Early American Utopias and Communalism

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Introduction

With the founding of the English colonies, Americans have repeatedly attempted to build better societies than the ones they have known. John Winthrop’s desire to see Boston become a “shinning city on a hill” expressed an early American ideal of utopia. And while Winthrop thought in religious terms, that spirit was not lost on later generations, which held a differing point of view. This was at the heart of the communal societies that began to appear in the 19th century. Efforts were made to create communities that looked to release humanity from the chains of social and economic bondage that many felt their contemporary society had enclosed them in. Others felt this stifled the spirit of men, their productivity, and their opportunities.

By the 19th century, some began to see American society as repressive, with little opportunity for the common man to advance beyond his or her station in life. With the advent of the “Second Industrial Revolution” almost every facet of American society and daily life would be affected. As the factory system began to regiment life for more and more Americans, others would seek to liberate themselves by experimentation with communalism. The earliest communitarian movements attempted to transform society by forming religious and secular communities with participatory governments to produce an equilibrium between the private and common ownership of property. These experiments would grow in both their form and scope as Americans looked to build a better society.
Communes and Societies

The “First Age of American Reform” brought change to the country, and the desire for further social change would carry people’s yearnings toward development of communal societies and utopian communities. This had been at the heart of much of the early colonization of the English colonies, as Puritans had been driven to create their “wilderness Zion” and their “shinning city on the hill”. That spirit would be rekindled with the desire to found and develop what a new generation hoped would be better societies.

The utopian communalism that began to grow in the decades before the American Civil War would have both religious and secular roots. The communities would attract both the devout and trustworthy, as well as the occasional misfit and opportunist. Some of the communes would begin to meet their members expectations, while others would be destined to fail from the start. What they all had in common was the desire to create better societies that would improve the lives of their participants. Why then did some succeed and others fail? Were their ideals beyond the scope of their capabilities, or was there just no room for them in an America where the social fabric was beginning to be torn apart? Was American society beyond transformation? Some believed that this was not the case, and would strive to build better societies, even if in most cases they were small in size, and short term in effort.

The Rappite Communities

At the beginning of the 19th century, a former Lutheran preacher from Germany founded the Harmony Society. Together with one-hundred and forty families, land was purchased in Pennsylvania with Johann Rapp recognized as their spiritual leader. Rapp hoped to lead his followers to new prosperity and religious purity, away from the trappings, concerns, and temptations of the world at large.

The members organized under a contract calling for all property to be held in common, creation of a common fund, and submit to the spiritual and material leadership of Rapp. New prospects would be brought in under a trial period of six months, before being made permanent members. Members were expected to refrain from the use of tobacco and alcohol, and the community was to be a resting place of peace as the members awaited the “second coming of Christ”. The members were also encouraged to adopt a life of celibacy.

In the beginning, the society had little in the way of money, but managed to struggle through by appointing a business manager, and an elected “board of elders” that would oversee the society’s economic situation, and enforce the rules and regulations of the community. As money was raised first through agriculture, the community began to build
more housing, workshops, and a school. Prosperity followed the community’s agricultural economy, as work and profits were shared equally.

By 1810, the community numbered around 800 members and celibacy became their custom, if not the rule. Still, the community grew, and in 1814, the Rappites sold their holdings for ten times their original investment and purchased land in Indiana, where they would build a second community. Here, the Rappites hoped to expand in an area they felt was better suited to commercial endeavors. In their eyes, God had smiled upon them before, and would increase his bounty in Indiana.

With the move to Indiana, the Harmony Society began new agricultural and manufacturing undertakings on a much grander scale. There were early setbacks due mainly to sickness brought on by the surrounding wetlands and the malaria they fostered. Over one-hundred of their number perished before the swampy areas were drained and the disease subsided. By then the community had begun to expand and would eventually encompass nearly 30,000 acres. Included in the community was a mill, a sober tavern, various manufacturing facilities, a church, and a host of one and two story dwellings.

The overriding issue of concern in Indiana became one of abolition. Located in the extreme southern part of Indian, the community bordered the state of Kentucky, where slave sentiments were high. The Rappites, being abolitionists at heart, incurred growing confrontations over the issue with pro-slavery advocates. As the situation seemed to worsen, the Rappites determined to move again.

In 1824, they purchased land along the Ohio River in Pennsylvania and prepared to move again. The community in Indiana was sold to the English idealist and social reformer, Robert Owen, who had plans of forming his own utopian community in America. The Harmony Society was then transplanted back to Pennsylvania, just outside of Pittsburgh, where they founded the town of Economy.

It was at Economy that the Rappites found their greatest economic and cultural success. By 1830, the new community had become so successful, that its members were involved in much of the trade and markets in Pittsburgh. The community established a clothing factory, a sawmill, a lumber company, a brick works, and established a bank and oil company as well. The Society also donated land for the establishment of Geneva College. At its height, the Harmony society was capitalized at over $2 million dollars.

As the decades passed, the Rappites began to succumb to internal pressures and the community divided in 1834, mostly over the issue of celibacy, with most of the younger members leaving and taking with them an apportionment of the communities assets. While the Harmony Society easily overcame the loss of capital, it was hard pressed to replace the nearly three hundred younger members that departed in the split. By the closing decades of the 19th century, most of the remaining members were too old to carry on the businesses and celibacy had curtailed a new generation from taking their place. Most work had to be hired out and the Harmony Society fell into growing debt. The Society was eventually dissolved at the end of the century by its few remaining members, and its property and businesses were sold into receivership to pay its outstanding debts. The Rappites had succumb to their own philosophy, which did not take into consideration the need for population sustainability.
Shaker Communities

First founded as the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, the Shakers were a religious group that found communal success. The Shaker communities were founded around the leadership and teaching of Ann Lee beginning in England in 1747. Ann Lee was a strong willed women, who believed herself to be the female incarnation of Christ. Members became known as Shakers in reference to the peculiar fits and gyrations that overcame them during their services. These would exhibit themselves as manifestations of dance which they took to be God’s signs of inspirations.

Because of her past and distain for sexual activity (all eight of her children died in early years), Mother Ann Lee preached celibacy. She taught that this was required to gain perfection and true harmony with God. While the shakers sanctioned marriage, celibacy would become a trademark and tenet of the communities. Were they to go down the same path and find the same ends as the Rappites? The shakers would maintain their numbers through conversions and adoption of children.

In America, New Lebanon, New York became the recognized center of the Shaker movement with the construction of the first “church building” there. The Shaker communities were built around common property, and strict celibacy. Most activities outside of worship were performed with separation of the sexes. Segregation of men and women was maintained during work, during meals, and even in the household during rest.

The Shakers would eventually found over twenty different communities, and spread across five states at their height. Their membership would reach 20,000 at one point. With celibacy being a key precept of the communities, it was paramount that the members were always ready to evangelize and spread the word. An outsider once commented after attending a Shaker service, “as that is the only time men and women are allowed in close proximity, it is no wonder they both begin to shake so violently.” This observance was the common opinion of most outsiders, who viewed the Shakers as off base and religious fanatics.

Regardless, economically the communities became quite successful. All labor and reward was shared equally with the communities, between both men and women, as well as between those of prominence and common background. The communities manufactured goods to be sold to society at large including clothing, household goods, garden seeds, and furniture. Original Shaker furniture is still prized to this day, and has spurred a large “reproduction” market, that capitalizes on the simplistic beauty of their original style.

By the American Civil War, Shaker communities across New York, New England, Ohio, and Kentucky had reached their peak and had begun to go into decline. The lack of new members coupled with the tenet of celibacy would eventually doom the societies. At the time of the Civil War, there were still over 6,000 Shakers living in over a dozen communities, yet by 1920, there were only a dozen practicing Shakers left. The death of Ann Lee had robbed the “Society” of its enthusiastic spiritual leader, and was never able to find an equal or qualified replacement. There just were not that many people claiming to be God by the early 20th century.
Robert Owen

One of the first moves toward the new experiment of secular self-sustaining communities was to take place at New Lanark, Scotland. In 1786, David Dale built a series of cotton mills along the Clyde River, which were later sold to his son-in-law Robert Owen and a group of investors. Owen would become one of the earliest reformers in the cooperative movement and later be considered the “father of the cooperative movement”.

Owen had the idea of forming cooperative townships, whereby workers could grow their own food, produce their own clothes, and also be self-governing. He believed that people were the products of their environment and were therefore greatly affected by it. If that environment was changed for the better, then the result would be better workers, which would be more productive, and in the process become better citizens.

Owen saw his greatest gift as being one of education. His belief was that the primary education of children would set in motion a lifetime of learning and opportunity for those afforded the chance. The success of this idea can be found today in public education systems throughout the world. For this, not a small amount of credit might be afforded Robert Owen, who insured that each of the communities he was associated with contained primary and secondary schools, as well as educational opportunities for adult workers.

Early on, Owens was a believer in liberalism and the utilitarian ideas of his business partner Jeremy Bentham. Central to Bentham’s philosophy was the idea that life should be organized around moral and ethical concepts whereby society produced the “greatest good for the greatest number” of people. In the simplest terms, the ultimate utility of society was that it should maximize the good by replacing sorrow with happiness. Whereas Bentham viewed this in terms of pure individual and economic freedom as they pertained to the market place and capitalist endeavors, Owen began to lean more and more toward ideals of a socialist community. He would start his greatest experiment in the United States

New Harmony

Feeling it necessary to start with an established infrastructure, Owen helped purchase the town of Harmony, Indiana in 1824 from the Rappite group known as the Harmony Society that had founded the town on 7,000 acres in 1814. By the time Owen made his purchase this had expanded to include some 30,000 acres of surrounding land and buildings. The name was changed to New Harmony and the New Harmony Society was formed as the initial overseers of the community. The new community then set about transforming the ideas that its inhabitants had about society and instituting a new set of community principles. The community first introduced equality for all its citizens with each responsible for contributing to the labor force. A system of “labor money” was introduced whereby the community’s currency was tied to the amount of work an individual performed. The currency could then be exchanged for commodities involving an equal amount of labor. This would seem to solve the problem of production, but it did
not address the problem of commitment that had been the major stumbling block of previous communities, and which would resurface at New Harmony.

While the desire to develop a communal economy was vital to New Harmony, the community lacked the strong central belief or ideal that could be found in religious communities that had begun to appear at the time. Owen had little faith in religion, believing that moral and ethical integrity were the true principles that influenced a person’s character and produced responsibility. The problem was that New Harmony did not attract enough people of like mind. For most of the inhabitants, the community did not provide sufficient individual autonomy, or enough personal property. This was indicated by the constant power struggles that the community lapsed into, and what one member called a “constant re-enactment of the French Revolution that killed the spirit of the members rather than their bodies.” Owen’s son would later describe the community as a gathered collection of radicals, lazy theorists, and unprincipled sharpers (opportunists).

In 1828, Owen broke all connections with the community and left its members to sort things out as they please. By 1829 the experiment had failed and the community went into receivership and was dissolved. It was claimed that the very diversity and freedom that the community looked to foster had led to the lack of “united interest” which was necessary for its success. For the community to work, it required persons to place individual concerns behind community concerns. For a time, in the beginning this was accomplished, but it had not lasted.

In the end, self-preservation had taken over. First, the community began to divide into factions which looked to control certain community assets. These factions then dissolved into smaller groups with their own agendas of control. Finally, individual disputes over control and ownership of community assets crushed the last threads of cooperation in the community. Whatever the exact reasons were, New Harmony had at the very least shown that the idea of combined communalism was feasible provided the members of the community committed themselves to the endeavor.

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**Amana Colonies**

In 1842, a committee of German Lutherans led by Christian Metz and calling themselves the Ebenezer Society, purchased land outside of Buffalo, New York and founded the town of Ebenezer, meaning “the Lord hath helped us”. By the following year, over three hundred and fifty “Inspirationists” had immigrated to the United States and joined the settlement.

The community was to be communal in nature, and to ensure the collective disposition of the settlement, a constitution was drafted in 1846 establishing a permanent communal system of shared wealth and common property. Metz would soon deliver a “divine proclamation” endorsing communalism, and the issue of contributions and common enterprise would be the community’s basis for decades.

During the interim, Ebenezer grew and thrived. Several villages were established and additional land was purchased as the population exceeded a thousand members. Coupled with the growth of nearby Buffalo and the need for ever more land, the
Inspirationists were soon forced to look elsewhere to expand, as property prices soared in the area and economic opportunity for the community declined.

In 1854, the Society began to purchase land in Iowa. By 1859, they had acquired some 18,000 acres and established six new villages and incorporated under the new name of the “Amana Society”, meaning to “remain true”. The society would now be governed by a Board of Trustees, and a Council of Elders. In addition, local councils would represent the six villages individually. Voting was expanded to include men who signed onto the constitution, widows, and women over thirty that were not represented by a man.

The Church also held a governing presence in the community, and was under the control of the Board of Trustees. The status of the members in the community was reflected in the seating arrangements at church services. Men and women were separated during services, with prominent members seated forward. Separate services were held for older members and those above thirty.

The colonies and villages, developed their economic viability on agriculture and manufacturing processes such as grain milling and printing. Each colony had a market of exchange surrounded by stores, where members purchased all their goods. Commodities that the colonies could not produce themselves were purchased from outside the community for general sale. While this did not make the Amana Society wholly self-sufficient, it did create amenity with the surrounding areas and society at large.

Unlike many other utopian communities, the Amana Society was to remain intact, if not in the communal form it was founded under. Still in existence after the beginning of the 20th century, the colonies were forced to adapt after World War One and the Great Depression that followed. In what became known as the “Great Change”, Church control was separated from the business enterprises, and communalism was abandon.

The Amana Society Inc. was formed as a joint-stock company and became the recipient of the communal economic assets. Agriculture remained as a foundation of the colonies, but Amana Refrigeration Inc. became the mainstay of the business ventures. To this day, the company employs colony members, and is a leading manufacturer of refrigerators, microwaves, and appliances world-wide. The Amana Society became an example of commercialized communalism that adapted to meet the demands of a changing membership.

Brook Farm

Around the same time that the Ebenezer Society was formed, another utopian experiment was started in Massachusetts. In 1841, a Unitarian minister named George Ripley and his wife founded the Brook Farm Association for Industry and Education at the Ellis Farm in West Roxbury, outside of Boston. Brook Farm would be loosely established around the ideals of Transcendentalism and was secular in nature. This meant that religion was not an integral part of the community, but at the same time was not discouraged. The venture would attract several notable people during its existence, among them Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The Ripley’s formed a joint-stock company and immediately attracted investors, selling shares for $500 each. The initial idea was to pool the community’s labor in farming pursuits to uphold its economic needs, which would then allow for literary and
scientific endeavors which most interested the majority of the members. Ripley believed the community would become a grand model for American society.

In the beginning, members did whatever work appealed to them, but this soon revealed itself as a problem, as some jobs went undone, and not all the members had the same work ethic. As a result, required standards and hours were set to insure that everything that needed to be done was accomplished. Members were compensated with guaranteed medical treatment, free room and board, education, and social amusements.

Brook Farm soon found itself in debt, and the property was mortgaged within the first year, and again three other times. Agriculture on the farm was never to produce large enough quantities to become profitable. The community’s renowned school was another source of income, and it attracted international students, but even this could not keep up with the community’s costs. The community did find another ready source of income in the thousands of visitors that came to the community. Visitors were soon being charged for each and every visit, but this was still not enough to address the community’s ever growing debt. The community readily spent money before it had been made, and this was its greatest fault, and would eventually lead to its downfall.

After this rocky start, the “farmers” and investors agreed to restructure and move toward implementing the “Fourier system”, the ideas of a French social reformer who believed in a more structured and organized society of specialized members. A constitution was drafted by Ripley and his associates in 1844 to implement the new plan, and a daring construction project was begun along with economical spending restrictions. It was hoped that the new “system” and economizing would turn around the fortunes of the community.

Sadly, the community would never prove to be fully profitable. There was from the start a lack of pure physical labor, and as one member put it, “one man was paid to work all day in the field, as another was paid to look out a window and watch him do it”. After the restrictions began, the finances of the community became such that as to save money, meat, butter, coffee, and other amenities were only available in the community by paying an extra rate for board. This produced a division in the community between the “haves and the have nots”. Still, friction within the community was minimal and never became a real problem, as finances would always be the main concern.

Construction of the new grand building, the Phalanstery, was well under way by 1846. The transition and building program encouraged some, while alienating others. Some felt that the new constitution provided the structure necessary for success, while others saw it as restricting the very hospitable atmosphere that had attracted them in the first place. New members arrived as others left and any cohesion the community had was quickly evaporating.

Upon completion, the Phalanstery would provide greater and more communal housing, a large communal kitchen and dining-hall, and two spacious lecture halls. The hopes of the community increased as construction progressed. Then in March of 1846, tragedy struck. The building that the community staked all its hopes on caught fire and burned to the ground, and with it went the hopes of many of the community’s members, and most of its investors.

Brook Farm would never recover from the fire and Ripley would leave the community that same year. Ripley’s book collection, which had made up the majority of the community’s library, was sold off at the end of the year to pay debts from the burned
building. By 1849, the community had been dissolved, and the land was sold to cover part of the remaining debt of the community. As an honorable man, Ripley would spend the next two decades repaying the community’s last outstanding debts.

The community had held great hopes for success in its early days, focusing on individual freedom of labor and thought. Women and men were both held in equal regard as both members and investors, and readily exchanged work which was considered to be that of the other in society at large. But for the fire, and the fact that Brook Farm never successfully addressed its financial problems, it most likely would have succeeded.

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**Charles Fourier and the Phalanx**

Not to be disheartened, others would try their own hand at creating communal utopias. As seen at Brook Farm, the French philosopher Charles Fourier would set in motion the development of new socialist minded communities of shared wealth. He believed that the secret to social and economic success centered around a concern for a community’s endeavors, and in genuine cooperation. Fourier considered poverty to be the overriding cause of disorder in the world. He felt much of society faced a debilitating lack of education which also inhibited human passion and progress. He proposed paying sufficiently high wages to workers and a decent minimum for those that could not perform at normal expectations, or who could not work at all. He was also a champion of equal rights and opportunities for women. Therefore, his communities would become centers of liberal thought about sexuality, gender, occupation, and welfare. The members could enjoy their lives unencumbered by the social and religious morays of the outside world.

With this as the goal, he proposed to develop communities around what he called the Phalanstere, or Phalanx. The phalanxes would encompass a main structure at their core known as the “Grand hotel” where the community’s members would live. These would consist of four story apartment complexes, with the wealthiest members living on the highest floors. Wealth would be distributed according to ones job, to be determined by a member’s individual interests, wants, and desires. To ensure that all labor in the community would be performed, the jobs that people might not be prone to accept paid the most. While he did not personally found any communities himself, Fourier’s writings would become the basis for associations founded in the United States.

The first community was founded at La Reunion, Texas in 1855. The Frenchmen Victor Considerant and Francois Cantegral would begin the colony on land purchased near present day Dallas with some 200 members who had arrived from France. Eventually the community would have over 350 European members. At La Reunion the members would advocate communal production and distribution of profits. Also, both men and women had a voting say in the community and individuals could own private property beyond personal affects.

The community would be beset with problems from the beginning. First off, the property was not good farmland. Secondly, for the most part the colonists were not farmers. They were mostly skilled craftsmen and storekeepers. These two factors were going to be constant liabilities. These were overcome to some degree, just in time for the Texas weather to doom the advances they did make as a blizzard destroyed most of their
crops in 1856. What survived was then wiped out that summer during a drought that had been preceded by an invasion of locusts. The death nail came when the expanding town of Dallas incorporated La Reunion within its city limits. Some of the colonists returned to Europe and the remainder integrated into the general population.

A new “American” populated Fourier community was founded near Red Bank, New Jersey in 1844 on 670 acres of land. This community of “associates” would last for over a decade and incorporate more of Fourier’s social principles than its predecessor. A three-story phalanx was built that included communal cooking and eating areas, with adjacent private apartments and a communal social area. The North American Phalanx or NAP, as the community began to be called, was successful for many years, even though the population never topped 200 associates. The community was separated into divisions including ones for agriculture, livestock, manufacturing, and education.

Success was based on the productivity of its three economic areas. Over the first half decade of its existence, the NAP was successful in its endeavors. As long as their agriculture and livestock enterprises provided for the community, it could carry the manufacturing division. The key to success however would be growth, and the community never attracted the increase in numbers to help build upon its initial accomplishments. As the years began to pass, the community went into a recession.

Still, the community held its own, and many were content in their lives, but the economy of the community was in decline. By 1853 the community faced internal problems that it was not able to overcome. Disagreements over women’s rights, abolition, and plans to add a religious affiliation broke the community into factions. These issues forced many members to leave, and when a fire struck the next year, it was impossible for the community to recover. By 1857, the NAP had been dissolved and the property was sold. The Phalanx building itself would stand as testament to the community for over another one-hundred years before fire engulfed it in 1972.

Oneida Community

John Noyes would found the first Oneida Community in 1848 in the belief that Christ had previously returned in 70 A.D., so it was already possible to bring about his millennial kingdom on earth. The main community in Oneida, New York would become the largest and grow to include over three hundred members at the height of its success. Members would go on to establish secondary communities in Vermont, Connecticut, and in New Jersey.

Noyes looked to found the community around the social principles of common property and community possessions. Community businesses and enterprises would create an economic foundation that would allow the community to be self supporting. Work was distributed among all the members according to their abilities, with the more menial jobs being performed on a rotating basis. Still, women performed the majority of the domestic work, while men carry out the more labor intensive activities.

The community found early economic success in the manufacturing of animal traps and became one of the leading suppliers for the Hudson Bay Fur Company. The community also produced and sold leather suitcases and goods, as well as garden furniture. As the community’s businesses grew, they began to hire outside help, and
became a chief employer in the area. Later, the Oneida Community would find lasting economic success in the production of cutlery and other tableware.

The community adopted a policy of equality between the sexes, and women were relieved of childcare as the community had a communal nursery, one of the earliest forms of today’s “day care”. This allowed both parents to work, and therefore increased the labor force. Women also had an equal voice in the governing of the community, which operated under a complex administration of committees and “sections”. As could be found in most communalist communities of the time, women were afforded a much greater voice than was available or allowed in larger society. However, it should be noted that men were generally considered to be spiritually superior to women, and older members were also deemed to be spiritually above younger ones. This would play out in one of the most bizarre aspects of the Oneida Community.

What set Oneida Community apart from other religiously based communal experiments in the first half of the 19th century, was its adoption of what came to known as “complex marriage”. Noyes held the belief that sexual activity was not only a biological and physical act, but its origins held social as well as spiritual purposes for the community. In theory, every man was married to everyone women and exclusive sexual or romantic relationships were not sanctioned. Even when married couples joined the community, while encouraged to maintain their marriage, they were expected to “circulate” and expand the sexual parameters of their marriage. The community referred to these encounters as “interviews”, and the average female member had two to three interviews a week. Generally older men and women had relations with the younger members in what was called “ascending fellowship”. Pregnancy was limited by the use of “male continence” (withdrawal) as a form of birth control.

For those that wished to have children, a program of eugenics was instituted in 1869. Noyes and a committee of members would match chosen members based on their perception of the participating member’s spiritual and moral qualities. The committee would then encourage sexual relations between certain members, which they believed would produce spiritually superior children. While this was not the norm, one quarter of the members participated in the program. Participating members truly believed that in this way they would create the spiritually pure and sin free world of Christ’s millennial kingdom.

The community began to go into decline as the older members aged and died, and younger ones looked to enter into exclusive relationships. The community then divided over the issue and the community’s sexual rituals. In 1879, Noyes was charged with statutory rape and he fled to Canada. The community ended complex marriage that same year and many of the younger couples married. A re-organization then took place with part of the members forming a joint-stock company.

Formed as the new Oneida Community Limited, the manufacturing businesses now began to focus exclusively on cutlery and tableware. The community sold off its animal trap business in 1912, and had sold or ended its other ventures by 1916. Oneida Limited continues to produce tableware to this day, but acts mainly as a marketing firm of its produces now produced overseas. As of 2009, the joint-stock company was still in existence. The last original member of the Oneida Community died in 1950 at the age of 100 years old. Again, a religiously based communal society changed over time to meet the new demands of its membership in an effort to survive.
As a side note, during its existence, the Oneida Community, which was known to be friendly to outsiders, and even help hobos and indigents, was to contain two temporary residents in the persons of Charles Guiteau, and Leon Czolgosz. In 1888, Guiteau assassinated President James Garfield, and in 1901, Czolgosz assassinated President William McKinley. In later years, these acts led many in the surrounding area to begin to refer to the Oneida Community as the “Assassination Community”.

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**Ruskin Communities and Colleges**

While not within the given time frame of this course, it bears noting here, that nearing the end of the 19th century, a communal society was formed and developed here in the Tampa Bay area. Ruskin, Florida was founded for the very purpose of establishing a communal society of cooperation and education. The name of the commune, the “Ruskin Commongood Society”, clearly expresses the intentions of the founders. The community would be the last of some five attempts to build an integrated community / college environment around the economic and educational principles developed by the renowned English philosopher and social critic, John Ruskin.

Among other things, Ruskin was a leading social critic of the 19th century and would sponsor several attempts to create workingman communities in England. He first formed the Guild of St. George to bring philanthropic businessmen together to improve the conditions of the working-class by purchasing undeveloped land and turning it over to working-men of England for cultivation. He had set out his vision of a utopian society in *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Working-class*, and expounded upon them in his other literary works. His idea was that workingmen would live within a cooperative community that would provided them with both a livelihood, and an opportunity for an education.

Founded in 1901 by college president G.M. Miller, his wife, and her family the Dickman’s, the community in Ruskin would grow and thrive up until World War One. Miller, who had been president of one of the previous Ruskin communities, had devised an “industrial plan” whereby students could work for the college and community to fund their expenses. This inventive idea was an early forerunner of today’s federal and state student subsidy programs – Student Aid and Study Work programs.

The Ruskin College closed its doors in the aftermath of World War One, and the Ruskin Commongood Society officially ceased to exist in 1965. Its common held properties were turned over to Hillsborough County and to the city of Ruskin. Carrying on the ideals of John Ruskin and the Ruskin College, the Dickman family would later donate land for the construction of Hillsborough Community College’s “SouthShore Campus”. Hillsborough Community College and the community college system in general carry forward John Ruskin’s ideals of providing education to many that otherwise might not have the opportunity for “higher education”.
Looking Back

The communitarian movement of the early 19th century can be seen in the light of being a protest against the prevailing society of that time, and part of the first “age of American reform”. The early growth of industrialization had created a society that had begun to discard the importance of the individual in favor of greater economic prosperity. As the economy expanded in favor of wealthy capitalists, working peoples where increasingly exploited. When government was slow to respond to their needs, individuals and groups of peoples looked to address their own aspirations by forming communitarian societies and communities. For the greatest part, these people did not eschew the immediate change of all society. Rather, they looked to take control of their own lives and destinies within cooperative communes and communities that they believed would guide greater society toward a more inclusive social and economic model.

These communities were a form of protest against what was found to be wrong with American society at that time. All were attempts to find ways to show that society could be transformed and economically restructured to address the needs of all concerned. Many of the religious communities saw slavery as a sign of American corruptibility and looked to create moral communes. While most failed, for the duration of their existences they did provide a glimpse into what was possible when an effort was made toward cooperative change. The simple idea of communities of workers functioning together for the greater good of the society did show merit.

There would be a second wave of communitarian societies and communities by the end of the 19th century, as once again, individuals would look to change society and their own lives thorough cooperative communities. The 20th century would see change begin to take place as government began to restrain the abuses of industrial capitalism, and the “Progressive Era” would lead to sweeping reforms. The growth of trade unions had much to do with improving working conditions and wages. Workers gained a greater voice in the workplace and in society, women were moved to a status of greater equality, and democracy was expanded toward greater inclusion.

For their part, communitarian societies had set an example of cooperation that greater society could not ignore. In their own way they helped develop a means toward social change. Government began to pass legislation to improve working conditions and unions gained a greater ability to improve the living standards of their workers. The spirit of these communities lives on in cooperatives and collectives throughout the country to this day.

Further Reading and Credits

A general understanding of the utopian concept can be found with Douglas Gallery, Utopias ( Dublin, 1999). Also, Henrik Infield explains the workings of co-operative communities in, Co-operative Communities at Work ( London, 1998). The histories of New Lanark and Orbiston are explored in Alexander Cullen, Adventures in Socialism: New Lanark and Orbiston Community (Clifton, 1972). A good study of Robert Owen and