"Mingling the Sexes": The Gendered Organization of Work in the Oneida Community

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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."

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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".¹

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?2

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”.3 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.4

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.
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”.\(^5\)

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.\(^6\) 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.\(^7\)

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

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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.
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 bed-
ding materials, Mrs. A. washed the glassware and silver for the din-
ing 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 careless-
ness . . . 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.8 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 at-
tack.

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. After
the Sunday washing, six to eight women and girls spent the week
sprinkling, ironing, and folding the clothes. Harriet Worden re-
called, “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”.9 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 Commu-
nity commentator believed that because the men came to know
from firsthand experience the oppressive drudgery of the laundry,

“improvements and conveniences have since been successively introduced . . .” 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 washtub”, 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”. 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”.

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

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 stirpi-culture 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”. 13

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. 14

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-

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”.

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.” 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.” 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

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.”

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”.

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.

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”.

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

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”.22

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

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".23

In 1865 the Community set about establishing a silk-spinning 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.24 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.25 Charles Cragin subsequently became superintendent of silk manufacturing.

In the silk-spinning 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-spinning 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

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.”

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, typesetting 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”.

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-

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.²⁸

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.²⁹ *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".³⁰

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

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 . . .”

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

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’”.

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”.

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.” 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. 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.

34. The Daily Journal of the Oneida Community (30 November 1866), 52.
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". 37

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.

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".38 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

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. 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.

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Amount of labor per day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Able-bodied men</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>7 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able-bodied women</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>6 hours 40 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalid and aged men</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3 hours 40 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalid and aged women</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1 hour 20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 hours 40 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 hour 20 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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”. 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

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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.\(^4\)

In their article, "The Oneida Community Experiment in Stirpiculture",\(^5\) 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>subordinate leaders</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>superintendents of departments</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>editors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forewoman</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accountants, reporters and teachers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compositors</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>housewives</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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41. "Community Journal", Oneida Circular (10 February 1873), 53.
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. 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 Pierrepont 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. Pierrepont 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".44

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.