out of romantic love, frequently separated a couple geographically, emotionally, and socially from their “family”—that is, their parents and larger kinship and community ties. Such marriages based on romantic love contributed to the fragmentation of social relations. As Noyes saw it, love attachments confined to individuals were a form of “egotism for two”, part of the same disruptive and antisocial individualism that was rep-

14. John Humphrey Noyes went so far as to maintain in his *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1870), p. 23, that the main idea underlying the efforts of both the secular and religious associationists in antebellum America was “the enlargement of home—the extension of family union beyond the little man-and-wife circle to large corporations”. (Italics in original removed.)

15. *Handbook of the Oneida Community* (Wallingford, Conn.: Office of *The Circular*, 1867), 64.

16. Nordhoff, *Communitistic Societies*, 299.

17. Alan Estlake [Abel Easton], *The Oneida Community* (London: George Redway, 1900), 56.

18. “The Family and its Foil”, *The Circular* (16 November 1854), 594. See also “Becoming as Little Children”, *Spiritual Magazine* 2 (22 December 1849): 339.

resented by the spirit of rampant acquisitiveness in antebellum America.

How were the disruptive aspects of such romantic love to be dealt with constructively? Further individualistic fragmentation—for instance, free love outside a community context—was no solution. Instead of causing community disruption, powerful sexual forces of attraction should be given natural channels and harnessed to provide a vital bond within society. Noyes wanted all believers to be unified and to share a perfect community of interests, to replace the “I-spirit” with the “we-spirit”. If believers were fully to love each other while living in close communal association, they must be allowed to love each other fervently and physically, “not by pairs, as in the world, but en masse”. The necessary restrictions of the earthly state, governed by arbitrary human law, would eventually have to give way to the final heavenly free state, governed by the spirit in which “hostile surroundings and powers of bondage cease” and “all restrictions also will cease”. A perfect unity in all respects would result. Each would be married to all—heart, mind, and body—in a complex marriage.<sup>19</sup>

The appeal of such an approach—and its severe limitations—are not hard to discern. The mystical desire for total union with and submersion in the universe is one of the most fundamental drives underlying religious experience. In its often distorted forms in human sexual intercourse, it has incredible complexity and power as well. The anthropologist Victor Turner has eloquently and evocatively analyzed the role of rites of passage and the liminal or transitional state between two modes of being or ways of living in the world.<sup>20</sup> The raw power and intensity of emotion released during

19. “Bible Argument”, 21–22; Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 626–27.

20. Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969). For an application of Turner’s approach to new religious movements, see J. Gordon Melton and Robert L. Moore, *The Cult Experience: Responding to the New Religious Pluralism* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982). Also suggestive in this context are Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken, 1969); and Anthony F. C. Wallace, “Revitalization Movements”, *American Anthropologist* 38 (April 1956): 264–81.



Oneida woman and child,  
ca. 1860.

the transition state when neither the old nor the new status is in effect can be extraordinary. A profound state of communion can result from the breakdown of existing structures. Equally noteworthy is the potential for destructive expression and self-delusion in such states. To sustain a community such as Oneida that sought, in effect, to keep the fluidity and emotional intensity of such a transitional state over a long period of time is extraordinarily difficult and dangerous. Yet Oneida shows, if any community can, that there can be great appeal in “the pursuit of an impossible ideal” in which all arbitrary distinctions between individuals are broken down as part of an effort to realize a higher union.

On a more mundane level, Noyes’s analysis of the family makes a key point for us today. All too often, we talk about “the family” as if it existed in isolation from the larger society. We talk about “family breakdown” and assume that individuals bear primary or even sole responsibility for such failure. Noyes, as well as some of the

most articulate recent critics of the family such as Stephanie Coontz in her recent book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, make the critically important point that the nuclear family is not and cannot exist in isolation from the larger social order. Larger social problems often exacerbate, even cause, difficulties in the nuclear family. And no effort to improve the family can be successful unless it is placed into the larger context of overall social reconstruction.<sup>21</sup>

A final topic on which the experiences of Noyes and the Oneida Community raises significant questions for us today is the issue of women and their roles. If reestablishing “right relations with God”—a sense of common values that could link together an “enlarged family” or community—constituted the first priority for Noyes, then his second, closely related goal was reestablishing “right relations between the sexes”.<sup>22</sup> As an extremely shy young adult, Noyes had struggled to understand his own impulses and to determine why so many of the Perfectionists with whom he associated were engaged in such erratic and often self-destructive sexual experimentation. The existing marriage system was unsatisfactory, he concluded: “The law of marriage worketh wrath”.<sup>23</sup> Unrealistic and unnatural restrictions were being placed on relations between the sexes. In marriage, women were held in a form of slave-like domestic bondage, while their husbands toiled away in an uncertain and highly competitive external world.<sup>24</sup> Romantic love and the monogamous family merely accentuated the disruptive individualism present in other areas of society. Most serious of all, men acted as though they owned their wives, as though their wives were a form of property. Noyes felt, instead, that sexual and emotional exclusiveness between the sexes should be done away with.

21. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

22. “Bible Argument”, 27–28.

23. *Ibid.*, 25.

24. *Slavery and Marriage, A Dialogue: Conversation Between Judge North, Major South and Mr. Free Church* (Oneida, N.Y.: Oneida Community, 1850); “The Family and its Foil”; and *Bible Communism*, 79–80.

Within the ideal order he was attempting to set up, sexual relations should be fundamentally restructured so that loyalty was raised to the level of the entire Community.<sup>25</sup>

The details of this remarkable effort at reorganizing marriage and family relations have been treated in many accounts and need not concern us here. What does need to be stressed, however, is both the systematic and the institutionally radical character of Noyes's innovations. Once basic community loyalty and the necessary institutional supports had been established over a period of nearly a decade, Noyes proceeded to introduce the practice of complex marriage and a variety of other radical changes that attempted to do away with all nonintrinsic distinctions between the sexes. Women were formally freed to participate in almost all aspects of Community religious, economic, and social life, in contrast to the far greater restrictions that they faced in the outside world. Within the limits deemed necessary to maintain the primary loyalty to the larger communal order, all individuals were encouraged to develop their highest capacities. Few societies in human history have done more to break down arbitrary distinctions between the sexes than did Oneida.<sup>26</sup>

It might initially seem paradoxical that this significant revision in sex roles and women's status at Oneida should have been accomplished in the face of John Humphrey Noyes's formal belief in the superiority of men over women. The chief reason this could occur was that Noyes's primary concern was not with male and female authority patterns per se, but rather with establishing his own personal authority over all his followers, both men and women. So

25. See "Bible Argument"; *Bible Communism; Handbook of the Oneida Community* (1867), 64; and *Handbook of the Oneida Community* (Oneida, N.Y.: Oneida Community, 1871), 56.

26. Parker, *Yankee Saint*; Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969); Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*; and Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981) discuss the ways in which sex roles and daily activities were modified at Oneida. Even Dalsimer's critical account, "Women and Family in the Oneida Community", 242–77, shows that significant changes were made in women's work at Oneida.

long as Noyes's male and female followers unquestioningly acknowledged his paternalistic, God-like authority, he was prepared to be flexible in delegating that authority and making major changes in the interests of both sexes.<sup>27</sup> No one way of organizing relations between the sexes was sacrosanct; the underlying spirit rather than any specific external form was Noyes's concern. In effect, therefore, both men and women at Oneida shared a common personal and religious commitment that radically undercut normal social restrictions. Woman's primary responsibility was not to her husband or to her children, but to God—and all souls were ultimately equal before God.<sup>28</sup>

Even though Noyes may have succeeded in resolving many problems that he and his followers faced by setting up a close-knit community, the question still remains how his activities related to the larger society and its concerns. In particular, several points need to be made about Noyes's response to the contemporary women's rights movement. One is that Noyes was genuinely sympathetic to many of the basic goals of antebellum feminists. He not only argued that relations between the sexes were out of joint, but also felt that a major reason for that disruption was the restricted role assigned to women. As a former abolitionist with ties to William Lloyd Garrison, he explicitly compared woman's status to that of a slave and used other language as vivid as that of the most militant feminists.<sup>29</sup> Such writing was more than mere rhetoric unsupported by action. Noyes saw himself as a figure with a mission to free women (as well as men) from servitude to stereotyped behaviors and attitudes, and he made specific and often highly controversial changes at every level of community life to end discrimination

27. The overriding concern that Noyes had with his own personal authority and control is stressed in *Spiritual Magazine* 2 (11 July 1842): 57–59, and by George Wallingford Noyes, ed. *John Humphrey Noyes*, 25–33. Also see Thomas's observation in his *The Man Who Would Be Perfect*, and Richard De Maria, *Communal Love at Oneida: A Perfectionist Vision of Authority, Property, and Sexual Order* (New York: Mellen, 1978).

28. "Woman's Slavery to Children", *Spiritual Magazine* 1 (15 September 1846): 109–10.

29. The important linkage between Noyes and Garrison is analyzed in John L. Thomas, *William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston: Little Brown, 1963), 228–32.

against women, encourage their participation, and reestablish harmonious relations between the sexes.<sup>30</sup>

Yet while Noyes was in general agreement with much of the feminist diagnosis of the illness affecting relations between men and women, he was in sharp disagreement with its prescription for cure. Feminist stridency and emphasis on conflict between the sexes as a method of social change particularly repelled him and his followers. A note in the *Community* newspaper in 1850, for example, mentioned a women's rights convention in Ohio at which Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke and compared married women's legal status to that of slaves. The paper editorialized: "There is an oblique pointing at the truth in this statement, but it is far from probing the real depths of the case. . . . What is really wanted is to be able to live under the government of God, to establish mutually satisfying relations between the sexes."<sup>31</sup> The point was to achieve the necessary and desirable changes in the right manner, one that would contribute to restoring harmonious relations between all parties involved in the conflict.

Like conservatives such as Catharine Beecher who helped to articulate and establish the Victorian synthesis, with its emphasis on the family, domesticity, and women's power in the home sphere, Noyes felt that the whole social order was threatening to come apart. New and more satisfying roles for men and women must be established, but this must be done in such a way that the divisiveness and conflict that were already so rampant in society could be minimized. Noyes achieved such a new synthesis for himself and his followers by creating a communal family at Oneida. The larger society, in the meantime, achieved much the same effect by making use of the nuclear family in conjunction with larger institutional agencies for social control such as churches, schools, and asylums. The specifics of their programs might differ, but in a curious way both Noyes and the larger Victorian society were alike in

30. "Woman Suppression", *The Circular* (27 March 1854), 298. The optimistic tone of this article is also characteristic of many of Noyes's other statements on this topic.

31. Susan C. Hamilton, "Communism, Woman's Best Friend", *The Circular* (27 May 1854), 298. This line of argument is repeated on numerous occasions.

seeking to use essentially conservative means to achieve ways of life that differed greatly from those that had come before.<sup>32</sup>

Does such an approach have any continuing resonance for us today? A decade ago, many feminists would have said “No”. It appeared to them that Noyes was, at best, attempting to co-opt and weaken serious efforts to improve women’s status. With the passage of time, however, a certain mellowing seems to be occurring, at least among some feminist writers who have become increasingly aware of the difficulty of “having it all”, trying to engage in high-powered and successful careers and, at the same time, to sustain a full and rewarding domestic life. Under such circumstances, feminist writers such as Ellen Wayland-Smith and others have been more impressed by how much rather than how little the Community was able to achieve.<sup>33</sup> Without directly reentering the debate again at this time, let me simply argue that perhaps the greatest value of Oneida for contemporary feminists is that it raises and highlights many of the difficult questions of women’s roles, without providing any definitive answers to them.

For more than three decades at Oneida, John Humphrey Noyes and his followers struggled with complex issues of social organization, not simply in theory but also in practice. They attempted to modify extremely deep-seated sexual attitudes and behavior patterns, and they did make important (if ultimately temporary) changes in the relations between men and women. On the other

32. For a suggestion of the striking similarities between Noyes’s approach and that of conservatives such as Catharine Beecher, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), especially 151–67.

33. Ellen Wayland-Smith, “The Status and Self-Perception of Women in the Oneida Community”, *Communal Societies* 8 (1988): 18–53, makes use of the perspectives of Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theories and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982) to argue that Noyes put forward an essentially “feminine” model for his female and male followers. Using extensive primary writings by women at Oneida, she concludes that by putting into practice a society emphasizing an ethic of connection and self-sacrifice to maintain the good of the group, Noyes helped bolster women’s self-perceptions, allowing them a richer and more fully integrated experience than most women in the outer world found possible.



hand, Noyes and his followers certainly did not achieve an egalitarian millennium (nor was that their intention). Those historians who would treat the Oneida experiment as a “failure” simply because it did not achieve absolute “perfection” (in whatever sense perfection is being defined) are unrealistic in their expectations and their understanding of the way in which social change takes place. Noyes was a doer as well as a thinker. He sought, as much as possible, to approximate what he conceived to be the ideal community, but he was also aware of the limitations and strengths of the human beings with whom he was working. John Humphrey Noyes, his communities, and his philosophy deserve the kind of serious scholarly attention that they have only recently begun to receive.

# “Mingling the Sexes”: The Gendered Organization of Work in the Oneida Community

BY MARLYN KLEE-HARTZELL

AFTER RECONCILIATION WITH God and the reorganization of sexual relations, John Humphrey Noyes placed labor as the third great challenge to be dealt with by those living in a state of perfect holiness on earth. He claimed that his holy community would “mingle the sexes” in work assignments to an unusual degree not found in mainstream American society of the nineteenth century. But in fact, most women in the Oneida Community were assigned traditional female work roles.

As in every major area of Community life, John Humphrey Noyes enunciated the principles that would guide Community labor. In social treatises he explained how communal work would differ from, and improve upon, work in the “outside world”. First, communal labor would increase economic strength “by placing the individual in a vital organization, which is in communication with the source of life, and which distributes and circulates life with the highest activity. . . .” Noyes’s second principle held that the amount of work necessary in a holy community would diminish, due to its “compound economics”. Third, Noyes critiqued “the present division of labor between the sexes [which] separates them entirely. The woman keeps house, and the man labors abroad. Men and women are married only after dark and during bed-time. . . .” He predicted that with the introduction of “loving companionship in labor, and especially the mingling of the sexes”, labor would become “attractive”, like “sport, as it would have been in the Eden State”.<sup>1</sup>

To what extent did the Oneida Community alter the sexual di-

1. John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Wallingford, Conn.: Oneida Community, 1870), 635–36.

vision of labor, which Noyes's theory promised? In what follows I will examine women's work at Oneida and will attempt to answer such important questions as: who did what work, where, with whom, for how long each day, under what working conditions, and under whose direction?<sup>2</sup>

The Oneida Communists organized their numerous work activities into "departments", each headed by a superintendent. In 1875 Charles Nordhoff reported forty-eight separate work departments in the Community, ranging in importance from "silk-manufacture" to "clocks" and "stationery".<sup>3</sup> Because some work departments were more critical to Oneida's economy than others, it seems unlikely that all forty-eight department heads participated equally in economic coordination and decision-making. Such a large committee would have been too cumbersome. *The Circular* of 8 May 1856, mentions a fifteen-member "Central Board" that made business decisions. Probably Noyes's handpicked male "central members" advised him on economic affairs, and after the decisions were debated and made, the entire Community accepted them as accomplished fact.

The Community also institutionalized several important work practices: using "bees", or collective efforts, to accomplish urgent or onerous work; having children help with light tasks; splitting up the working day into several different segments interspersed with recreation and fellowship; and rotating jobs. The latter practice insured a flexible labor supply and provided refreshing change in job assignments. Although some members, including women, changed jobs frequently, others did not. As the Community became more prosperous, it added hired help; by 1870 it had more than 200 employees on its payroll.<sup>4</sup>

2. Such answers to these questions as may be found will not necessarily apply to all thirty-plus years of the Oneida Community's existence. Yet, the Community was remarkably consistent in many of its practices. Individual examples are dated, as an aid to the reader.

3. Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875), 219.

4. Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1993), 87.

An examination of sources reveals five categories of work at the Oneida Community, listed according to the proportion of women employed in each:

1. Traditional women's work: kitchen, housekeeping, laundry, sewing and mending, nursing, early child care, and nursery school teaching. In these areas of work women predominated as both workers and supervisors. They made most of the decisions in these work departments.
2. Light industry: fruit canning and packing, silk-spooling factory, traveling-bag manufacture; and Community support activities: print-shop, bookkeeping, and phonography (a kind of shorthand). In these activities young women predominated as workers and were supervised by both women and men.
3. Industry: animal-trap manufacture and machine shop, as well as various specialized areas including dairy, dentistry, transportation, and gardening. In these labors men predominated as both workers and supervisors, but a few women worked in these areas too.
4. Heavy farm work, carpentry, sawmilling, lumbering, sales work, and peddling: Community men and male hired laborers did all these traditionally male jobs.
5. Ideological administration: John Humphrey Noyes dominated this department with the help of a few men and women (mainly his wife, sisters, and favorite lovers) whom he personally selected to assist him.

#### TRADITIONAL WOMEN'S WORK

Women ran the Oneida kitchen. Depending on how much food they could afford to eat, the Oneida family took two to three daily meals in a common dining room. Women planned, prepared, and served food. Two women planned the menus for the family and did the actual cooking for a month at a time; then they were replaced by two more women. Realizing the enormous responsibility this job required, the Oneida Communists wisely rotated this task among the women, and incidentally assured themselves a variety of taste experiences. One Oneida woman commented that the

women especially appreciated being relieved of kitchen tasks, and felt that this explained the reason “we women of thirty are mistaken for Misses [because] we are saved from so much care and vexation”.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the cooks, five or six women assisted in the kitchen with the paring, slicing, and cooking of the food. Two to four men, beginning at 4:30 a.m., built the kitchen fires and lifted the heavy pots and pans. In the dining room a group of young women, ages twelve to thirty, waited upon and cleared the tables, usually on a part-time basis, in addition to other tasks they performed in the Community. After dinner several women washed the dishes “in a pan of water, in a completely manual and timelessly traditional fashion”.

A man, however, rinsed the dishes because the Community boasted an “ingenious device . . . operated by a catch and foot-treadle”, by which whole racks of dishes were lowered into a large box full of hot water.<sup>6</sup> It is not clear whether this contraption required unusual strength or mechanical knowledge, but a Community man, Mr. Mills, originally invented it and supervised its operation for the first few years, probably long enough to institutionalize it as a man’s job. A separate department of the Community did the baking, headed by a man with a young woman assistant. Clearly, then, the Oneida kitchen was women’s province. Women performed most of the menial work associated with feeding the Oneida family; men worked in the kitchen either as supervisors, as in the case of the head baker, or as those performing tasks that required unusual muscular strength.<sup>7</sup>

The housekeeping corps required to maintain the high standards of cleanliness of the Oneida Community was entirely female. Many

5. “Community Journal”, *Oneida Circular* (13 July 1874), 229. *Oneida Circular* (1871–1876) was preceded by *The Circular* (1851–1870). They were published at various times in Brooklyn, N.Y., Wallingford, Conn., and Oneida, N.Y. The names of the editors and contributors were often omitted.

6. “Community Housework”, *The Circular* (6 January 1867), 343.

7. Ibid. See also Harriet M. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories. By One Brought Up In It* (Kenwood, N.Y.: Privately published, 1950), 30.

women had specific tasks. For example, Mrs. S. had charge of the furniture, Miss K. took care of the carpets, Mrs. N. mended bedding materials, Mrs. A. washed the glassware and silver for the dining room, another woman filled and trimmed the lamps. Each morning a group of women circulated through the Mansion House, airing and making beds and tidying individual rooms. Women cleaned their own rooms as well as the men's. *The Circular* reported an incident in which a man complained that he could not find his nightshirt, "surmising that there had been some carelessness . . . in arranging his room" by the woman who made his bed. On bath day he discovered that he had put his other clothes over his nightshirt.<sup>8</sup> When it was necessary to undertake large house-keeping projects, such as oiling and waxing floors, Oneida women organized a "bee" and swept through the house in a collective attack.

Laundry at the Oneida Community was a formidable task. In the early years an equal number of Community women and men drew lots for Sunday washday and, in a series of teams, carried water, rubbed, pounded, boiled, rinsed, and hung out the clothes. After the Sunday washing, six to eight women and girls spent the week sprinkling, ironing, and folding the clothes. Harriet Worden recalled, "The women remember several instances when the weather was freezingly cold, and their dresses, wetted by the pattering of soapsuds, became frozen stiff; and occasionally numerous icicles formed a crystal border around their skirts". She remembered fondly the Sunday washdays, full of "merriment and fun", and "the hum of conversation, singing together".<sup>9</sup> In the early years, laundry was a Community task, commonly shared, but enormously time-consuming.

In 1863 the Oneidans constructed a separate wash-house with steam engine and boiler, washing machines, centrifugal wringer, mangle, and a drying room for bad weather. At least one Community commentator believed that because the men came to know from firsthand experience the oppressive drudgery of the laundry,

8. "Community Gossip", *The Circular* (11 November 1867), 276.

9. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 26–29.

“improvements and conveniences have since been successively introduced . . . ”<sup>10</sup> Although some Community members looked back nostalgically to the early washday bees and lamented that “our children seem destined to grow up in total ignorance of the wash-tub”, most agreed with Harriet Worden when she wrote that “we feel reconciled . . . [and] were glad when the release came and gave us a chance to devote ourselves to education and industries more profitable and better adapted to our tastes”.<sup>11</sup> After the introduction of machinery into the laundry, men did some folding and mangling of large items such as sheets, tablecloths, towels, and pillowcases; women and girls sprinkled, starched, and ironed the wearing apparel of the entire Community, then returned the clothes to the Mansion House to be sorted and distributed to the shelves or their respective owners.

Despite some limited male participation, members of the Oneida Community definitely viewed laundry as women’s work. An amusing article reported an imaginary conversation between articles of clothing who discussed indignantly the “new-fangled devices [which had robbed] them of the attention they formerly had from the women”. “Old Sheet” chaired the meeting and inquired, “Did [the women] not get up early every Monday morning and devote the first labors of the week to us? Did they not rub and scrub and rinse and wring until they wore the skin off from their fingers? And did they not sometimes make the men cross and blues as bedlam in view of the rival attentions given to us on washing day?” The article went on to toast “the Steam Engine—a family institution—suggested originally by our Grandmother’s teakettle—now at last reaching its highest distinction as the washer of dirty clothes and liberator of women”.<sup>12</sup>

All of the clothes in the Oneida Community were homemade and organized in the following manner: women designed and made their own clothes in their after-work hours; a tailor shop

10. “Correspondence: Laundry Improvements”, *The Circular* (31 October 1864), 260.

11. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 26–29.

12. “Rebellion in the Laundry”, *The Circular* (21 March 1864), 5–6.

presided over by a man made the shirts, coats, and trousers of the Oneida men. For the greater part of the Community's history, a children's dress department staffed by women sewed the numerous articles the Community children required. When, after the stirpiculture experiment began in 1869, there were more children, making the children's clothes was an especially formidable task. The *Oneida Circular* respectfully described Miss Matthew's responsibilities and working conditions as head of the children's dressing department where she had two regular assistants and seasonal bees to help her with her work: "[S]he it is who cuts and fits, turns, rips and sews for the children from morn till night. . . ." The article puzzled, "[H]ow she can bear in mind . . . fourteen hundred different articles of children's wear—frocks, petticoats, chemises, drawers, waists, aprons, jackets, pantaloons, etc.—and know where they all are and keep them all in repair, passing along what one child outgrows to another smaller, and never getting tired, and never out of patience—is a pleasing mystery. We solve it thus: it is her mission, and therefore she thrives in the business, and the business thrives with her".<sup>13</sup>

Oneida women assumed roles as "mothers" to alter and mend the clothing of one child and of one or more men of the Community, in addition to caring for their own. This included sewing on buttons and mending rips or tears, as well as knitting socks and other items. Corinna Ackley Noyes remembered that this extra work used up much of the women's spare time; they often did their sewing during the evening meetings of the Community, where they rarely participated in the discussions.<sup>14</sup>

*The Circular* carried a revealing account of a man whose "mother" could not alter his neckline to his satisfaction. Although the story was written in a sprightly, good-humored style, one can detect an undercurrent of hostility directed to the man by his "mother". After trying and failing many times to suit the man's specifications, his "mother" "summoned a council of sewing-soci-

13. "Community Journal", *Oneida Circular* (29 January 1872), 37.

14. Corinna Ackley Noyes, *The Days of My Youth* (Kenwood, N.Y.: Author, 1960), 44.



ety women, and we went into a committee of the whole". After satisfying him for a few weeks he offered a new complaint. She lamented, "I believe the mischief is all in your neck which dilates and contracts on purpose to torment me". Finally, the man's "mother" decided that the only way to solve the problem was to alternate pinning over or letting out the neck size. She concluded testily, "and what is better, he has learned to do the thing himself".<sup>15</sup>

Although the Oneida Community population enjoyed extraordinarily good health, when the need arose, several women filled the roles of nurses. "Aunt Sarah Dunn was a particularly fine nurse. She seemed to have special intuition for diagnosis and what the immediate treatment should be, and she inspired courage and confidence in the patient at once. Mrs. Sears . . . was an excellent midwife."<sup>16</sup> Eventually the Community sent two of its young men, Theodore R. Noyes and George Cragin, to Yale for medical training. They served as Community doctors until the Breakup in 1880.

According to Community practice, mothers cared for their babies until the infants were weaned and able to walk, usually till age nine to fifteen months. The following details of early child care are taken from the last decade of the Community's existence. From 1872 to 1873 Mrs. M. E. Newhouse "mothered the youngest flock in the Children's House" and then retired "for rest and change of scene. She was admirably adapted to this vocation and won every baby's heart and every mother's heart by her gentle, earnest ways."<sup>17</sup> The toddler's group, one to two and a half years, met in the "Drawing Room", probably attended exclusively by women. From approximately ages two and a half to six the children in the "East Room" received rudimentary nursery school instruction from Aunt Susan or Portia, and were tended again by women. From ages six to twelve children were graduated to the "South Room". Here Papa Kelly supervised, assisted by Miss Chloe and Miss Libby. Pierrepont Noyes recalled that the latter two women

15. "The Inherent Wickedness of Shirts", *The Circular* (2 April 1866), 23.

16. C. A. Noyes, *The Days of My Youth*, 32.

17. "Community Journal", *Oneida Circular* (17 February 1873), 60.

“put on our mittens and rubbers and made sure that when we came indoors our clothes were dry. They fed us wormwood tea and sulphur and molasses every spring, administered ‘drugs’ when an epidemic of sore eyes threatened, and saw to it that at least three times a day we were clean and properly fed.”<sup>18</sup> Miss Jane Abbot brushed the children’s hair. Papa Kelly presided authoritatively over the Children’s Meetings, administered discipline, and took charge of the spiritual instruction of the children.

Oneidans considered women better suited than men to care for children’s physical and emotional needs. One father of a seven-month-old girl wrote in the *Oneida Circular* that although he enjoyed playing with his daughter, “to take care of her for a whole hour especially if she be fretful, I have found it real hard work”. He went on to comment, “It is very lucky for us ‘lords of creation’ that women are so fond of such chores as to relieve us almost entirely. We are willing to do a fair day’s work in the shop or field, but we want to eat our meals in peace, and sit down undisturbed to the evening paper when the day’s work is over. . . . [I]n some things at least woman is our superior”.<sup>19</sup>

As in child care, women directed the early education of the Oneida children. Continuing Mary Cragin’s work with children in the early days of the Community, Aunt Susan and Portia were schoolmarms to the younger children, presiding over ABC charts, slates and pencils, primer and picture-books, and Bible stories.<sup>20</sup> After age six, however, the children were graduated to the tutelage of Mr. Warne, a former college professor from St. Louis, who was “fond of children, especially boys”.<sup>21</sup>

While Oneida women performed most of the actual work in caring for the Community’s children, a few men held positions of responsibility in the Children’s Department, usually as supervisors or administrators of discipline and spiritual instruction. The 1875

18. Pierrepont B. Noyes, *My Father’s House: An Oneida Boyhood* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1937), 22, 41–43.

19. “On Baby Rearing”, *Oneida Circular* (25 January 1875), 30.

20. “Community Journal”, *Oneida Circular* (12 October 1874), 334.

21. P. B. Noyes, *My Father’s House*, 33, 98.

*Community Handbook* reported forty-eight children under age twelve in the Children's House (actually a wing of the Mansion House), "where they were cared for by 3 men and 15 women".<sup>22</sup>

From the descriptions cited above, it is obvious that Oneida ideology assigned to women the traditional female work of kitchen, housekeeping, laundry, sewing and mending, nursing, and early childhood care and education. The majority of Oneida women labored in these areas of work. With the exception of children's spiritual instruction, discipline, and primary school education, women made the myriad daily decisions demanded by these important social tasks.

#### LIGHT INDUSTRY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

In the second category of Community work, light industry and Community support activities, young women predominated as workers and had both male and female supervisors. The canning and traveling-bag manufacture, associated with food and sewing, respectively, probably recommended themselves as women's work since both these tasks were traditionally done by women. Likewise, because young women made up the work force of early New England textile mills, this precedent might have dictated female labor in the Community's silk-spooling industry.

The Community took pride in its fine gardens and orchards. Their vegetables, fruits, and berries provided healthy fare at the Community tables. Community women expertly preserved the surplus for sale to outsiders who appreciated the delectability of Community-grown food. Bees were often used to gather, pare, and cut the produce, and to pack the jars for sale. In addition, some fresh produce was peddled in the surrounding Oneida neighborhood, always by men.

The traveling-bag industry grew out of John Humphrey Noyes's need for a bag in which he could carry food and drink during his frequent travels. Community women obligingly fashioned a bag to his specifications. After Noyes received several favorable

22. Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (New York: Harper, 1971), 63-64.



Community members making traveling-bags, ca. 1866.

comments on his bag from other travelers, he hit upon the idea of manufacturing them for sale. Women (and eventually a crew of hired outside laborers) sewed the bags by hand, often in bees, when other Community activities lagged, so that a surplus could be kept on hand for the steady trickle of orders the Community received.

Oneida men helped with both the fruit preserving and traveling-bag manufacture in times of great demand, but the work was clearly viewed as women's domain. They provided the stable work force for both. It is difficult to ascertain who supervised these two industries over the years. For a time Henry Thacker, a superb horticulturist who lovingly cared for the Community's gardens, plants, and orchards, also supervised the fruit-preserving business. Helen Campbell Noyes superintended the traveling-bag department for at least two years.

The fruit-preserving business required an auxiliary boxing and packing enterprise in which women also worked. A report of the packing department in *The Circular* contained the following exchange: Miss F. M. B., a packer, had been warned by the man who trained her that she would be unable to nail shut the packing boxes. She scorned “the imputation on her sex” and learned the task well. Furthermore, after packing and nailing as many cases as her “illustrious colleague”, she had to make out the bills, while he retired to “calm contemplation”.<sup>23</sup>

In 1865 the Community set about establishing a silk-spooling industry which they hoped would provide additional income. Three Community young people, Charles Cragin, Elizabeth Hutchins, and Harriet Allen, journeyed to a Connecticut silk factory to learn the trade.<sup>24</sup> Upon their return to the Community, Cragin assumed managerial responsibility for setting up the business, while the two young women resumed posts in the printing office and in child care until the factory began operation.<sup>25</sup> Charles Cragin subsequently became superintendent of silk manufacturing.

In the silk-spooling factory Oneida women, and eventually hired girls from the surrounding community, tended the machines that wound the silk onto spools, which the Community then boxed, packed, and sold in retail trade. When Community women staffed the factory they worked one half-day and spent the rest of the day at “smaller chores like waiting table or proof-reading at the Print Shop”, with some leisure time for study. As the Community grew more prosperous, the silk-spooling factory hired paid laborers, all young women. Unlike their female predecessors from the Community, these hired girls worked a full day, with two fifteen-minute recesses at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. The *Oneida Circular* reported as many as forty-four hired girls, some as young as ten years of age, at work in the silk factory, and commented: “[H]ow to work them economically and yet not oppressively has become something of a problem. . . . Mrs. Waltch, an assistant whose disposition became

23. “Community Gossip”, *The Circular* (27 November 1865), 292.

24. P. B. Noyes, *My Father's House*, 15.

25. “Community Gossip”, *The Circular* (4 June 1864), 93.

well-adapted for the task, now has the immediate supervision of the girls. Her time is wholly occupied in looking after them—picking out the snarls they make, etc.”<sup>26</sup>

The Oneida print shop, although not income producing, reaped many nonfinancial rewards for the Community. Oneida publications related to the outside world the Community’s religious beliefs, its social system, and its hopes for world communism. In the early years Noyes wrote most of the copy for Oneida publications, ably assisted by his wife, Harriet Holton Noyes, his sister Harriet Noyes Skinner, and Mary Cragin, who recorded and copied his words in meticulous longhand script. As Noyes became more involved in the economic administration of his Community, his trusted lieutenant, Theodore Pitt, supervised the print shop and edited the *Oneida Circular*. In the print shop, Community women set type for the precious words, proofread the copy, collated and hand-addressed the more than one thousand *Oneida Circulars* that went out weekly to a national and international readership. In 1864 the Community’s newspaper commented: “To boast a little more of Community tendencies in the way of women’s elevation, type-setting in the office of *The Circular* has long been monopolized by girls, and there is danger of their meddling with the editorship one of these days; for printers are very apt to grow into editors”.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, two Oneida women eventually assumed editorial responsibilities for the *Oneida Circular*, although it is important to note that both served for only brief periods—three years and three months cumulatively—and that both had strong romantic ties with Noyes. Tirzah Miller, editor in 1873, was Noyes’s niece, daughter of Charlotte Noyes and John Miller; she was born in Putney and thoroughly trained in Community ideology. She was also a confidante and favored lover to her uncle. Harriet Worden, editor from 1874 to March 1876, came to the Oneida Community at age eight with her father and younger sister. She, too, grew up entirely in a Community context and was a special favorite of Noyes. She was initiated into the Community’s sexual practices by Noyes and re-

26. “Community Gossip”, *The Circular* (8 April 1867), 28.

27. “The Way Things Are Going”, *The Circular* (25 April 1864), 44.

mained loyal to his religious ideas throughout the Breakup in 1880. She bore a son, Pierrepont, by Noyes, in 1870. When Harriet Worden suspected that she was about to be replaced by a man as editor of the *Oneida Circular*, she lodged a bitter, even sarcastic, protest with Noyes. Her statement was probably the strongest an Oneida woman ever uttered concerning prejudice against women:

If it were right to envy, I should envy the men. They are so wise and strong; and so confident, withal, in their wisdom & strength. They form such great plans, and are able to talk about them in such a large, disinterested way . . . that their opinions *pass for what they are worth*, every time. But woman, *per contra*, is such a creature of feeling she can scarcely give her views entirely free from personalities, and hence her judgment is received doubtfully. . . . She may feel as deeply, know as intelligently, & understand as thoroughly the premises in a certain case as her “lord & master” man! But being a woman is evidence against her—she meekly bows to fate, and retires from the field of argument to attend babies and make pancakes.<sup>28</sup>

As she had feared, Editor Worden was subsequently sacked.

As the Oneida Community increased its commercial activities, its bookkeeping tasks became more complicated and intensive. By 1866 the Community kept three ledgers, two journals, and five sales books. A team of five women, Maria Barron, Annie M. Hatch, Sophia Nunn, and Ann S. Bailey, assistants, and Carrie A. Macknet, superintendent, kept all these books, and in addition, acknowledged the receipt of all monies and answered most letters.<sup>29</sup> *The Circular*, with a backhand use of the negative and obviously some surprise, commented that these young women developed “both mechanical and commercial talents not inferior to those of men”. The same article waxed enthusiastic about the accomplishments of its women bookkeepers: “The Oneida Community women make excellent accountants; they are quick to comprehend, prompt in execution, patient, faithful, and accurate in details”.<sup>30</sup>

28. Klaw, *Without Sin*, 135.

29. “Women in the Accounting Room”, *The Circular* (6 August 1866), 166.

30. “Women as Book-Keepers”, *The Circular* (17 January 1870), 349.

Another support activity for the Community largely carried out by women was the daily recording of Community meetings, Noyes's "Home-Talks", and special lectures delivered to the Community membership for its improvement. In the early 1850s Mary Cragin began the practice of trying to record, word for word, Noyes's messages to the Community; often her notes were transcribed and published as articles in the *Oneida Circular*. After her untimely death this practice languished for a time, but as the Community accumulated leisure time and a growing sense of its historical mission to the outside world, Community members made new attempts to record their deliberations for posterity. Consequently, several young men took up the study of the new scientific phonography and kept careful records of Community proceedings for the communal archives. After several years, women took over these responsibilities.

#### INDUSTRY

In the third category of Community work, men predominated as both workers and supervisors. These male-dominated work departments included the animal-trap industry and the machine shop, as well as smaller enterprises like dentistry, dairy, transportation, and gardening. Into these work categories women were integrated in emergency situations, or as token bows to the Community ideology of "mingling the sexes". The work of the animal-trap shop varied seasonally and, in addition, was extremely sensitive to supply and demand and, therefore, to the price of furs in the American economy. Women helped most in the trap shop during the mid-1850s when the Community first established its animal-trap business, and in 1863 to 1865 when the strong demand for furs kept the Community busy filling its mail orders.<sup>31</sup> In the trap shop women generally heated the metals, and then passed them to the men to be forged. Women also worked with the older children who spent an hour a day after lunch joining the links of the chains that were attached to the traps.

The entrance of women into the Community machine shop was much heralded in the Community literature, although the number

31. Robert Allerton Parker, *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community* (New York: Putnam, 1935), 208.





Drawing of the Chain Room, ca. 1865, by Milford Newhouse.  
This is one of a series of unpublished drawings that Newhouse made as an adolescent member of the Oneida Community.

of women involved and their real contributions in terms of time and responsibilities were relatively minor. At most, five Community women worked one half of a day in the machine shop. In 1873 William Inslee, the head machinist, trained several Community women to run lathes. The *Oneida Circular* boasted: “Almost every kind of manufacture in iron, steel, and brass has parts adapted to feminine fingers. Woman’s patience with details, and long-suffering routine, fits her for many monotonous operations on the lathe.” In the machine shop, women were assigned the more detailed work and were paternalistically lauded “not only for their work, but for the influence of their inalienable tidiness and order, not to say anything about the attractions of their personal presence . . .”<sup>32</sup>

Despite the condescending attitude, some Oneida women clearly preferred manufacturing and industrial labor to housework. One Community woman, “C.,” wrote an article based on her experience in the silk factory. She found that housewifery was a “miserable, self-absorbing profession”. Instead, “factory work gives us women a chance . . . to taste of the pleasures of *production*. . . . It is

32. “Community Journal”, *Oneida Circular* (5 January 1874), 12–13.

more blessed to be producers than consumers. To many women, an hour or two a day of escape from the routine of household cares to some pleasant and profitable form of *productive* labor would be better . . . than a trip to Saratoga or daily draughts of ‘Plantation Bitters’”.<sup>33</sup>

In smaller Oneida offices, for example, Mr. Dunn worked as Community dentist and trained at least one young woman as his “assistant”. The only comment on Miss Hutchins’ work was that she made a set of artificial teeth for Mrs. Lynde which gave “excellent satisfaction”.<sup>34</sup>

Although men took care of the Community’s livestock and barns, at least two Oneida women worked for a period of time in the Community dairy. *The Circular* reported that Mrs. N., a “constant milker”, said that “instead of curling up over the register, she liked to straighten herself up in the frosty morning air—it put courage into her for all day. If a woman wants to slip out of her effeminacy, she cannot take a more effectual way than to milk in the winter.”<sup>35</sup> In the last decade of the Community’s existence Miss Jerusha Thomas carved out a place for herself as “presiding genius of the dairy” and seems never to have relinquished her position to the principle of rotation in work assignments. Corinna Ackley Noyes remembered her as “the homeliest woman in the world”. She was “short, square and flat. Her short hair was white and her complexion florid, her eyes were small and deep-set and her straight, thin-lipped mouth closed like a trap.” Miss Thomas did not indulge the children who gathered round to watch her work, but shouted, “Look out! Don’t get in the way.” The children were awed by her muscular prowess, as she swung and tossed heavy milk cans.<sup>36</sup> Miss Thomas obviously loved her solitary work. She was marvelously eccentric and would probably have been much the same person, doing the same work, even in the outside world.

33. “Community Journal”, *The Circular* (21 February 1870), 390. Emphasis in the original.

34. *The Daily Journal of the Oneida Community* (30 November 1866), 52.

35. “An Oneida Journal”, *The Circular* (29 October 1857), 163.

36. C. A. Noyes, *The Days of My Youth*, 77–78.

Another area of men's work in the Community which women entered was that of transportation. As the Community's outside business transactions increased, the Community decided to furnish the women with a horse and carriage for running light errands daily to Oneida Depot, probably to pick up and deposit mail, packages, and provisions.

In addition to the trap shop, machine shop, dentistry, dairy, and transportation, a few Community women gave service as gardeners and florists when seasonal demands were high. Community documents made only vague reference to women's work in the gardens and, therefore, little can be gleaned about the details of their work there.

#### HEAVY WORK AND SALES

In the fourth category of Community labor, which included heavy farming, carpentry, sawmilling, lumbering, traveling sales work, and neighborhood peddling, virtually no women participated. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, after the Community's move to Oneida, women helped with the heavy manual labor of clearing swamps, and lathed the first Mansion House. As the Community grew more prosperous, however, work became more sex-stereotyped. Despite increasing sex stratification in work assignments, on two occasions the Community exhorted women to work at heavy manual labor. Both occasions seemed dictated by economic necessity. In 1855, while the Community was still struggling for economic viability, a *Circular* article called for women to do "manly" outdoor work. The article was written in the manner of bestowing an educational opportunity on women, for it counseled, "a lesson in manly work every day would do more for [women's] education than ever so much playing on the piano, or sewing and sweeping".<sup>37</sup>

The second occasion during which the Community made an effort to expand women's work into traditional men's spheres coincided with the American Civil War. Again, it was a special case; the Community feared that manpower might become scarce.

37. "An Oneida Journal", *The Circular* (26 April 1855), 54.

George Cragin laid out the Community view that woman should be removed from her “irresponsible dependence upon her surroundings. . . .” A “true appreciation of women” would “lead to her elevation as a responsible co-worker with man, capable of the efficient exercise of good sense and true instincts in regard to all affairs of life that require planning and execution”. Cragin advocated having women drive teams of horses pulling mowing and raking machines on the farm, but drew the line against women’s using “the hoe, the spade, or the axe”, as “distasteful, if not repulsive, to truly God-given instincts in the heart of women”.<sup>38</sup> In the end, the Community did well during the War. No men were drafted, and the Community prospered.

In the case of peddling and commerce, Oneida women were systematically denied access to the outside world, because of both their peculiar dress which invited ridicule, and the protective paternalism of the Community’s male leadership. Because women were considered to be spiritually inferior to men, it was felt that they could not withstand the contamination from worldly influences that sales and peddling entailed.

#### IDEOLOGICAL ADMINISTRATION

In the final category of Community work, ideological administration, John Humphrey Noyes held tight control. Noyes always insisted that his divine inspiration sanctioned his authoritarian rule. Everyone joining the Community agreed to this central ideological principle and confessed his or her “union with Christ and Mr. Noyes”. Community sources often mentioned the “central members”, with whom, to some extent, Noyes shared his power. These central members included both men and women, but their duties were different.

Noyes’s male lieutenants often conducted evening meetings and elaborated Noyes’s religious theories. When Noyes was away on one of his frequent trips, these “apostolic deputies” ruled as vice-regents until Noyes’s return. The female central members included Noyes’s wife and two sisters. For a good part of the Community’s

38. “Women and Out-Door Labor”, *The Circular* (25 July 1864), 149.

history, “Father” Noyes’s titular counterpart was his wife, “Mother” Noyes. This title, however, seems mainly to have been honorific, for Harriet Holton Noyes was shy and diffident. Although she counseled Noyes privately, she was unsuited for public leadership, even of the female half of the Community population. She, in fact, spent much of her time at the Wallingford branch of the Community. Pierrepont B. Noyes remembered her chief contribution as “kindness to children”. At Oneida, therefore, Harriet Noyes Skinner and Charlotte Noyes Miller served, respectively, as “mother” of the Community, and “mother” to peer groups of young girls. Their main duties seem to have been to advise their brother John on the women’s points of view, and to preside at the infrequently called “women’s business meetings” at which such topics as the organization of housework, child care, health, and new members were discussed.<sup>39</sup> Skinner and Miller also set a formidable example in appearance, behavior, attitudes, and loyalty to Noyes for younger women to emulate. These female central members never led mixed meetings of the Community population, nor did they expound publicly on Noyes’s religious theories. Instead, they interpreted Noyes’s sexual theories and general decisions concerning Community life to the female populace. In addition, Harriet Noyes Skinner kept a close eye on sexual combinations in the Community, and reported these to her brother.

39. “Letter from Oneida”, *The Circular* (4 April 1864), 20.

## CONCLUSIONS

In attempting to determine how many hours Community women and men labored daily, we have, unfortunately, only one rather vague chart which Noyes compiled in 1868. He detailed the amount of Community labor as follows:

|                        | Number | Amount of labor per day |
|------------------------|--------|-------------------------|
| Able-bodied men        | 80     | 7 hours                 |
| Able-bodied women      | 84     | 6 hours 40 minutes      |
| Invalid and aged men   | 6      | 3 hours 40 minutes      |
| Invalid and aged women | 9      | 1 hour 20 minutes       |
| Boys                   | 4      | 3 hours 40 minutes      |
| Girls                  | 2      | 1 hour 20 minutes       |

At the end of the chart Noyes added, "This is exclusive of care of children, school-teaching, printing and editing *The Circular*, and much headwork in all departments".<sup>40</sup> Since women did much of the work in the first three categories, their number of hours at daily labor was more than Noyes calculated. It is also likely that he did not add the considerable time women spent at sewing, darning, mending, and knitting during evening meetings, since that period was considered "leisure" time.

Two sources are helpful in ascertaining women's work assignments in the various categories of Community labor already outlined. A census reported in *The O. C. Daily* of 15 March 1867, gave these work positions of the 111 females in the Community:

There were 25 "business women" as follows:

|                    |                          |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 4, counting room   | 1, shoe-business         |
| 1, store           | 1, green house           |
| 3, silk factory    | 1, school-teaching       |
| 4, printing office | 7, bag-shop              |
| 1, dentistry       | 1, librarian and company |
| 1, bag-bees        |                          |

40. "From the San Francisco *Evening Bulletin*", *The Circular* (28 March 1870), 15.

In addition, from June to November, three women were “entirely appropriated to the fruit business, and four to the company business, with continuous bees through the season, of all the women and children that have any time to spare”. The rest of the women were accounted for as follows:

- 28, no work due to “infancy, age, and infirmity”
- 12, under 15 or over 65
- 42, household work, which included “cooking, washing, dairy, bringing up children, all the sewing, dress-making, hat-making and braiding; preparing bedding for the boarding-houses; and one woman to oversee them. To assist in the house-work, six men are appropriated, and four hired girls.”

Another, similar census of women’s work at Oneida added five part-time workers in the machine shop; three instructresses in music, writing, and drawing; and four women making paper boxes and labels for the silk spools, with the help of several children.<sup>41</sup>

In their article, “The Oneida Community Experiment in Stirpiculture”,<sup>42</sup> Hilda Herrick Noyes and George Wallingford Noyes provided a list of forty-one women (ages twenty to forty-two years) who were selected for participation in the stirpiculture program, along with their occupations:

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| subordinate leaders                 | 2  |
| superintendents of departments      | 2  |
| editors                             | 3  |
| forewoman                           | 1  |
| accountants, reporters and teachers | 7  |
| compositors                         | 7  |
| housewives                          | 19 |

Thus, in both censuses, more Oneida women were classified as housekeepers than workers in any other category, with a significant

41. “Community Journal”, *Oneida Circular* (10 February 1873), 53.  
 42. In *Eugenics, Genetics, and the Family* 1 (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins Co., 1923): 377.

number of women working in light industry and in Community offices.

With the possible exception of the five part-time lathe operatives, Oneida women did work similar to that of their female counterparts in the outside world. Oneidans broke no ground in opening new occupations to women.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, men monopolized management and economic decision-making in the Community.

In general, women's work domain at Oneida was the traditional one of home, children, and light industry—similar to the work roles of their nineteenth-century female counterparts. In light of this fact it is difficult to see how Noyes “mingled the sexes” at labor in the Oneida Community. A few women worked with male counterparts, but the majority did not. The relatively few men, both Community members and male hired laborers, who did work at traditional women's tasks did so under commercial rather than familial conditions; that is, the men who assisted in the kitchen, bakery, and laundry were workers engaged in production on a fairly large scale, necessitated by the numbers of people to be served in the Oneida Community. Commercial laundries, bakeries, and eating establishments of the period commonly employed both male and female workers.

During their work day, most Oneida men and women came together for meals and leisure-time activities, much the same as they would have had they labored on farms and in small villages and homes in the outside world. Nonetheless, the communal efficiencies of work at Oneida expanded the amount of leisure time both

43. See Arthur C. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family; from Colonial Times to the Present 2* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1917–19): 182. Calhoun has concluded that women worked in more than a hundred different occupations in nineteenth-century America. Some commentators have been impressed that two women were editors of the *Oneida Circular* for a time, but this occupation for women also has nineteenth-century precedents. Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, for example, founded and edited her *Ladies Magazine* in 1828, and later went on to a long and successful career as editor of the very popular *Godey's Lady's Book*. Victoria Woodhull and her sister Tennessee Claflin published *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, and are credited with the first printing in the United States of Engel and Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. Suffrage organizations published magazines and newspapers that were owned, managed, and edited by women.



male and female workers in the Community could enjoy. Judging from Community sources, much of this leisure time was spent in reading, study, conversation, recreation, and sexual activity. Thus, Noyes's Community *did* "mingle the sexes" more frequently than their nineteenth-century counterparts, not so much at the workplace, however, as during their after-work activities. As for the principle of work rotation, it seems that Oneida women moved from one realm of women's work to another. Oneida women were dependent upon men and male decisions for their economic security.

As well as a shorter working day, Oneida women and men also enjoyed relatively more opportunities for self-education and cultural pursuits than non-Community members. Further, they labored in a communal sisterhood and brotherhood of believers. All but a few women at Oneida were entirely freed from the tasks of cooking, laundry, and child care, although in the case of child care, some Oneida mothers would have liked to have been more involved in their children's upbringing. Community life clearly offered Oneida women and men a better alternative to the working lives they would no doubt have led in the outside world. So long as the Community endured, members also benefited from an increased measure of economic security for themselves and their children, which depended on their collective life rather than the relative insecurities of nuclear family living. These advantages to Oneida members were substantial. At the same time, it is interesting that, his predictions to the contrary, Noyes's Community reproduced almost exactly the traditional sexual division of labor of the outside world. Despite Noyes's energetic alteration of many social practices of nineteenth-century mainstream society, he had no real commitment to changing gendered work roles.

The testimony of Pierrepoint B. Noyes, who lived in the Community until age ten, indicates how well the Community taught the separation of men's and women's work into traditional categories. Pierrepoint Noyes wrote that he early respected the men who were in charge of the factories because "they seemed surrounded by an atmosphere of masterful activity and accomplishment". During his childhood he learned the lesson that "the father

stood in our [Oneida children's] minds as a provider and protector of the family, in return for the housewifely labors of the mother".<sup>44</sup>

The gendered work roles of Oneida adults fortified John Humphrey Noyes's true vision of a patriarchal utopian society. The documentary record does not substantiate his claim that his holy community mingled the sexes in work.

44. P. B. Noyes, *My Father's House*, 74ff.

# Breaching the “Wall of Partition Between the Male and the Female”: John Humphrey Noyes and Free Love

BY LOUIS J. KERN

Whoever has well studied the causes of human maladies will be sure that Christ, in undertaking to restore men to Paradise and immortality, will set up his kingdom first of all in the bed-chamber and the nursery.

John Humphrey Noyes<sup>1</sup>

ONEIDA, ITS CRITICS MAINTAINED, was a “seedbed of free love, the nursery of anarchic doctrines” that threatened “the total destruction of the marriage relation”.<sup>2</sup> This paper will examine the cultural and religious contexts within which John Humphrey Noyes developed and implemented his ideas about free love.

Although the Putney Community (1843–48) and the Oneida Community (1848–79) were both theocratic, socialistic communities, critics were most concerned about the social and moral implications of their ideas—especially their Perfectionist claims of having irreversibly transformed the “Man of Sin” into the “Spiritual Man”.<sup>3</sup> Apologists for traditional evangelical denominationalism and self-appointed conservators of public morals saw Perfec-

1. *Bible Communism: A Compilation from the Annual Reports and Other Publications of the Oneida Association and Its Other Branches; Presenting in Connection with Their History, a Summary View of Their Religious and Social Theories*, chap. 3, proposition 14, n. 1 (1853; reprint, Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1972), 40. The quoted phrase in the title is from Noyes's “Battle-Axe Letter” (see nn. 12 and 13).

2. John B. Ellis, *Free Love and its Votaries; or American Socialism Unmasked. Being an Historical and Descriptive Account of the Rise and Progress of the Various Free Love Associations in the United States, and of the Effects of Their Vicious Teachings Upon American Society* (1870; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1971), 10.

3. The quoted phrases are from John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (1870; reprint, New York: Hillary House, 1961), 621 and 620, respectively. Perfectionism was derived from holiness theology, which was in turn

tionism as the foremost example of decadence in contemporary American social and ethical life, with “a strong tendency to ultraisms—ultraisms not only in religion and politics, but in almost every department of moral and philanthropic enterprise”.<sup>4</sup> “Noyesism” was most dangerous because it had embraced the human passions in all their vigor and, through misguided “enthusiasm, or phrenzy, or from deliberate imposture”, had been led into “licentiousness and criminal intercourse between the sexes”.<sup>5</sup>

Noyesism’s opponents seem to have viewed its institutional expressions in much the same way that today’s Americans perceive such cults as the Branch Davidians. To Oneida’s enemies, this “singular sect” exhibited a “deeply laid scheme of personal aggrandizement—a scheme designed to sever the ties of consanguinity—under the social relations—subvert the present order of society—sap the foundations of civil government—and erect [its system] upon the ruins of republican institutions and the relics of morality”. It was claimed that the subversion of society would be accomplished through a process quite similar to what modern cults have called “individual programming”. This process, according to a contemporary critic of the Oneida Community, was one

they had so often repeated that they had become adepts in the business of *breaking-down*; and the whole phenomena [*sic*] was so perfectly familiar that they could “calculate results with precision”. And under the influence of the great “moral magnet of inconceivable strength”, which was among them, is it at all strange that each devoted victim should be drawn within the “*charmed circle*,” and doomed to irretrievable ruin?<sup>6</sup>

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derived from New Light Calvinism as understood at the New Haven Theological Seminary, and it combined the theological perspectives of Nathaniel W. Taylor, Wesleyan Methodism, and the Edwardian tradition of evangelical revivalism.

4. Hubbard Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled; A History of the Sect Self-Styled Perfectionists, with a Summary View of Their Leading Doctrines* (1849; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1971), 402.

5. Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 400.

6. *Ibid.*, v, 179–80. The reference to a “singular sect” is found on p. 13.

To the “One-Love” party (as Noyes called the romantic advocates of strict monogamy), free love was a transcendently “dangerous Social Evil”, far worse than the petty vices that plagued Victorian social life. Other champions of conventional marriage, like John B. Ellis, recognized that some sexual deviations attend socially sanctioned marriage (and he even on occasion argued that prostitution was necessary to the preservation of monogamy). But he distinguished between these abuses and a system that, as he believed, sought to overthrow and replace the formalized institutionalization of sexual relationships:

Licentiousness is very different from Free Love. The former exists in secret and avoids publicity. The latter not only exists in defiance of the law, but seeks to destroy it, and to build up a system of its own, in which vice shall be made admirable and morality a reproach.<sup>7</sup>

Ellis claimed that “Free-Love experiments are failing when tried in organized communities”, but he thought the real issue was that the liberation of the affections threatened a broader social revolution, since “the principle is far more disastrous in society at large than at Oneida, Berlin Heights, or any of the other Free-Love hells of the country”.<sup>8</sup>

Noyes was not the first proponent of an antimarriage doctrine in the United States. He was preceded by the spiritual wifery movement, which smouldered amidst the embers of the great evangelical enthusiasms of the early nineteenth century, burst into flame upon contact with the spark of early Perfectionist controversies, and then scorched the burned-over district in the mid-1830s.<sup>9</sup> The movement sought to liberate those who were mismated from the toils of

7. Ellis, *Free Love*, 444.

8. *Ibid.*, 491, 492, respectively.

9. The idea of spiritual marriage, grounded in the purification of sexual relations through voluntary abstinence, had been part of the sexual tradition of early Christianity from the apostolic age to the sixteenth century. See Dyan Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993). See also William H. Dixon, *Spiritual Wives*, vol. 1, 2d ed. (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1868).

legal matrimony so they could seek their true “spiritual affinities”.

Spiritual wifism in practice led in two diametrically opposed directions: towards celibacy on the one hand and free divorce (or failing that, adultery) on the other. Lucina Umphreville, “Miss Anti-Marriage”, asserted that chastity must obtain between all who were under grace—“that females must not think of love; that the men must not woo them; that the church must not celebrate the marriage rite; and that those who had already passed beneath the yoke must live as though they had not”.<sup>10</sup> Those who were not so keen on mortifying the flesh, who wished not so much to bear the yoke in purity but to slip it altogether, found the position of Andrew Jackson Davis, the “Poughkeepsie Seer”, as expressed in his multivolume magnum opus, *The Great Harmonia* (1851–59), more congenial:

Should a man or a woman, after entering into the relation of husband and wife, become convinced, by various means, that each does not embody the other’s *ideal*, then they are not truly married—they are *divorced*; and both have a natural right to seek further for the embodiment of the heart’s *ideal* associate. Human legislation may not forbid them to marry again. In truth, men have no right to control arbitrarily the soul’s deepest, purest wants, the rights and elevations of true marriage.<sup>11</sup>

William H. Dixon, who considered spiritual marriage a libertine’s rationale for destroying monogamy, read Noyes’s “Battle-Axe Letter” of 15 January 1837 and concluded that he was preparing to launch his own theory of Spiritual Wifehood.<sup>12</sup> But Noyes, in his retrospective gloss on the letter, distinguished his “theory of absolute communism in love”, which “had never before been broached in

10. William H. Dixon, *Spiritual Wives* 2:12.

11. Quoted in Ellis, *Free Love*, 412.

12. Dixon, *Spiritual Wives* 2:51. The “Battle-Axe Letter” was a private epistle addressed to Noyes’s friend David Harrison. Though written “in the nakedness of privacy”, the letter quickly went the rounds of radical Perfectionists, and was published by Theophilus Gates in his antimarriage paper *Battle Axe and Weapons of War*. The letter is most readily available in Taylor Stoehr, *Free Love in America: A Documentary History* (New York: AMS Press, 1979), 498.

this world”, from “theories of limited affinityism or spiritual wifery, which is really marriage and nothing better”.<sup>13</sup>

In 1867, looking back with philosophical detachment on what he considered the excesses and “social irregularities” of the revivalism and reformism of the last three decades, Noyes observed that all “revivals breed social revolutions. . . . Religious love is very near neighbor to sexual love, and they always get mixed in the intimacies and social excitements of revivals”.<sup>14</sup> These upheavals of the affections resulted in gendered movements that sought to “revolutionize the relations of man and wife”, but in which men and women spun off in opposite directions. In such a divergence,

if women have the lead, the feminine idea that ordinary wedded love is carnal and unholy rises and becomes a ruling principle. Mating on the Spiritual plan, with all the heights and depths of sentimental love, becomes the order of the day. . . . On the other hand, if the leaders are men . . . polygamy in some form is the result. Thus Mormonism is the masculine form, as Shakerism is the feminine form, of the more morbid products of Revivals.<sup>15</sup>

Noyes rejected both conventional and revivalist sexuality. The latter, manifested in plurality of wives, liberalization of divorce, and marital abstinence, was indicative, for Noyes, of the sickly, unsound, and contaminated nature of contemporary American society. All of these practices represented attempts to address the symptomatology rather than the pathology of conventional marriage and monogamic sexuality. Americans suffered the effects of poor social hygiene, which found expression in emotional extremes—languishing affectivity on the one hand and febrile fleshiness on the other. But to the wise physician, these were merely superficial indications; the real source of the culture’s infirmity lay in the debilitation of the affections, especially the declining vigor of

13. Quoted in Stoehr, *Free Love in America*, 498.

14. Quoted in Dixon, *Spiritual Wives* 2:176–77.

15. *Ibid.*, 2:181–82.

romantic love and the weakening of its primary institutional support, monogamous marriage. For Noyes and the countercultural practitioners as well as for the more orthodox cultural homeopaths, appropriate therapy for society's sexual ills lay in purifying the affections and establishing a foundation for "true love" in "true marriage".

The conflict between the advocates of free love and the custodians of traditional marriage was played out in the context of the cult of sentimentality, which defined Victorian orthodoxy between 1830 and 1870. It allowed Americans to ignore or avoid unpleasant aspects of social reality and to reaffirm the status quo by holding fast to a romantic mythology—in which "true" women were apotheosized, children cherished, and all families harmonious—that obscured the fundamental crisis in social and emotional life: the loss of social confidence (at the height of the age of the "self-made man") occasioned by the too-frequent success of confidence men and tricksters. Lest he be duped by such characters (the unauthentic, delusory element of society) and led astray by their example, "the young American was told he must assume complete command of his own moral destiny for forming his own character from within".<sup>16</sup> In their preoccupation with personal authentication, the Victorians gave precedence to private experience over public life and gauged the value of private experience by its emotional intensity. Ideologically, evil came to be equated with the inauthentic, the superficial, the illegitimate.

Noyes's opponents cast him as a religious charlatan and a sexual confidence man. He was described as "the great *magician* of Putney", deceiving the credulous "with pretensions to wonderworking power"; "an impostor", manipulating the vulnerable "by *spiritual jugglery*", and using his "pretended miracles" "to humbug the people"—in short, as the arch-hypocrite and deceiver.<sup>17</sup>

16. Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), 25. Other ideas in this paragraph are based on the discussion on pp. xiv–xv, 60–62, and 83–84.

17. These phrases are from Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 183, 185, and 219. Emphasis in text.



Commenting on “Noyes’s doctrine of ‘sexual morality’”, Hubbard Eastman maintained that he

has fairly outstripped Mahomet himself, and thrown the great Arabian Impostor far back into the shade! Mahomet promised *his* faithful followers a paradise of sensual pleasures *after this life*, or in a future state of existence; but Mr. Noyes has fitted up such a place *in this world*, and offers to *his* followers *in this life* what Mahomet promised *after* this life. Thus it appears that Noyesism is *an improved and enlarged edition of Mahometanism!*<sup>18</sup>

Seeking to shock and titillate his readers with a recitation of the more sensationalist details of social life at Oneida, John B. Ellis observed that

there is no marriage here, consequently there are no such things as husbands and wives . . . men and women are entirely unrestrained in their approaches to each other. Promiscuous intercourse is the rule. . . . The women are the common property of the men and *vice versa*. No woman being a wife can claim a husband’s protection against the advances of those who are personally repugnant to her. She must submit. She must love all alike.<sup>19</sup>

By virtue of the psychological projections that sustained these fantasies, Oneida sexual practices were believed to be degrading to women. The sentimental ideology constructed lubricity as male and, in denying sexual desire to women, had no alternative but to cast her as victim. For the female, the social theory of Bible Communism, “more than all others, degrades and debases her, and leaves her a defenseless prey to the passions and caprices of the stronger sex”.<sup>20</sup>

Though exercised by their anxieties over the social and moral threat of free love, contemporaries were unable to conceive of cohabitation absolutely devoid of any formalized conjugal relations.

18. Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 115–16.

19. Ellis, *Free Love*, 175.

20. Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 295.

Their language suggests that for all their concern over the subversive tendencies of free love, they saw it as an alternative, albeit an execrably beastly, form of marriage.

Underscoring the public nature of Victorian discourse on sexuality, an anonymous Christian woman noted that

“Free Love” is nothing new; but until lately such relations have been held in secret. . . . Its doctrines have been whispered in the ear, among private circles. But now they have found public advocates, and in the promulgation of the doctrines of Free Love I recognize only an attempt to render respectable such acts and principles as have hitherto been confined to the secret resorts devoted to the gratification of the senses.<sup>21</sup>

While many saw in free love a primarily legal and institutional problem, on a deeper level it represented a profound psychological and emotional challenge to the moral imperatives and the emotional complacency of the culture of sentimentality. The controversies that swirled around free love raised the following questions: What is the essence of love? Is it morally and physiologically desirable to separate love from sex? Is reproduction the only legitimate justification for intercourse?

“True” love, as a sentimental expression of romantic monogamy, was motivated by “a desire to possess exclusively the affections of the beloved”. It found its ultimate fulfillment in reproduction, for “from such love, and such alone, can the true relations of parentage arise, and on fidelity to such love rests our social safety”. By contrast, “the false theories veiled under the specious name of ‘Free Love’” are grounded solely in “*passional attraction*”.<sup>22</sup> Sex thus becomes the exclusive criterion of gratified desire. As a mid-century female defender of romantic exclusivity put it, free love’s

claim for “variety” is in other words a confession, that *sexual passion in some men is insatiable, and no one woman can fully*

21. Quoted in Stoehr, *Free Love in America*, 428.

22. *Ibid*, 427, 429, and 430, respectively.



**John Humphrey Noyes and Charlotte Miller Leonard  
in the North Tower of the New Mansion House.**

*satisfy it and live.* This, I grant, is true. But *sexual desire* is not love. And I would not have young or old taken captive by an appeal to the senses, under the impression that they are obeying the high behests of love.<sup>23</sup>

“But *Love*”, she concludes, “makes no such claims. It places the animal nature completely under subjection to the higher powers of the soul. While Free Love clamours for continual indulgence, true love asserts a firm, wise self-control.”<sup>24</sup>

John Humphrey Noyes, as an advocate of free love first at Putney and later at Oneida, would have agreed that the discrete function of the sexual relationship was to establish an emotionally fulfilling yet principled love. The problem with the institutional framework of worldly sexuality, however, was that it was bound to the letter of the law of matrimony, to the virtual exclusion of the spirit of love. The substitution of the form for the essence tended to frustrate any honest attempt to realize the essentially passionate and affective imperatives that had brought the sexes together in the first place. Conventional marriage, then, was an anomaly: it marginalized and frustrated the fulfillment of the emotional needs of husband and wife and repressed the expression of the natural instincts of love, thus alienating the affections and hindering the realization of the “true” ends of marriage. The institution had become an end in itself and had ignored the vital importance of process to the achievement of its own proper ends.

Noyes’s free love doctrines aimed initially at the redemption of marriage and the elevation of sexual relations as the means or process to accomplish its primary purpose—the expression of “true” love. In the *Spiritual Magazine* of 15 December 1846, he wrote that “love cannot be perfect while one fear remains that it will not always last”. Too often the experience of those linked in worldly marriage was one of love “without security. . . . Their union has not been an eternal marriage, where divorce is impossible.” But for Perfectionism, the relationship between the sexes

23. Stoehr, *Free Love in America*, 430.

24. *Ibid.*, 427.

would be more reliably covenanted by a “union which has the security—which is entered into like marriage, with irrevocable bonds”.<sup>25</sup>

The key to attaining emotional security was conscious and unremitting attention to the *process* of the physical relationship between the sexes. The practice that created and maintained love in Noyes’s system was male continence (discovered by Noyes in 1844), a form of *coitus reservatus* that made it practicable to separate sex from reproduction.<sup>26</sup> In an anonymous letter published in *The Circular* in 1866 as an endorsement for male continence, an adherent of the practice from outside the Community pointed out its critical role in promoting love:

A man of God, or a true gentleman . . . would never desire anything of a woman the granting of which would not make her happier. To all such men your mode is the only true and refined one. . . . How many a fond husband [in conventional marital practice], with a heart filled with passionate love, has at least found his life made stale, irritable,

25. Quoted in Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 395.

26. Speaking of the first eight years of his marriage to Harriet Holton (1838–46), Noyes explicitly said that “it was during this period . . . that I studied the subject of sexual intercourse in connection with my matrimonial experience, and discovered the principle of Male Continence” (*Male Continence* [Oneida Community, 1872], 10). Havelock Ellis, the great pioneer sexologist of the early twentieth century, supported Noyes’s claim to discovery: “Noyes believed”, he wrote, “that ‘male continence’ had never previously been a recognized practice based on theory, though there might have been occasional approximations to it. This is probably true if the coitus is *reservatus* in the full sense, with complete absence of emission” (*Sex in Relation to Society*, pt. 3 of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* [New York: Random House, 1936], 2:554). Certainly, the postponement of ejaculation in order to heighten the sexual pleasure of both parties had been a central feature of India’s erotic practice for centuries before Noyes’s independent “discovery” of *coitus reservatus* and, indeed, had been formalized as a social expression of religious doctrine by sectarian Tantric Buddhism. For a fuller discussion of Tantric sexual practice, see Omar Garrison, *Tantra: The Yoga of Sex* (New York: The Julian Press, 1964). Also, George Noyes Miller, after his uncle’s death, referred to male continence as “Zugassent’s Discovery”. See his *After the Sex Struck; or Zugassent’s Discovery* (Boston: Arena Pub. Co., 1895).

and destitute of romance, in consequence of an unwise expression of his love.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, Oneidans maintained that they had secured “true” love by purifying sexual relations and regenerating the romantic elements that alone guaranteed emotional satisfaction. “Free Love, in the Oneida sense of the term”, they maintained, “is much less free, in the gross, sensual way, than marriage”:

The theory of sexual interchange which governs all the general measures of the Community . . . is just that which in ordinary society governs the proceedings in *courtship*. . . . It is the theory that love *after* marriage and always and forever, should be what it is *before* marriage—a glowing attraction on both sides, and not the odious obligation of one partner and the sensual recklessness of the other.<sup>28</sup>

Ferocious resistance on the part of defenders of conventional sexuality led the Oneida Community to deny its links to that “class of socialists called ‘Free Lovers’”, and to discriminate its theory and practice from the broader movement. A policy statement by Noyes that appeared in *The Circular* early in 1865 laid out the foundation of the Community’s position:

This terrible combination of two very good ideas—freedom and love—was probably first used in our writings about fifteen years ago, and originated in the Oneida school of socialists. It was however soon taken up by an entirely different class of speculators scattered about the country, and has come to be the name of a form of socialism with which we have but little affinity.<sup>29</sup>

This admission of paternity coupled with denial of responsibility for the offspring allowed Noyes to take credit for inventing the generic term, while simultaneously dodging the tarbrush of ortho-

27. “Male Continence”, *The Circular* (1 October 1866), 229.

28. *The Circular* (21 March 1870), quoted in Constance Noyes Robertson, ed., *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851–1876* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1970), 283.

29. “Free Love”, *The Circular* (6 February 1865), 369.

doxy that awaited the more strident and ultraist of the antimarriage reformers.

The term required, to Noyes's mind, an antinomian stance towards the civil and criminal law. Those who stood in the resurrection state "constituted a kingdom by themselves, beyond the jurisdiction of human judgment, and amenable in conscience only to the spiritual authority which belongs to Christ". Those in the resurrection order, while apparently in docile conformity to social convention, should maintain, however, not "an atom of loyalty in their hearts for the institutions of the world, but . . . [give] all their devotion, both of conscience and affection, to the kingdom of Christ".<sup>30</sup>

Noyes encapsulated the Community's position on free love in the section of *Bible Communism* entitled "The Bible on Marriage". "We avow ourselves", he wrote, "strictly and entirely Bible men—disciples of the New Testament of Christ and Paul, in relation to the subject of marriage".<sup>31</sup> In practical terms, that discipleship combined strands of heretical Puritanism and New Light evangelicalism—Hutchinsonian antinomianism and Edwardsean conceptions of the relationship of the will to the affections.

The antinomian strain of Perfectionist belief was clear in a letter Noyes wrote in 1839, in which he maintained that "the outward act of sexual connection is as innocent and comely as any other act, or rather . . . is the most noble and comely of all". That belief, however,

covered with any covering but that of the Spirit, is licentiousness. The same is true of every principle of human action. "Whatever is not of faith is sin"; and to him that

30. *Bible Communism*, 95, 116, respectively.

31. *Bible Communism*, 82. The essential Biblical texts that provided a doctrinal foundation for the practice of "complex marriage" (pantagamy) were 1 Cor. 7:17–19 (the nullification of the ordinance of circumcision) and Matt. 22:23–30 (the Sadducees' conundrum about the effects of the levirate on a woman in the resurrection). The importance assigned to the Sadducees' challenge to the notion of bodily resurrection in the Gospels is attested by the inclusion of the episode in two other essentially identical accounts. See Mark 12:18–25, and Luke 21:27–36.

believeth, “*all things are lawful*” [1 Cor. 10:23]. God tells me that He does not care so much *what* I do, as *how* I do it, and by this word I walk in all things. I never inquire whether it is *right* to do this or *wrong* to do that, but whether God *leads* me to do it or not.<sup>32</sup>

He had made the antinomian foundations of what he called “complex marriage” even clearer in his statement of his credo in *The Witness* in 1838:

1. I believe, that marriage does not exist in heaven.
2. I believe, that the will of God will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven: consequently that a time will come when marriage will not exist on earth. . . .
4. I believe, that in the heavenly state . . . the Holy Spirit takes the place of written law, and arbitrary ceremonies, in regard to the intercourse of the sexes, and all other matters.<sup>33</sup>

Roundly attacked for his heretical beliefs by orthodox clerics, Noyes argued that they merely practiced an inferior kind of antinomianism. Those who “impede the true tendency of these doctrines by misrepresenting their nature and trusting in written laws”, he declared, merely extol the letter of the law while rejecting the higher standard of “gospel experience”.<sup>34</sup> Theirs was a carnal antinomianism, his a spiritual.

Another Perfectionist heresy was a tendency to Arminianism—the rejection of the belief in innate human depravity, which rejection validated individual choice (free will), thereby implying that salvation hinged on personal conduct and merit and on individual effort, rather than on the arbitrary visitation of divine grace. But since that had become standard evangelical doctrine by the 1830s,

32. Letter to Mr. [Alonzo?] Hollister, 2 July 1839, quoted in Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 86–87.

33. *The Witness*, vol. 1, no. 4 (21 November 1838): 26.

34. *Ibid.*; and “Two Kinds of Antinomianism”, in John Humphrey Noyes, *The Berean: A Manual for the Help of Those Who Seek the Faith of the Primitive Church* (Putney, Vt.: Office of the Spiritual Magazine, 1847), 223. For critiques of Noyes’s antinomianism, see: Ellis, *Free Love*, 61–64; and Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 64–66, 262–64, and 275–79.



religious conservatives could only assail Noyes obliquely on this issue. Thus, John B. Ellis referred to “the Perfectionist being free to follow his own impulses”, and Hubbard Eastman charged that “they glory in their freedom”.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Noyes held to doctrines on the will that derived from the New Divinity school, whose institutional stronghold was the Yale Divinity School, whence it dominated the pulpits of the Connecticut River Valley churches in the early nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

Through the New Divinity men, his ideas on freedom of the will ran directly back to Jonathan Edwards. Noyes’s most succinct expression of his own thinking on this question came in his colloquy on the “Divinity of the Will”. In man resided a “central divine principle” that manifested itself as will (the faculty of choice). “We must not think of suppressing it”, he asserted, “but endeavor to always surround it with such attractions that in the Perfection and even delirium of liberty it will act right”.<sup>37</sup>

Noyes followed Edwards in believing that perfect holiness was grounded in the religious affections and in the freedom of the will, the two doctrinal elements that form the theological basis for his system of free love. The “spiritual appetite after holiness” and the “increase of holy affections” led Noyes, as they had Edwards, to the realization that “true religion consists in the affections”.<sup>38</sup> As Ed-

35. Ellis, *Free Love*, 63. Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 65.

36. The New Divinity school sought to reconcile rational and emotional religion and focused on the relationship between man and sin. They made a distinction between original sin (the Calvinist doctrine of congenital human depravity) and the actual sin of individuals. Conversion lay in the free exercise of the will, which in the regenerated person led to positive holiness, or triumph over sin. Noyes’s Perfectionism similarly maintained that sin was voluntary and that those whose will has been regenerated had attained perfect sanctification or complete holiness, i.e., had moved beyond sin.

37. John Humphrey Noyes, *Home Talks* (Oneida, N.Y.: Oneida Community, 1875), 118.

38. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections [Treatise Concerning Religious Affections]*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), 377. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, in *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), clarifies Edwards’s doctrine on the affections. “The ‘affections’, to Edwards”, he notes, “are not simply the passions or even the ‘will’, but more

wards expressed it, “Love is not only one of the affections, but it is the chief of the affections, and the fountain of all the affections. . . . [and] from a fervent love to men will arise all other virtuous affections toward men”.<sup>39</sup>

Although frequently mistaken for an absolute Arminian, Noyes shared Edwards’s disdain for what was “vulgarly called liberty” and his belief that volition was truly free only when determined by the good. As Edwards wrote,

the liberty of moral agents does not consist in self-determining power; and . . . there is no need of any such liberty, in order to the nature of virtue . . . but that the state or act of the will may be the virtue of the subject, though it be not from self-determination, but the determination of an extrinsic cause. . . . God does decisively, in his providence, order all the volitions of moral agents.<sup>40</sup>

The religious affections reveal a God, who is “infinitely becoming and lovely”. They draw the human soul on to “perfect and glorious holiness and goodness”. The perfected will is free only insofar as it has been liberated from the tyranny of the lower, natural order of “present pleasure” and has become bound to determination by a higher order of the moral good that offers “greater advantage at a distance”. The will is free, then, only when it chooses the good. For Edwards, by definition, the regenerated will is only capable of choosing good; if evil is chosen, the will is unregenerate, and in its subordination to evil, unfree.<sup>41</sup>

As a Perfectionist, and like Edwards a practitioner of experiential religion, Noyes stood on the principle that “whoever commiteth

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fundamentally, that which moves a person from neutrality or mere assent and inclines his heart to possess or reject something” (p. 303).

39. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 107–8.

40. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will [A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern and Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of the Will, Which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame]*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), 433.

41. Phrases quoted are from: Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 255 ; and *Freedom of the Will*, 144, respectively.

sin is the servant of sin [John 8:34], and cannot be a freeman. Christ, as a Savior from sin, is the liberator and can make us free by setting us free from selfishness".<sup>42</sup> "True liberty" requires the death of "the liberty of *independence*" (the freedom of the will to choose evil), a false liberty that "proves in the end to be horrible bondage". No "man, governed by selfish passions deserves liberty". God must "restrain any tendency of that kind", "purge out . . . any remaining desire for that kind of liberty", and "force us, if need be into the liberty of heaven, the liberty of unity"—"the liberty of fellowship—liberty to approach one another and love one another—the liberty of Communism", issuing in "a genuine love feast—a flowing together of hearts".<sup>43</sup> "Perfect liberty", or redeemed free will, thus provided the theological foundation for the social intercourse of Bible Communism. For Noyes, the perfection of free will was a prerequisite to the practice of free love; it was essential for the spiritual man to achieve control of the flesh before he could safely undertake the practice of male continence, and before the community could begin "the experiment of a new state of society".

At the outset, Noyes was stating a resurrection theory of the relation of the sexes that could only come to prevail subsequent to the full spiritual integration of man. In the "Battle-Axe Letter" (1837), for example, he anticipated a resurrection state in which "there will be no marriage". "But", he warned, "woe to him who abolishes the law of apostasy before he stands in the holiness of the resurrection".<sup>44</sup> In *The Witness* in 1838 he declared categorically that "I do NOT believe that any have attained to that state [the heavenly state] that are now on earth".<sup>45</sup> It was not until 1846 that Noyes and his Putney followers had achieved (so they believed) the

42. Noyes, "Liberty", *Home Talks*, 348.

43. Phrases drawn from Noyes, "Liberty", *Home Talks*, 348, 346, 348, 350, and 346, respectively.

44. Stoehr, *Free Love in America*, 497. The state of "apostasy" that Noyes refers to here is the universal condition of the unregenerated human will. Those lacking the indwelling presence of divine grace are quite appropriately subject to all civil and ecclesiastical law—"the law of apostasy". This is essentially a restatement of the classic antinomian position.

45. *The Witness*, vol. 1, no. 4 (21 November 1838): 26.

necessary perfection for sanctification to sit at the table of “the marriage supper of the Lamb”, that feast at which “*every dish* is free to every guest”.<sup>46</sup>

Once having entered the practice of complex marriage, the Bible Communists sought to insulate as precisely as possible their social system from “bad men [who] might avail themselves of our sexual theories for licentious purposes”; to discriminate it from practices entailing infanticide, abortion, or “artificial tricks for frustrating the natural effects of propagation”.<sup>47</sup> They found it particularly galling to be linked, in the public mind, with the sexual doctrines of Robert Dale Owen and Fanny Wright, especially “their commendation of Onanism”.<sup>48</sup> Free love at Oneida was precisely the opposite of a “licentious state of freedom”, since, they boasted, “amativeness, the lion of the tribe of human passions, is conquered and civilized among us”.<sup>49</sup>

Oneida, under the social system of complex marriage, wished to be seen as closer to orthodox sexual practices than to licentious heterodoxy. By virtue of Bible Communism, they maintained, we

hold to freedom of love only within our own families. . . .

In respect to permanency, responsibility, and every essential point of difference between marriage and licentiousness, the Oneida Communists stand with marriage. Free Love with them does *not* mean freedom to love to-day and leave to-morrow; nor freedom to take a woman’s person and keep their property to themselves; nor freedom to freight a woman with offspring and send her downstream without care or help; nor freedom to beget children and leave them to the street and the poorhouse. Their communities are *families*, as distinctly bounded and separated from promiscuous society as ordered households. The tie that binds

46. “Battle-Axe Letter”, quoted in Stoehr, *Free Love in America*, 497

47. John Humphrey Noyes, *Male Continence*, 2d ed. (Oneida, N.Y.: Office of the American Socialist, 1877), 5, 7.

48. *The Witness*, vol. 1, no. 4 (21 November 1838): 26.

49. *Bible Communism*, 19.

them together is as permanent and sacred to say the least, as that of marriage, for it is their religion.<sup>50</sup>

Free love at Oneida can best be understood as a system of limitation; the nature of freedom lay in restriction and control. Complex marriage was uncompromisingly antiproprietary in social relations and, in the spirit of “actual Communism”, renounced all selfish possession, “exclusiveness in regard to women and children”.<sup>51</sup> The “one-sided freedom” of marriage, the “liberty of the strong to oppress the weak [which] seems to be recognized and tolerated as inevitable and right in all popular forms of sexual relations”, they condemned, as well as “the liberty of marriage, as commonly understood and practiced . . . the liberty of a man to sleep habitually with a woman; liberty to please himself alone in his dealings with her; liberty to expose her to child-bearing, without care or consultation”.<sup>52</sup>

Paternalistic hegemony in the form of sexual proprietorship was abolished through the institutions of pantagamy and male continence. The combined impact of these “twin relics” of free love was powerfully subversive of the Victorian ideal of wedlock. The Oneidans inverted the romantic myth that monogamic marriage was the conservator of “true” love and that love was the primary *raison d'être* of matrimony by enlarging the sphere of the affections and locating it explicitly outside of normative marital relations. Sex was at once chained and loosed in this system, for it bound the heart with silken cords of sentiment, while simultaneously liberating the expression of physical desire by separating sex from reproduction.

The Oneida attack on romantic obsession and the cupidity of marriage found expression in the Community ideal of a “communism of hearts”, where all men strove collectively “to have the heart enlarged so as to cease to be a husband and become a univer-

50. “Special Notice”, *Oneida Circular* (21 August 1871), 265.

51. *Bible Communism*, 29. See also pp. 30–31, and Robertson, *Oneida Community*, 280.

52. “Free Love”, *The Circular* (7 March 1870), 401.

sal lover". The ultimate goal of Noyes's sexual system was to free love from fixation on isolated objects and from sexual dependence, and to make it general. "The Supreme affection", he maintained, demands that

amativeness must come in as the servant of catholic love. The present order of affections must be completely reversed. The acute love that the novels make so much of as being the primary affection, to which friendship is only an accessory, must itself subside into an accessory to friendship. Love that turns in all directions, toward God himself first, and then toward all mankind, must occupy the middle of the picture, and the specialities of amativeness must come in as accessories.<sup>53</sup>

Oneidans confessed that their purpose was the "civilization of the passions". Making love, they believed, was an art. "It is", one Community member said, "an attempt to express a sense of beauty and goodness. . . . It allows a person to express feelings that he cannot give any reason for, and to praise his sweetheart merely because it is a musical operation to himself and her."<sup>54</sup>

In the physical relationship between the sexes, the practice of male continence and of "ascending fellowship"<sup>55</sup> assured that *process* took priority over product, and made free love an art of fellowship rather than an impulsive expression of the exuberance of animal

53. Noyes, "The Superior Affection", *Home Talks*, 332–33. For other statements on the purification of love and its universalization, see Ellis, *Free Love*, 165; and Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled*, 395.

54. *Mutual Criticism* (1867; reprint, Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1975), 67. The prior phrase is from p. 42.

55. In every relationship, Noyes believed, one of the two partners was the natural spiritual superior to the other. From the point of view of the lower partner, the association would be considered "ascending fellowship"; from the point of view of the higher partner, it would be considered "descending fellowship". Since all social and spiritual relationships were seen in the light of this doctrine, those at the upper reaches of the associational hierarchy, it was argued, drew their strength from a more direct association with the divine spirit. Those who were most "advanced" in community doctrine were considered to be superior partners regardless of gender.

spirits. Free love became the antithesis of worldly licentiousness by virtue of “the real self-denial which it requires [that] cannot be adjusted to their [libertines’] schemes of pleasure seeking”. Complex marriage at Oneida was legitimized by male continence, which solved the “darkest of all problems”—“how to subject human propagation to the control of reason”.<sup>56</sup>

Solving this problem required that the propagative and erotic aspects of sexual intercourse be separated. Noyes’s discovery of a sexual technique to insure that separation was based on his division of the male role in the sex act into two parts—intromission and ejaculation. For the male, institutionalized sexual practice was nonorgasmic; sex became pure process, over which, ideally, the male had absolute control. The rational control of the male over the emotions and the physiological course of the sex act assured female liberation from the “suffering and miseries of involuntary propagation” and freed men to enjoy to the fullest “the sweetest and noblest period of intercourse with woman”.<sup>57</sup>

The language Noyes used in describing the benefits of his system underscores its freedom of choice. The whole process of intercourse up to emission is “voluntary”; only the final crisis is “involuntary” or “uncontrollable”. Men can “choose” to stop the progress of the act “at any point in the voluntary stages of it”. Indeed, the separation of propagation from the typical sex act insures the freedom of reproduction as well, for it “provides that impregnation and child-bearing shall be voluntary, and of course desired”. This freedom of reproduction is “a great deliverance” for both men and women, and insures the regeneration of love and sexuality.<sup>58</sup> “Our method”, Noyes concluded,

56. Noyes, *Male Continence*, 5, 7.

57. *Ibid.*, 4, 9.

58. *Ibid.*, 9, 10, and 13. Since female orgasm in absence of seminal emission was a nonreproductive act, women’s sexual climaxes were not restricted in Noyes’s theory, and in practice, women were encouraged to pursue erotic pleasure through intercourse. See discussion of female sexuality in my *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 243–46.

simply proposes the subordination of the flesh to the spirit, teaching men to seek principally the elevated spiritual pleasures of sexual connection, and to be content with them in their general intercourse with women, restricting the more sensual part to its proper occasions. This is certainly natural and easy to spiritual men, however difficult it may be to the sensual.<sup>59</sup>

Male continence, then, the foundation for the practice of free love at Oneida, affirmed that “the social function of the sexual organs is their superior function, and that which gives man a position above the brutes”, and guaranteed that the amative function would remain “as superior to [the] reproductive as we have shown love to be to propagation”.<sup>60</sup>

The doctrine of ascending-descending fellowship provided the most succinct statement of the social and ideological effects of the practice of male continence. As Noyes put it,

while in ascending fellowship there is no self-limitation, because you are limited by your superior[,] in the descending fellowship you must be prepared to limit both yourself and those with whom you associate. Self-limitation is the principle which qualifies one for the descending fellowship. In the fellowship between man and woman, for instance, man is naturally the superior and his business is self-limitation. We hold that man is not only responsible for his own limitation but for that of the female.<sup>61</sup>

Free love at Oneida was thus oxymoronic; it was precisely the limitation on love that made it free. In the doctrinaire terms of Community belief and ritual, movement in the direction of free-

59. Noyes, *Male Continence*, 17. Male ejaculation was to be restricted to those occasions when the partners mutually agreed that the sex act should result in conception. After the initiation of “scientific propagation” at Oneida (1867), this effectively meant that male orgasm was restricted to those selected to father children under the eugenic breeding program (stirpiculture), although there seem to have always been some whose control was faulty.

60. Noyes, *Male Continence*, 15.

61. Noyes, “The Law of Fellowship”, *Home Talks*, 205.



dom (will) was ascending fellowship; movement in the direction of love (sex) was descending fellowship. Free love at Oneida was essentially a freedom of negation, a freedom *from* more than a freedom *for*, a liberation through empowerment over obstacles to an ethical emotional life rather than an expansion of erotic rights.

Antilegality and free will meant the abolition of “bacchanalian revelry” and licentiousness. Oneidans sedulously maintained that their kind of free love was neither “seditious” nor “unchaste”, and that those “imputing indecency to us, simply by inference from our free principles, only show that they have no confidence in their own virtue, except as it is secured by law”.<sup>62</sup> In other words, doctrinaire proponents of orthodox marriage were slaves to the law and bondsmen of sin.

The “law of marriage” was also unnatural; the “worldly system of sexual intercourse” perverse. Free love, on the contrary, was natural and salubrious. Noyes analogized “fleshly attractions” to the irresistible force that drew steel to the magnet. “If nothing intervenes”, he wrote,

and the tangent ends are plane surfaces, the steel advances to plane contact. If the tangent ends are ball and socket, or mortise and tenon, the steel, seeking by the law of attraction the closest possible unity, advances to interlocked contact. Attraction being the essence of love . . . man and woman are so adapted to each other by the differences of their natures, that attraction can attain a more perfect union between them.<sup>63</sup>

In “a state of unobstructed love”, a true union of “interlocked contact”, “variety . . . [became] in the nature of things, as beautiful and useful in love as in eating and drinking. . . . This is the law of nature, thrust out of sight, and condemned by common consent, and yet secretly known by all.”<sup>64</sup>

The secret history of the heart affirmed that free love was the most natural expression of the affections, and that it brought hu-

62. *The Circular* (7 March 1852), quoted in Robertson, *Oneida Community*, 273.

63. *Bible Communism*, 32.

64. *Ibid.*, 33, 35.

man emotional life and social institutions into agreement with the biological requirements of the natural order. Only the congruence of human behavior with natural law could make sex safe for society. Noyes argued that the unity of the sexes must be “according to the demands of nature”; “the only way to make it [the sexual instinct] safe and useful, is to give it a free and natural channel”.<sup>65</sup> Thus, free love, as a kind of universal moral reform, would restore the equilibrium of the natural world to human societies and thereby promote sexual hygiene and physical and psychological health.

In a culture as obsessed with the authenticity of experience as Victorian America, Noyes’s system of free love promised as well to reestablish the “true union of the sexes”. It would reconcile male and female by overcoming the gender alienation resulting from society’s false perception of the sinfulness of the sex act and the shame associated with the body and with sexual desire. His goal was society’s acceptance of the human sex drive as a natural, innocent biological urge. “True modesty”, as Noyes saw it, was

a sentiment which springs not from aversion or indifference to the sexual organs and offices, but from a delicate and reverent appreciation of their value and sacredness. . . . The shrinking of shame is produced by a feeling that the sexual nature is vile and shameful. Modesty and shame ought to be sundered, and shame ought to be banished from the company of virtue, though in the world it has stolen the very name of virtue. Any one who has true modesty . . . would sooner consent to the banishment of singing from heaven, than of sexual music.<sup>66</sup>

But at Oneida, the notes of the sexual score would be played not only *appassionata*, but by virtue of the practice of pantagamy, *ad libi-*

65. *Bible Communism*, 37. While the latitude of sexual choice was clearly more restricted than would have been the case under a more liberal construction of free love, it still provided Community members much more sexual latitude in selection of partners than conventional monogamy.

66. *Ibid.*, 41, 55.

*tum*, and by means of male continence, *sostenuto*. And the words of the song would come into perfect harmony with the music of sex.

Liberty of the will, expressed by institutionalized free love, would minister simultaneously to the personal and the communal. The individual would become one with his fellows and with the natural order of things. Sexual subjects would be discussed openly. As Noyes expressed it,

the sentiment of shame attempts a hopeless war with nature. Its policy is to prevent pruriency by keeping the mind in ignorance of sexual subjects; whilst nature is constantly thrusting those subjects upon the mind. Whoever would preserve the minds of the young in innocence by keeping them from “polluting images”, must first of all carry moral reform into the barn-yard and among the flies.<sup>67</sup>

Though the culture of shame thought only to despise the passions and to degrade sexual intercourse, Noyes had a visionary’s faith in the sanctification of sex. “Of all the pleasures of the senses”, he wrote, “sexual intercourse is intrinsically the most spiritual and refined; for it is intercourse of human life with human life, whereas in every other sensual enjoyment, human life has intercourse with inanimate matter, or life inferior to itself”.<sup>68</sup>

The practice of free love under institutionalized pantagamy and male continence at Oneida unbound the passions, privileged pleasure over reproduction, and licensed Community members to “love one another *fervently* . . . [or] *burningly*”. The liberation of pleasure in sex was a therapeutic innovation because it promoted physical and psychological health. “Amativeness”, Noyes said, “is eminently favorable to life”, whereas the “alienation of the sexes” only insured that the “source and distribution of life” would remain “deranged and obstructed”.<sup>69</sup>

67. *Ibid.*, 55.

68. *Ibid.*, 57.

69. *Ibid.*, 31 and 44, respectively. The sex act, for Noyes, was sacramental; it distributed the force of divine love. Therefore, in any sex act, the spiritually superior partner, while engaging in “descending fellowship” when

Oneidans believed that such a unified consciousness of emotional and sexual matters had the potential to transform society. This system of free love would promote intimate social cohesion by overcoming selfishness; would emancipate labor by breaking down the barriers that separated the sexes at work; and would, in the grand scheme of things, advance the moral and physical progress of the race. When the utopian day of jubilee dawns, under “freedom of love”, “the refining effects of sexual love . . . will be increased a thousand-fold, [and] when sexual intercourse becomes a method of ordinary conversation and each is married to all”, it “will at once raise the race to new vigor and beauty, moral and physical”.<sup>70</sup>

The genius of Noyes’s sexual discovery, male continence, was that it subsumed the ascetic sensibility towards intercourse under a romanticized physical technique. Separation of the amative from the propagative aspects of the sex act rendered it “a joyful act of friendship”, and the skill and precision required for the practice of male continence elevated intercourse to “a place among the ‘fine arts’”.<sup>71</sup> Noyes, then, in his practical system of intercourse, contributed materially to laying the foundations for a modern sexual sensibility. In lovemaking, refined technique and conscious attention to the details of the act came to comprise the essential skills of the ideal lover.

Although Noyes himself specifically rejected any use of artificial means of contraception, his separation of pleasure from reproduction and the superordination of pleasure over propagation pointed the way toward a modern sexual consciousness. His insistence on frank and open discussion of sexual questions and on matter-of-fact acceptance of sex as a natural biological function provided the basis for later public sex education programs—what, after all, was his treatise on *Male Continence* if not a sexual hygiene and sex educa-

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the act is considered purely from a physical point of view, is engaging in “ascending fellowship” when the sex act is seen from a spiritual perspective. Sex thus became the medium for bridging physical and spiritual experience.

70. *Bible Communism*, 53. See also pp. 59–61.

71. *Ibid.*, 53.



John Humphrey Noyes.

tion pamphlet? He also pioneered in undertaking one of the earliest eugenics experiments in America and in institutionalizing birth control (though social contraception at Oneida did not employ what Noyes called “artificial means”). His influence can be traced to the widespread modern practice of contraception (although he most assuredly would have disapproved of most of the current methods), and by extension to such contemporary techniques of conception as *in vitro* fertilization and artificial insemination that rely on the separation of the physical sex act and male ejaculation from conception.

In social terms Noyes, despite an inveterate belief in female moral inferiority, provided a model for the emancipation of women as domestic chattels and their protection from the perils of childbirth by communizing marriage and terminating the proprietary control of the husband. Persons would no longer be defined as property solely on the basis of their gender. Ironically, by strengthening the moral hegemony of the male in complex marriage through the practice of normatively nonorgasmic sex for men, he also liberated sexual pleasure for women. Since women were defined as morally inferior and did not expend their vital energy in sexual climax to the same degree as men, they were expected to experience orgasms at Oneida. For the male, except under conditions of propagative intercourse, sex was pure process, whereas for the female, it integrated process and end. Noyes, then, was unable, finally, to transcend the sexual ethics of the double standard.

Noyes saw himself as a radical social reformer and evinced great impatience with gradualism, though his system of perfected sexuality was, he realized, potentially “incendiary and dangerous”. To the modern social critic, it is clear that Noyes’s system threatened—as his critics had charged from the beginning—the subversion of both the civil and ecclesiastical order because it was, quite self-consciously, revolutionary. Complex free love sought to “break up the social system of the world, and [to] establish true external order by the reconciliation of the sexes”. Following the principle that “holiness must go before free love”, the Oneida Perfectionists

believed they had achieved the spiritual grace to “revolutionize sexual morality”.<sup>72</sup>

That revolution did not come in their time, and the forces of conventional sexual morality reestablished social control. But John Humphrey Noyes had exposed the sentimental pieties and romantic myths of Victorian sexuality to the glaring light of reason. He was the most innovative sexologist of his age. Unlike most other free lovers, he went beyond ideological prescriptions for ideal gender behavior, or personal social rebellion, and developed a practical sexual science that established physical ground rules for the sex act itself. Though he repeatedly denied the label, Noyes was nonetheless one of the greatest practitioners as well as one of the chief proponents and theorists of free love in the nineteenth century. Through the subtleties and complexities of his free love system, Father Noyes of Oneida expressed a new sexual aesthetics and fostered a new erotic consciousness that made him a father, as well, of modern sexual attitudes and sensibilities.<sup>73</sup>

72. *Bible Communism*, 42. Phrases quoted earlier in the paragraph are from pp. 63, 34, and 41, respectively.

73. The connections between Noyes's ideas, including the practice of male continence, and modern sexual attitudes and behavior is recognized in a brief discussion of Oneidan sexual practices in Samuel and Cynthia Janus, *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior* (New York: John Wiley, 1993), 173.

# An Interview with Spencer Klaw

BY MARY BETH HINTON

*Mr. Klaw's recently published book, Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community,<sup>1</sup> has provoked varying, but generally enthusiastic, responses from coast to coast. A few reviewers took him to task for failing to see Oneida's leader, John Humphrey Noyes, as the wicked tyrant that he was. Conversely, one reviewer chided him for judging Mr. Noyes too harshly.*

*Since graduating from Harvard University in 1941, Mr. Klaw has been a writer and editor. His other books include The Great American Medicine Show (1975) and The New Brahmins: Scientific Life in America (1968). Between 1947 and 1952 he was a reporter for The New Yorker. He has contributed to American Heritage, Esquire, Fortune, Natural History, Playboy, Harper's Magazine, and The Reporter. From 1980 to 1989 he was editor of the Columbia Journalism Review.*

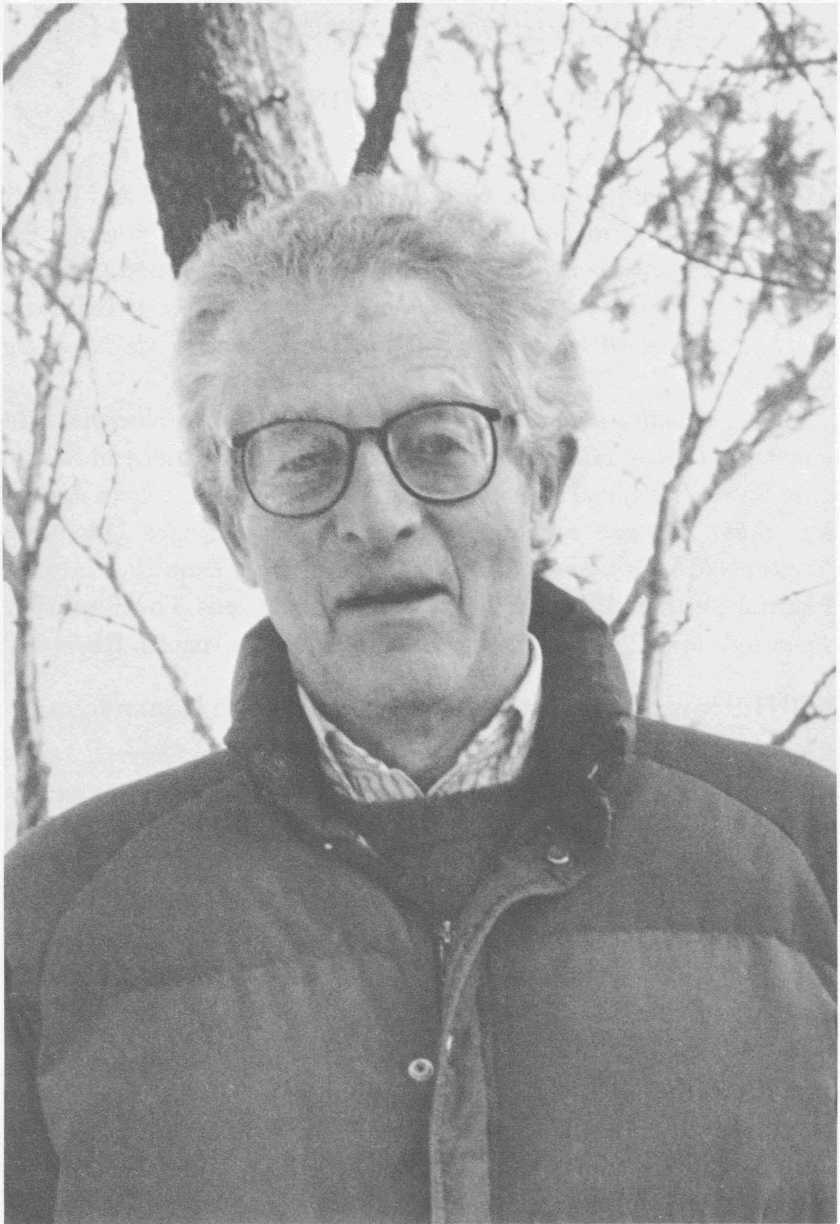
MBH: How did you get interested in the Oneida Community?

SK: A good many years ago I wrote an article for *Harper's Magazine*<sup>2</sup> about a modern utopia builder, B. F. Skinner, who was a Harvard professor of psychology and the man who invented the Skinner Box (in which he raised his daughter). He had written a book called *Walden Two* about an imaginary utopian community. At the time I interviewed him, Skinner was planning to start a real-life utopian community more or less modeled on his *Walden Two* community. His specifications for the community got very detailed. He even had lists of what would be available in the refrigerator for midnight snacks. I asked him, "What about those nineteenth-century utopian communities?" He dismissed them because he said the founders hadn't known anything about behavioral, social engineering. I decided to check them out anyway for a sen-

1. New York: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1993. In October 1994 the book will appear in paperback.

2. Spencer Klaw, "Harvard's Skinner, The Last of the Utopians", *Harper's Magazine* 226 (April 1963): 45-51.





Spencer Klaw.  
(Photo: Peter Del Tredici.)

tence or two. I found out that most had indeed failed pretty quickly. But there was this one outstanding exception, which was the Oneida Community. It had lasted for thirty-odd years; a generation had grown up there. I just filed Oneida in my mind as something I might want to pursue sometime. Finally, years later, I did.

MBH: Many people who believe themselves to be spokespersons for God end up in psychiatric hospitals. Was John Humphrey Noyes a psychotic or a great spiritual leader?

SK: Well, I certainly can't for a minute think that he was a psychotic. If he were a psychotic, I would have to think that St. Paul was a psychotic or that Martin Luther was a psychotic. I think the belief that one has a special relationship to God is easy to write off as pure dementia. If somebody in the subway comes up to you and says, "I am Jesus. I died on the cross for you." I'm probably going to think that he is mentally ill. But in Noyes's context, in the religious environment in which he grew up, it was not unusual to believe in the imminence of the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. So I don't think he was psychotic. That doesn't mean that I happen to think he really did talk to God because I'm not sure there is a God. But he believed it, and he seemed to me to be thoroughly healthy mentally.

MBH: What about when, as a young man, he went through so much turmoil? Even his family thought he was deranged.

SK: At that time he was undergoing a supremely difficult experience of religious conversion, and certainly would seem to have been mentally unstable. But one would have to draw the same conclusion about some stage in the life of Martin Luther. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James describes prophets and their feelings—their agony and self-doubt and questioning of their own faith. Noyes was not unique at all in that respect. With his visions and his sense that the devil was grappling for his soul, he was not well balanced. But he sounded just like many other religious leaders, and when he emerged from that episode he seemed to be thoroughly in command of himself.

It's a difficult question. We don't think that a shaman or an In-

dian faith healer is deranged because he believes in things that we don't believe in. I don't think, for instance, that devout Catholics are mentally unbalanced because they believe that the Pope, through apostolic succession, is the vicar of Christ on earth. From my atheistic standpoint, that's an untrue belief, but I don't think that people who believe it are mentally sick. You have a point about the time when Noyes was wandering in the spiritual wilderness with the devil pursuing him. He was definitely at that time, if not entirely off his nut, at least sliding off it. But he recovered.

MBH: Some people say that the Oneida Community existed as a pretext for indulging sexual appetites. Another perspective is that Noyes was courageous in defying Victorian strictures. What is your own opinion?

SK: It would be much nearer to the second. I have no doubt that complex marriage served Noyes's own powerful sexual drives and rationalized his desire to have different sexual partners. The system that he built was interesting—I don't know that I'd use the word courageous, but it certainly was bold, innovative, a remarkable experiment. It showed that human beings can live together under many different sets of rules, other than, say, the ones that would have been prescribed by nineteenth-century Anglican missionaries. There are many different forms of sexual relations and taboos, and this was an experiment which, to a large degree, worked.

MBH: Often in our society sex is either cheapened or ignored. But the Oneida Community celebrated sex as a sacred and joyful part of life. Maybe Noyes's system deserves to be taken more seriously.

SK: Yes, I think so—and I don't think it was just an excuse to have sex. In fact, many people found it very difficult to adjust to the sexual life of the Community. They didn't want to take part in it as actively as Noyes did. For one thing, Noyes happened to be a man of very powerful sexual appetites. Well, a lot of people are, and a lot of people aren't. But the last thing you could say about Oneida was that it was in any way a licentious community. Everything at Oneida was infused with a sense of moral purpose and divine wor-

ship. Maybe Noyes's ideas were kooky, but then a lot of religious ideas are kooky by my standards. Noyes thought that sexual pleasure was not simply a device to lure people into propagation and thereby perpetuate the human race. The joy of sex was an end in itself; it was given to man for his pleasure by God. This is not quite the same as what we think of as hedonism. Noyes's sexual theories may have been self-serving, but they were embraced within a more or less rational ethical system.

MBH: What are the lessons about love and work that the Oneida Community can teach us?

SK: In writing the book, I didn't think about what lessons we could learn. I thought about entering into the life of the Community and describing it as faithfully as I could, to create a kind of portrait of the Community and its founder. But I think we can learn something from Oneida about love and work. *Leben und Arbeiten* are after all what Freud said man (he meant man and woman, I guess) was placed on earth to do. That's what John Humphrey Noyes said, too, only he added the worship of God.

At Oneida work was treated as part of the fabric of life. People worked together, changed jobs, shifted, and kept up a great variety in their lives. I don't know if we can duplicate that in our lives, or if we even want to duplicate it, but it did work in that many people at Oneida led happy and fulfilled lives. And to the extent that complex marriage caused pain and jealousy and breaking up of pairs of lovers, the young women having unselfishly to yield up a lover to another young woman—all of this was painful. But you have to ask yourself, how painful were the lives of women in the outside world in Victorian America, living on farms and in small towns in New York State? They, too, underwent terrible pains, many of which were absent at Oneida. When you stand back and try to take a larger view of it—I know this has been much debated in scholarly literature—the life at Oneida had a great many advantages and attractions for women compared with what was available to them outside.

MBH: How would you characterize the kind of people who joined the Oneida Community?

SK: They were what we would call, in modern terms, “straight”. They were very sober people, artisans, farmers, most of them quite deeply religious. After all, what attracted them to Oneida—many of them didn’t even know about complex marriage—was that Perfectionism, which they had read about in Noyes’s publications, offered an escape from the terrible prison of Calvinism. It meant that you weren’t at God’s whim perhaps consigned to eternal damnation, but that you could lead a good life and enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. So these were not fringe people at all. They were people of deep religious conviction.

And this is a mystery to me. I try to imagine the scene in the parlor or the kitchen of a farmhouse in western New York State, where a man and his wife and their two small children decide they’re going to sell the farm and load their stuff in a wagon and go to Oneida. It took an awful lot of courage. But people in nineteenth-century America did have the thought that you could pull up stakes and start anew. Think of all those people who migrated across the Great Plains and the Rockies looking for a new life.

One of the things that made Oneida successful was the fact that the people who went there were generally hard-headed, practical, and self-reliant. They make an interesting contrast with the people who went to Brook Farm. Those people were Boston intellectuals who, as somebody said, didn’t know one end of a cow from the other. But the people who went to Oneida were blacksmiths, farmers, surveyors, architects, hard-working and successful people who were looking for something else, some transcendent spiritual experience and life, which was offered to them by Perfectionism.

MBH: Someone I know commented that the Oneida Community members must have been losers, that is, weak people who needed to have somebody tell them what to do.

SK: I did not get that feeling about them. They certainly put their trust in their leader and believed in him. But their success in business indicates their ability to be independent and forceful and effective. Some of the women, such as Harriet Worden and Tirzah Miller, were extremely articulate, strong-minded women. For instance, when Harriet Worden was passed over as a candidate to be-

come editor of the new version of the Community's newspaper, she exploded.<sup>3</sup> What she wrote about this publicly sounds very contemporary. But the fact that her situation allowed her to make such a protest illustrates the greater degree of independence and respect that women received in the Community.

I agree that these people accepted Noyes's leadership, but you have to ask yourself, do you think that people who have joined Benedictine monasteries throughout history have all been losers? I don't think so. They chose a communal life and accepted authority. A great many people like authority. We don't think that people who spend careers in the military are losers; they may exercise authority, but they also have to accept authority to a degree that the independent farmer does not. We don't think that people like Grant or Lee or Eisenhower were weak and dependent people because they willingly joined an authoritarian organization.

MBH: What are some differences between those who joined and those who were born into the Community?

SK: Those born into the Community never had the experience of choosing to join and of rejecting the outside world; and for the ones who were teenagers toward the end of the Community, the outside world held great fascination. The young women wanted to wear jewelry and long dresses. They wanted matrimony. Like the second and third generations of many social experiments, they were not wedded to the Community.

We'd also have to say that by then the times were different. Many of the people who had joined the Community were Noyes's contemporaries, and they had experienced the great spiritual revivals that made New York what was called the "burned over district". During the early decades of the nineteenth century, these people had been shaken and seared by religious conversion and then had chosen a life that would satisfy them spiritually.

It is interesting to note that Pierrepont Noyes, who spent his early boyhood in the Community and who, when he grew up, rescued the Oneida silver company and made it a great company, was

3. Her "explosion" is quoted in Marlyn Klee-Hartzell's paper, page 74 of this issue.

a strong-minded, highly independent person who looked back at his youth as a kind of golden period. He said he felt that the elders in the Community had been transfigured by a sense that they were taking part in a high spiritual adventure that set them apart from the ordinary run of mankind.

I don't know that I would have liked living at Oneida. I think I would have found Noyes exasperating. Look at the way he took away poor Frank Wayland-Smith's violin because he was too good a violinist! Noyes had all the weaknesses of an autodidact. He seemed to lack a context for what he read, and he had kooky ideas—wild ideas. He said, about Jonathan Edwards's son (a noted "womanizer", as we would say today), "Well, he was a rake and a profligate, but he was really serving God because he was spreading the seed of his brilliant, spiritually advanced father". Noyes could explain anything! A nephew of Noyes said he couldn't stand the way Noyes treated him like a little boy. You had to decide that you'd accept Noyes for what he was. It's not simple at all. I read the diaries and letters and I saw the pain. Yet many people chose to stay, and out of the sense of community they gained something that was very strong and rewarding. For others the constrictions, intellectual and otherwise, of that life may not have been strong enough to make them leave, but perhaps they would not have done it over again. There was a wide range of feelings.

MBH: Do you see parallels between the death of the Oneida Community and the demise of the Soviet Union?

SK: No. One way to look at it is that, clearly *not* like Oneida, the ideal of communism was perverted by a malignant dictator, Stalin, who was responsible for the deaths of millions of people. Obviously, there was nothing like that at Oneida. People who didn't like the boss left, and they got some money when they left. The Oneida Community failed for all kinds of reasons. One was the increasing secularism. In the early years of the Community, the members believed that the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven was only months away. And you remember that Mary Cragin, with general approval, invited the members of the Primitive Church to

send emissaries to Oneida. You might say, “That’s an absurd belief”. But is it more absurd than the belief in transubstantiation? Do we really think that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are somehow transformed into the true presence of the Son of God? This surely, from some nasty atheistic perspective, isn’t any more absurd than the Oneidans’ beliefs. The context for their passionate belief in the imminence of some sort of great spiritual change—the millennial spirit—was dying out by the 1870s. Oneida was no longer sustained by the sort of religious passion that had swept the country in the 1840s.

MBH: Is there one document that you wish had existed when you were working on your book?

SK: I did not have access to the diaries of Tirzah Miller when I began the project in the 1970s. When I resumed work on it more than ten years later, I spent time at the Syracuse University Library reading those diaries and other documents I hadn’t seen earlier.

MBH: Is there a document that *never existed* that you wish had existed?

SK: Yes. I wish that I had had a detailed, explicit diary of the sexual life of one of the men at Oneida. Very little is known about this. I know more about the women than the men because they wrote many more letters to each other, not so much about sex as about love. There is one document that provides a man’s perspective, and it will be published later this year.<sup>4</sup> It is the diary of a young man, Victor Hawley, who was in love with a young woman. They were denied permission to have a baby under the regime of stirpiculture. She went to Wallingford,<sup>5</sup> where she was paired up with a father, and later came back to Oneida. This young guy nursed her through a very difficult pregnancy. The diary is explicit about his feelings for her, and even about sex. But there’s not much else on the subject.

4. *The Annotated Diary of Victor Hawley*, edited by Robert Fogarty, is forthcoming from Syracuse University Press.

5. Wallingford was a branch of the Oneida Community.



MBH: The men with whom I've discussed male continence think it sounds like a bad idea.

SK: It is hard to imagine. The only thing you could say about it was that either the sex life was satisfying enough or orgasm was unimportant enough so that a great many men who came to the Community spent their lives there—when they could have left. I have not read widely in this subject, but I know that *coitus reservatus* has been practiced in other cultures. In some parts of India it was thought to be a spiritually superior form of sex. All I know is that it happened, and the fact that they had so few accidental pregnancies showed that it worked.

MBH: It is also surprising that there has been no mention of venereal disease at Oneida.

SK: The people who came there were typically small-town people who married young. The men were not the kind to have slept with prostitutes. I'm guessing that for most of the people their only sexual experience had been with their spouses.

MBH: How have Oneida Community descendants reacted to your book?

SK: Some of the descendants were unhappy about it. I have to remind myself that I wasn't writing the book for them, but for other people who might be entertained or edified by it. The descendants tend to regard the Community that I wrote about as a precursor of the silver company, and therefore to downplay its significance as a social experiment. Some of them felt I was exploiting the sexual aspects of Community life. I don't think I was guilty of that at all. Sex was one of the things that set Oneida apart. For example, Benedictine monasteries and Shaker communities also practiced total communism. But they did not have men and women living together and changing sexual partners, having lots of sex but no conventional matrimony—all of this existing within a moral framework that distinguished it from mere sexual anarchy and license. So I think that had to be emphasized.

Another thing I want to say is about complex marriage. Paradoxically, Oneida Community members felt closer to the Shakers

than to any other form of community. I think the reason was that, for both Oneidans and Shakers, the community was considered to be a large family. Monogamy at Oneida would have produced little knots of people whose loyalty was not to the larger community, but to their spouses or parents. Whether or not it was publicly articulated by Noyes, the Oneida Community could not have succeeded if it had had marriage as we know it. It would have foundered on conflicting loyalties. They called Noyes “father”. He couldn’t have been thought of that way if there had been many other fathers within that larger family.

I would also like to comment on the rejection of religious pomp, cant, and priestly ritual at Oneida. If you go into the Big Hall at the Oneida Community Mansion House—and remember this was a profoundly religious community—not one religious symbol or icon can be seen anywhere. Even prayer was entirely a private matter. I found all this rather appealing.

MBH: Would you like to say anything about the process of doing research on your book?

SK: I’ll tell you how I got to the sources and the difficulty I had. I came to Oneida to try to figure out what was available. There was a historical committee, and I had to be vetted by a number of people. I got some cooperation. However, I learned that a great many documents bearing on Oneida history, including letters and reports of meetings and mutual criticism sessions, had been destroyed. As I understand it, in the 1940s several Oneida Community Ltd. executives who were also Community descendants burned the archives for fear that the company’s image would be damaged if the public were to learn the truth about the Community. This disaster was mitigated by the fact that Noyes’s nephew, George Wallingford Noyes, in assembling the materials he needed to write a history (which was never completed) of the Oneida Community, had selected thousands of documents from the Community’s archives and copied them. These copies were in the possession of his daughter, Imogen Stone. She was dubious about my project, but agreed to let me use the copied documents after having a lawyer she knew look me over. Constance Noyes Robertson, a granddaughter of

John Humphrey Noyes, had written a history based in part on the materials assembled by George W. Noyes, but, as I discovered when I checked her work against her sources, she had bowdlerized them. She would quote letters and reports and would leave things out without any indication that she had done so.

There were other sources: one of Frank Wayland-Smith's descendants had his diary, and in the Mansion House were squirreled away hundreds of letters, reminiscences, and miscellaneous writings. I was appalled by the state of these documents, but they were there, and I used them. Fortunately, in the intervening years, an arrangement was made to give them to Syracuse University, where they have been properly catalogued and given the sort of tender loving care that they deserve.

## From the Collections

### HOPE EMILY ALLEN–GEORGE BERNARD SHAW CORRESPONDENCE

This exchange of letters between Hope Emily Allen and George Bernard Shaw of November 1924 is published here for the first time. The letters reveal Shaw's interest in the Oneida Community and the descendants' apprehensions about public exposure of their historical documents, forty-four years after the breakup of the Community.

The archives were guarded by George Wallingford Noyes, nephew of John Humphrey Noyes and Community historian, until his death in 1941. Thereafter some descendants who were part of Oneida Community Ltd. destroyed most of the original manuscripts, a tragedy mitigated only by the fact that G. W. Noyes had placed, in a bank vault, carbon copies of typed transcripts of selected manuscripts.

George Bernard Shaw was part of a long line of English writers and reformers, including Wilkie Collins, H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and Julian Huxley, who were interested in the Oneida Community. Shaw wrote about it in his essay "The Perfectionist Experiment at Oneida Creek", which appeared in "The Revolutionist Handbook" appended to *Man and Superman* (1903). In 1910 Shaw and H. G. Wells entertained Pierrepont Noyes during the latter's visit to Britain. A son of John Humphrey Noyes, Pierrepont was then president and general manager of the Oneida factories.

Having learned of Shaw's interest in the Oneida Community, Stella Smith (1878–1963) traveled to London to tell him more about it. Smith was a daughter of Community members James Vaill and Harriet Worden and a half-sister of Pierrepont Noyes. She married another descendant, Deming Smith.

Hope Emily Allen (1883–1960) was also a child of two Community members, Portia Underhill and Henry G. Allen. She studied at

Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, and Cambridge, and was perhaps the most accomplished scholar to emerge from the Oneida Community.\*

The letters have been transcribed exactly, except that a few apparently unintentional misspellings have been corrected.

From Hope Emily Allen to George Bernard Shaw  
(Typed transcript, Bodleian Library, Oxford)

Nov. 7 1924

Dear Sir,

You will be surprised to receive two communications on the subject of the Oneida community in so short a time. Mrs. Smith told me that she had seen you, and I was distressed, for I know her exceptional point of view, and what is said to a public man becomes in a sense official. The Oneida community, of which my parents and grandparents were members, seems to me the most intense and comprehensive experiment in human behavior ever made, and since it touched many persons very personally, selective estimates could be given that would offer striking contrasts. It so happens that Mrs. Smith, as perhaps she told you, is the only descendent of the old community who follows a manner of life related to that of the socialistic experiment of our ancestors. To the rest of us, the social novelties of the system seem to be an integral part of the theology, and to perish with that. Viewed as a mere experiment in human society without theological sanctions, I believe that the institution only served to illustrate the complications involved in any form of social organization. It bred as many problems and injustices as it solved or rectified. In any case, it could never be repeated without the condition of strong leadership, and a resultant strong organization of the theological conviction and isolation from the world which gave

\*See John C. Hirsch, *Hope Emily Allen: Medieval Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman, Ok.: Pilgrim Books, 1988).

it its peculiar stability. Anyone who borrowed its license without its discipline would be violating the essential spirit of the institution.

It seems to most of us that Mrs. Smith does so violate the essential spirit of the Community, and I am sorry to hear that she thinks of printing her life history (which I believe she discussed with you). I tried to urge her to put the book aside for many years, for I believe that our forefathers' act in throwing into the community their families and goods to be held in common brings on us now the obligations to hold the community history in common, at least during the lifetime of the old members. In time the materials will all be available for the symposium which is the only just method of treating so profound and various an institution. However, if in the meantime the community history is used for present-day propaganda by Mrs. Smith, I feel that (one who disagrees with her is almost obliged to point out) the special character of our common inheritance. From childhood I have questioned the old members on the community life as far as possible without preconceived ideas, and I have therefore some evidence on community history.

I believe that the documents, persons, and incidents that have most influenced Mrs. Smith in her understanding of the community belong to the very last years before the break-up. She was born under special circumstances that reflected decay in the last year of communistic marriage—actually I believe that only two children came later than she. She is therefore the child of the dissolution of the community rather than of the community itself.

Let me say in conclusion that in spite of occasional (proportionately few) lapses from grace, the community seems to me a wonderful undertaking of pure religion, and I am very glad that my people for thirty years made part of so courageous an attack on the general human problem. I am grateful that you in your Man and Superman have recognized both the high purpose and the difficulties in the enterprise.

Of course I do not expect you to acknowledge this letter.

Yours truly,

Hope Emily Allen

From George Bernard Shaw to Hope Emily Allen  
(Typed letter, Syracuse University Library)

10 Adelphi Terrace  
London W.C.2.  
19th November 1924

Dear Madam

I am much obliged to you for your very interesting letter.

I agree with you that only a symposium could do justice to the Oneida Creek Community's history; but the difficulty seems to be that the witnesses wont sympose. This being so, there is nothing for it but to let Mrs. Smith tell her history and provoke retorts, so that we shall get the symposium in different covers instead of in one book.

The situation, as far as I can gather, is that those members of the community who are in strong reaction against the experiment, and who have succeeded so well in capitalistic commerce and in conventional society that they desire nothing but the completest possible oblivion for their extremely unconventional origin, are opposed to any discussion or even mention of it. They put all the pressure they can on Mrs Smith to keep quiet; but Mrs Smith, who says she has a prodigious mass of records and diaries by Mrs Noyes, and who thinks that Perfectionism should not be let die, but should be revived in a more modern form, is not to be suppressed, and may catch on to that side of the Birth Control movement that is mystic rather than materialistic.

I should guess that your mind is firmer and more critical than hers; and it is possible that her nerves may not be quite

strong enough to carry her through what she conceives to be her appointed task with perfect selfpossession; but I think somebody has to take up the subject, and secure renewed attention for the peculiar sexual psychology of Noyes, and to the moral of his unique and important experiment. The old books will hardly do, because when they were written the limits of printable discussion were far narrower than at present, and the Birth Control movement less powerful.

As to keeping silence during the lifetime of the old members, I cannot see that there is any obligation on her to do that, even if they could offer her an undertaking to die within a reasonable time. If she is proud of her father (though she only guesses who he was), and her brother is ashamed of him, it seems impossible to ask her to refrain from celebrating him in deference to her brother's shame, which she cannot believe to be the more respectable feeling. That the surviving members should regard the official history of the community as their common property is natural enough; but clearly this does not mean that they have a right to suppress it. What it does mean is that they should all contribute to it and share in the expenses of its publication and its profits, if any. It may also give them the moral right to choose the historian. But if they refuse to exercise these rights and to fulfill the duty implied by them, they put Mrs Smith in the position of being the only one faithful to the old message and tradition, and almost force her to speak if her conscience drives her that way.

I do not see any way out of this. It may be hard on the old people's feelings to have their past dug up in a country which has got no further on the road to Perfection than to give an overwhelming vote for the Ku Klax Klan; but I do not believe that it will do them any material harm: quite the contrary. If I had to buy silver ware, and saw some of it marked Oneida Creek Perfectionist Silver, I should be strongly biassed in its favor. And if, when asked who my father was, I had to reply "I do not know; but he may have



been John Humphrey Noyes; and he was certainly an Oneida Perfectionist” I should be a much more interesting person than most of my neighbors, and should not like to exchange that status for one clouded in scandalous whispers. The real grievance would be to have the community misrepresented by its historian. But the remedy is not to make a vain attempt to suppress the inadequate history, but to produce an adequate one.

Is there any chance of your taking a step in this direction? Your letter shews plenty of faculty for the task.

Faithfully,

G. Bernard Shaw

From Hope Emily Allen to George Bernard Shaw  
(Retained draft, Syracuse University Library)

116 Cheyne Walk.  
S.W.

Nov. 22. 24

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your very kind letter about the Oneida Community. I was uncertain whether I did right in writing you, but your reply makes me feel that I did, for I think that you have been given some wrong impressions, which you would prefer to have cleared up.

The present “O.C.L.” (as we characterise it, to distinguish from the old community, which is the “O.C.”) is very far from wanting to suppress the history of the ancestor institution, and neither Pierrepoint Noyes, the President (and creator of the new organisation, which is not so merely commercial as you may think) nor any other responsible person now associated with the place (so far as I know) is “ashamed” of Mr. Noyes the founder, and his achievement. It is natural that he made mistakes, and also that the descendants of his institution do not wish those

mistakes to be put foremost, at least before the more characteristic features are before the public. But a very serious and sincere history of the whole institution has been under way—you may almost say ever since it ended. The first volume was brought out by Macmillan last spring, as “The Religious History of John Humphrey Noyes”, by his nephew, George W. Noyes. I have a copy in London. George Noyes was a community child, about ten at the break-up, and sixteen at the death of his uncle, with whom he had lived during the last years. I have heard Pierrepont Noyes say that George at fourteen learned short-hand to take down his uncle’s words, and that his father “would have swopped all his own sons for half of George”. I believe that interesting talks were taken down giving Mr. Noyes’s own account and feeling about the break-up. These documents were added to the enormous archives already in possession of the Noyes family. These included not only the official community records of all sorts, but all sorts of private matter, diaries, letters, confessions, etc. from believers in distress of mind. These papers were all left to Dr. Noyes, the oldest and only legitimate son, who was a remarkably philosophical and historically-minded man. He added to them about thirty years ago when many of the very earliest followers were still living. He had interviews with them, when he filled in missing links. All these archives were inherited about twenty-five years ago by George Noyes, who built a fire-proof vault in his house to receive them, and has devoted most of his time since to getting them ready to found on them a history. He has always been one of the Directors of the company, is now one of the Vice-Presidents, and was for many years Treasurer, but since he began the actual writing, the company has let him off with very little business, so as to free him for his research. The mere finding out what he had was a tremendous matter, and he took years arranging everything, and making a very complete catalogue, in which he has typed many salient quotations on cards. He is now in the early fifties, and he feels that if he

can't get to the end of the actual writing, at least everything is ready for his successor to go on with. About ten years ago he circulated among about twenty of us copies of documents he had chosen to use for his first volume, and, when he first wrote that, we met at his house weekly during one winter while he read what he had written and asked for suggestions. This first volume only carries Mr. Noyes to 1847, just short of the first social innovations, so perhaps it may not interest you as much as the next will, on which he is now working. The first volume is however very important in building up the characters of the founders—which in this case is an exceedingly important matter. It also describes the theology, which historically speaking is all-important, however dull it may appear to us now. Most O.C. members were devoted adherents of the theology 15 years before there were any social innovations (hence the type of followers that were acquired). To George Noyes, strangely enough, the theology seems all-important still. He is the only descendant who has any interest in this, and he once told me that for that reason it was desirable that he should be sure to get written that portion himself.

I think you can understand that with a dedicated person (equipped with all the materials) working at the history in this way, it may seem undesirable for the rest of us to rush into print on the subject. If, however, the full history does come out, then the doors will be open for every sort of individual estimate to be offered. (I'm not sorry S. Smith has written hers though I don't want her to print it now.) In any case I fancy that in a few years (when we get a little more leisure) several of us may register our impressions, to be used or not sometime. I should like to, and I have heard Pierrepont Noyes say that he means to. One old member has already written her autobiography for private circulation. But I think everyone feels that the authoritative work, done with the advantage of all the materials, ought to be out first. George's method has put off the controversial part till perhaps it won't be ready till all those who might be hurt

by indiscreet revelations are gone. Perhaps he won't print at once even after he has written. In any case he is writing, and I don't believe he will emasculate the whole thing.

In all this matter it really isn't possible, I think, to act less discreetly than George Noyes has acted. Too many persons (some of them those you would expect to be more public-spirited) are indignant that he has the private papers of their relatives, or of themselves, and may even like to force the whole archives to be destroyed. Not much is said, therefore, about them. He lets no one use them except himself, which I think the only right course. As it is, I do all I can when at home to preserve whatever I can get of interest for illustrating community history. We have a little Museum for material relics, for which I have picked out many things from the rubbish heap. We have the old "short dresses" of the women, memorials of the children's house, photographs of the place and all the people at all stages, etc. etc. When I am at home, about once a year we have a public exhibition of all these things (which is specially popular with the children). I think the last time Pierrepont Noyes gave a very amusing talk on "the life of a child in the children's house". I believe that it was on the same occasion that I persuaded an old gentleman to bring a book (kept by him in the community) which gives the only humorous reaction on it ever made (as I think). It was a very trying event because I had to promise to bring to him only "insiders". You see the point of view—that intimate community history is intimate family history, not for public exhibition in the lifetime of the person concerned. I think it very important for us who are interested in the history of the community to act so that the owner of that book and his wife and persons like them aren't scared by the expectation of immediate revelations into burning the book (their daughter promises to give it and they don't mind that for a final disposition). In the meantime I am trying to arrange for a community person to photograph the whole thing and deposit the photographs in the vault. So far I don't suc-

ceed because the only community photographer that I have been able to find is married to an “outsider”, who might take an unholy interest in the book!) The owners of this book were brought to the community as children, and grew up in a state of society that had absolutely no meaning for their temperaments. To such persons the communistic system could be the subtlest and profoundest tyranny ever fashioned. As George Noyes says, “the community was a battle-field, and there were wounded, who have to be tended”. In any case we don’t want some interesting documents still in private possession to be burned, nor do we want to dry up the flow of reminiscence. If anything very esoteric comes to the historical committee I hastily give it to George Noyes to put safely in the vault, in order to relieve apprehension. Perhaps this seems to you a disgusting state of discretion, but if it accomplishes the purpose I don’t care. If there is anything significant for human experience in the Oneida Community, it can wait for its disclosure a few years more. Really we are only paying the price of the qualities which gave the institution its unique staying power for nearly thirty years. A combination of accidents made a most revolutionary community out of most unrevolutionary, rather typically Anglo-Saxon persons. Hence the stability, and hence the discretion afterwards. If the members had been like Stella Smith, it wouldn’t have lasted two years.

About her “prodigious mass of records and diaries”, I am sure they are only letters and papers of her mother’s last years (which she refuses to share with her brother). My mother (who was one of the most devoted adherents of the community) years ago had much intimate conversation with Mrs. Smith, and told me then of these documents. She thought that they had been the undoing of Stella. My mother said that the earlier, more characteristic papers of the mother of Stella had all been burnt, that these belonged to the time of the break-up of the institution, when the latter was under the influence of the person who led the op-

position to Mr. Noyes, rather than of Mr. Noyes himself. She declared that they were most uncharacteristic of the institution, and that it was very sad that Stella (only twelve at her mother's death, and after then without any parental care) had brooded so much on these documents. Moreover, she talked on the community principally with an old couple (who joined late) who were of all the members the most unbalanced. Her own nature from an early age revealed itself as the essential ultimate cause of her theories. On one subject she has always concentrated. In London she seemed more poised than I have ever seen her. She was fairly ecstatic on these subjects when I last saw her—in her youth she was liable to outbreaks of hysteria. To me she is always a sad case of a mixed nature. Essentially she seems so dishonest with herself as to her motives, yet in other ways she is one of the most honest, generous and lovable persons born. She is truly musical. I say all this so that you can see that the fact that the Oneida of to-day rejects her doesn't mean that they reject the community. The community used to reject persons like her. As a matter of fact the Oneida of to-day have founded themselves on the community—selecting from the manifold experiments of that institution what seems suited to their situation. Being no longer a theocracy, they have given up the social experiment (except birth control in marriage), but they have founded their society on an unusual closeness of fraternity, which even allows of mutual criticism. The society is not essentially materialistic, even though material success happens to be its goal. Self Fulfillment in this case happens to take the form of money-making, but actually for the leaders it doesn't. They could get far more money elsewhere. They pool the profits for the benefits of the less talented, the stock-holders, and (of late, the employees). They are trying to build up a society of mutual responsibility and fairly equal fortune, in which everyone would take his work as a sport—and therefore put his best into it. The “essential reward” is fraternity, and only the “accidental reward” is

riches—and the more money that comes in, the more ways have been found to make the distribution more general. Surely materialism involves a way of using money, and not necessarily the mere getting it. I fancy Mrs. Smith told you how materialist modern Oneida is—she told me that. It is not strange that she is bitter against it, since she is not allowed to live there. I believe that the clan (as you could now call it) includes an unusual number of talented and (at least underneath, whatever their protestations) really idealistic persons, both men and women. It will be interesting to see what comes out of their association.

I hope that I have not written at inordinate length. It seemed to take a lot of details, if I was to be fair. Moreover, as my mother used to tell me “When you start talking about the community, there is no end to what there is to say.”

Thanking you for your interest,

Yours truly,

Hope Emily Allen

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