



Utopian Communities: European Roots, American Realities

Guide for Curriculum Unit 87.02.06
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This ten- to fifteen-day project will involve students in discovery of how various idealistic “utopians” tried to live out their ideas in practical ways. What were their motives in setting up communitarian societies? What was the leadership like? What practical problems did they face? What caused their eventual downfall? These and other questions will help to focus the unit for the students as they immerse themselves in the life of these various communities.

The roots of the “community movement” in Europe in the 18th century began with the belief that human happiness in an industrial society was impossible. Smaller was better. Careful planning was essential. Fully exploring a life that was happier, more moderate and appealing to the communitarian resulted in several experimental efforts that had mixed results for the participants.

In order to encourage students to “socialize” as part of this unit of study, they will be divided into small groups and given one of several utopian communities to study: e.g., the Oneida Perfectionists, the New Harmonists, the Zoar Separatists, the Owenites, etc. After studying and analyzing for several class periods, students will report back and try to “sell” the class on their experiment. Other students will act as possible recruits and voice approval or objections.

Of the religious community experiments, the longest-lasting and most successful was the Shaker movement. Included in the unit experience will be a field trip to Shaker Village and Museum in Hancock, Massachusetts where students can see first-hand a recreation of Shaker life as it existed in the 19th century.

(Recommended for Western Civilization classes, grade 9; and American History II classes, grades 10-11)

Key Words

American History Nineteenth Century

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