



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1989 Volume I: American Communities, 1880-1980

Utopian Communities, 1800-1890

Curriculum Unit 89.01.04
by Peter N. Herndon

Introduction

This curriculum unit is designed for American history students or ninth-grade World History students; it is intended to take up ten to fifteen class periods. One goal of this unit is to increase student awareness and interest in the practical idealism of men and women of the past. Students will be challenged to examine carefully the writings of utopian idealists of the nineteenth century and present arguments defending or attacking these ideas. This unit is meant to supplement an earlier unit I wrote in 1987, entitled "Utopian Communities: European Roots, American Realities," which was part of Volume II "Epic, Romance and the American Dream," pages 88-102. The teacher should read these two units together for a more complete treatment of this subject. In this unit, I expand on some of the earlier material on Robert Owen and John Humphrey Noyes.

Students will study two communities for comparison: (1) a purely secular community (Owen's experiment in New Harmony, Ohio); and (2) a strictly religious one (Noyes' community in Oneida, New York). Though both communities were communistically organized, i.e., both shared property and wealth, they were quite different in goals, methods and achievements. Students should become aware of the diversity possible within such communal living experiences. Another goal that I have is for students to appreciate the religious, economic and social conditions present in nineteenth-century America that led to the formation of literally hundreds of small communities such as the ones outlined in this unit. I expect that students will be able to develop some sort of criteria for judging "successes" and "failures" of such social experiments.

What makes for a successful community? This question is central to my unit. Worthy goals? Able leadership? Economic stability? One nineteenth century commentator, William Alfred Hinds, made the following observation:

[A community] may have its hundreds of members . . . its immense domain; its manifold industries; its large library and every aid to intellectual development; and yet, unless it finds a way to secure the conditions . . . essential to the happiness of a small family, it will prove a gigantic failure. . . . (Hinds, *American Communities*, page 162)

Family virtues and values. Can we define them? If Hinds is correct, his theory may have implications far beyond those of experimental communities begun a century or more ago. Many religious communities such as

the Shakers believed in earthly service performed out of a heaven-directed motive. As one Shaker hymn expressed it:

I work thirteen hours in each twenty-four,
Or more if necessity call;
In point of distinction, I want nothing more
Than just to be servant of all:
I peaceable work at whatever I' m set,
From no other motive but love,
To honor the gospel and keep out of debt,
And lay up a treasure above.

Of the religious groups, the Shakers were one of the most enduring. Perhaps there is a clue to their success in the ideas expressed in the hymn recorded above. Many of the nineteenth-century Christian communities believed that the time of Christ's Second Coming was very near. By righteous living and diligently practicing Biblical injunctions to separate themselves from the world, many believed they could usher in the Millennial Kingdom on earth, the time promised by the prophet Isaiah when

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
and the young lion and the fatling together;
and a little child shall lead them.
They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain:
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD,
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah, chapter 31, versus 6 and 9)

The Mormons believed they had been instructed by God through their earthly leader, Joseph Smith, to build a holy city. Mormon believers were to do their best to recreate an earthly paradise.

A Mormon editorial in 1842 declared:

‘Let the division fences be lined with peach and mulberry trees, . . . and the houses surrounded with roses and prairie flowers, and their porches covered with grape vine, and we shall soon have formed some idea of how Eden looked.’ (Quoted in Hayden, page 104)

The secular communitarians also placed a high value on building principles as symbolic of social principles. Albert Brisbane, a follower of Charles Fourier, and chief architect of the North American Phalanx, advocated a well-planned layout. Brisbane claimed (1843)

‘If we can with a knowledge of true social principles, organize one township rightly, we can, by organizing others like it, and by spreading and making them universal, establish a true Social and Political order.’

(Quoted in Hayden, page 8)

Can orderly principles in architecture lead us to the well-ordered society? John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida community, also saw a direct relationship between architectural form and community function. Both Noyes and Fourier saw the need for a large community meeting house so that the community members might have something symbolic to identify with and something practical to communicate in. An Oneida song of the 1870s spoke of the unifying effect of a community meeting place:

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

Back to thoughts expressed of a family again! What are those elements in a family which can allow us to help structure a larger group which can survive in a sometimes hostile world? To explore this question within the context of communitarian ventures might help students realize that communities are complex institutions, often fragile, which endure and are successful only if there is a proper balance of freedom and responsibility. As Shelley so ably stated in his *Declaration of Rights* , “All have a right to an equal share in the benefits, *and* burdens, of government.”

OVERALL OBJECTIVES

Following a pre-unit “Student Survey” (see Lesson One below) , students will be asked to design a plan for their “ideal” community, including the creation of a community map. This would be an excellent opportunity for the teacher to review map-reading skills by passing out a sample topographical map with a key, scale of miles, and symbols. The better-drawn student maps can be shown to other class members using the opaque projector or by xeroxing copies for everyone to see and discuss.

Next, they will be asked to suggest some laws or basic rules for community members to follow. Later, students will compare their ideas and work within groups to reformulate their projects into something acceptable to all within the group. This group process will help students experience some of the difficulties in making ideas practical; ideas that others agree have merit. Group members should learn some lessons in delegation of responsibility, leadership, and compromise. Discussion and listening skills, note-taking and social skills which foster cooperation and group planning are all integral parts in the understanding of what a sense of “community” is.

This unit is particularly geared toward activities that involve students in acquainting themselves with one another’s work and fostering cooperation among students. If students feel comfortable reporting on their work, or having it displayed, so much the better; students should be encouraged to support one another and learn how to offer constructive criticism.

In getting students involved with a unit such as this one, I believe that the process is as important as the end product; indeed, the process ultimately determines the end product. I plan to involve the students in the grading system by introducing a Self-Evaluation, in which each student will set individual goals for him or herself and evaluate his or her progress every few days. They will also be given opportunities to evaluate their peers in a constructive way, based on their experiences in group activities and oral presentations. My objectives here are two-fold: first, to help the students to develop the ability to evaluate their own performance in objective and subjective ways; second, to give students the opportunity to determine and reach a goal which is attainable through their own efforts and the support of others. Appropriate rewards other than grades will be given to students who complete the process successfully (free time, certificates, no homework, etc.). The rewards system will be one worked out mutually between the students and the teacher to reinforce the group process and to make the goals clear to everyone.

CONTENT OBJECTIVES

There will be a certain core of information that all students are expected to know, e.g., the differences and unique qualities of three communitarian groups in the nineteenth century. They should be able to define and use certain “core concepts” that are essential to their ability to communicate with one another intelligently. A list follows :

A. Core Concepts

capital (capitalism)	“law of love” (Perfectionists)
commune (communism)	Oneida Perfectionist
“Complex marriage” (Perfectionists)	Owenite
constitution	radical
heredity v. environmental determinism	Rappite
family, communal and nuclear	Separatist
Fourierist	Shaker
idealism (idealist)	social reformer
individualism (individualist)	stripiculture
inclusive v. exclusive membership	utopia

joint ownership (of property)

B. Learning and Behavioral Objectives

Students will be applying critical thinking skills, as well as becoming conversant with the above Core Concepts. Analytical thinking research, writing and listening skills will be emphasized. I have already discussed the importance of group process skills, which are central to the goals of this particular unit of study .

The classroom, for a major part of this unit, will be set up into several “mini-communities” (groups) in which students will help each other solve certain common problems (writing basic rules, choosing a leader) and anticipating others. By using the historical narrative, they can choose to improve on ideas and schemes from the past by interpreting from history what they believe will work and what will not . Here, in a very real sense, the students should realize that indeed we can “learn from history.” Their ideas will then be scrutinized by other members of the class for their suggestions and criticisms.

Observation and interpretation of historical information, maps, pictures, slides will aid the student in arriving at valid conclusions and help him or her substantiate his arguments. Students are given very little opportunity, in my opinion, to plan and organize their thoughts in such a way as to convince others that their ideas have merit, based on facts (and figures if available). This unit, if successful, can help students in building these important life-skills .

UNIT SUMMARY AND STRATEGIES

From the time of its founding, the “American Experiment” has been one of high aspirations and bold optimism. The high ideals of our nation’s Founding Fathers are apparent in the language of the official early documents of the Republic. We have come to use words like “democracy”, “freedom,” and “justice” almost interchangeably. Though these fundamental national principles have been trampled on, even openly violated at times in our history, they still remain at the core of our national character. For communitarian groups, as for individuals, this challenge was foremost: would they be free to initiate their own “pursuit of happiness,” so long as it did not interfere with the happiness and well-being of others? Perhaps these groups helped to remind Americans of their creed and the freedom to be different, to pursue different lifestyle goals, indeed to “march to a different drummer.”

This teaching unit will attempt to describe several experiments in living during the nineteenth century that should help students focus on community survival in any age of history. Because the questions raised are so basic, this unit would be best taught toward the beginning of a school year, or as part of a larger unit on the community.

At the outset, I plan to survey the students with a series of general questions about community and community organization. These survey questions (see Lesson Plan Section below) can be used by the individual teacher in any way he or she sees fit. Personally, I plan to survey the students at the beginning and again at the end of the unit, to allow them to compare their answers, to see if their opinions have changed. The Thought Questions (parentheses) can be used for class discussion following completion of the surveys. The questions are designed to highlight the following issues: Definition of the concept to be discussed, “Community” (#1); Success and failure of community (#2 and #3); Community government (#4 and #5);

Community economics (#6); Community goals (#7); Community traditions and social structure (#8 and #9).

I believe it is important at the beginning of a course or unit of study for the students to see “community” as a somewhat complex institution, difficult to define in a few simple words. I want them to see that communities function at many levels and attempt to meet a variety of needs. At the outset, I prefer to take students from the general to the specific, thereby allowing them to draw on their general knowledge in order to involve as many students in the group discussion as possible. I call this method “prepared brainstorming.” Students will have already prepared answers which the teacher can list on the chalkboard. The teacher is then free to ask follow-up questions to help clarify and sort out the random answers given. For example, the teacher may wish to star(*) certain answers which the class agrees are particularly good ones. Follow-up questions can be used to further clarify and reinforce key concepts and to draw out student responses on key questions.

If the teacher will refer back to my previous unit (“Utopian Communities: European Roots, American Realities”) he or she will locate (page 91) the first assignment following the above Survey assignment . This is a group assignment. Students will be expected to make up “Articles of Agreement” (i.e., a constitution) for their “community”, based on their own ideas and excerpts from three Community Covenants : . New Harmony, Pennsylvania; Zoar, Ohio; and Oneida, New York (Hinds, Appendix, pages 165-171). Student representatives will report their findings to the entire class; discussion should follow, with the teacher helping the class to summarize the similarities and differences among the groups. This exercise is intended to give students an appreciation for differences of approaches, problems to solve, and standards for success. I hope to use these three categories (Approaches, Problems, Standards) throughout the unit as one valid way of distinguishing these experiments in communal living.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Even before the nineteenth century, various groups flocked to the New World to claim land and establish a new way of life in communal living experiments. In the first century and a half after Jamestown was founded, almost all groups had a distinctly religious flavor. Most tended to be exclusive and did not welcome outsiders. Virginia was established as an Anglican state. Massachusetts was Puritan, actively persecuting Quakers and other dissident Protestant sects well into the eighteenth century. It wasn't until William Penn, a Quaker, founded the colony of Pennsylvania in 1682, that Quakers and other groups had a haven with complete religious liberty. Penn actively recruited Protestant religious groups in Europe, which resulted in the largest wave of immigration to North America to that time. Besides English and German Quakers, Mennonites, Moravian Brethren and German Anabaptists responded to Penn's pleas.

THE RAPPITES AND SEPARATISTS

In the nineteenth century, other Protestant groups founded communities in the United States. One of the earliest and most successful was headed by “Father” George Rapp, a German religious leader. After migrating to Pennsylvania in 1804, he and his group of over 1700 followers founded a communistically organized colony in Beaver County, north of Pittsburgh. The Rappites shared their economic wealth equally. They believed the Second Coming of Christ was imminent and soon the Millennial Kingdom would be set up on earth; Rapp believed that his Society would prepare true believers for this event. People were attracted to Rapp both

because of his charismatic leadership but also because of his common sense. His son, Frederick, was also an able businessman, administrator and organizer like his father. Following the deaths of the Rapps, an able group of administrators and trustees continued to guide the Society's affairs.

The accomplishments of the Rappite-Harmonists were many. Within two years, the community was virtually self-sufficient, due to Rapp's ability to attract hardworking farmers, builders and mechanics. In 1814 the community decided to cross the western frontier and set up a new headquarters, called "Harmony" in the Wabash Valley in Indiana. This new town became an important trade and industrial center for a large region. The community prospered and grew. But Father Rapp continued to preach to his followers to be good stewards of what God had provided and not to be overly concerned with riches. A decade later, in 1824-25, the group decided to move back to Pennsylvania, and sold their 30,000 acre community, buildings and all, to Robert Owen, who agreed to pay \$150,000. The Harmonists had found the Wabash Valley unhealthy and surrounded by unpleasant neighbors. The new Pennsylvania site, called "Economy", just fifteen miles from their original location near Pittsburgh, proved well-suited for manufacturing and business. One observer recounted:

They erected woolen and cotton mills, a grist-mill and sawmill; they planted orchards and vineyards; they began the culture of silk, and with such success that soon the Sunday dress of men as well as women was of silk, grown, reeled, spun and woven by themselves. (Nordhoff, page 77)

The community at Economy thrived and attracted many well-known international visitors, as well as many westward-bound settlers. Despite a split in the Economy society in 1833, the Harmonists continued their way of life until the early 1900s.

The Zoar Separatists, founded by Joseph Bimeler in 1817, established a sectarian community in northeastern Ohio. They wished to separate themselves from the dominant society, did not vote or participate in political life, and became self-sufficient with a woolen factory, two flour mills, a sawmill, machine shop, and a summer resort hotel to attract tourism. They also brewed beer and milled cider. They lived communistically, that is, all property and wealth was held in common. In terms of goals, one member stated in this way:

'Our object is to get into heaven, and help others to get there. . . . I formerly believed [our system] would spread all over the world. I thought every body would come into Communistic relations. I believe so still, but I don't know how far our particular system will prevail. In heaven there is only Communism; and why should it not be our aim to prepare ourselves in this world for the society we are sure to enter there? If we can get rid of our willfulness and selfishness here, there is so much done for heaven. '

(Quoted in Hinds, pages 31-32)

This world's experiences as a preparation for the next. This seemed to be a recurring theme in the Christian communities. But what of the nonsectarian groups? With the exception of two or three short-lived efforts in the mid-eighteenth century, the vast majority were religious groups, seeking to live free from persecution.

ROBERT OWEN AND THE NEW HARMONY SOCIETY

As discussed above, Robert Owen, the Scottish industrialist, deist, and social engineer, bought the Rappite village of Harmony, Indiana, lock, stock and barrel, in 1825. Owen, well-known in Britain, desired to come to America, where resistance to his experimental ideas would be minimal.

In April of 1825, then, Owen and his colonists took over a ready-made community with

. . . one hundred and sixty houses, churches, dormitories, flour mills, textile factory, distilleries, breweries, a tannery, various craftsmen's shops, over two thousand acres under cultivation with eighteen acres of vineyards and orchards, as well as additional pastureland and woods.

(Rexroth, page 234)

Could Robert Owen and his followers produce social harmony in a secular communistic setting? Time would tell. The communitarian spirit during the first quarter-century had been running high in the United States. A reform spirit was evident. Apparently a well-thought out theory ready for application was all that was necessary for the "good life" to be realized. Were the utopian ideals of the New Harmonists capable of producing a workable system that could be made adaptable in other locations as well? Robert Owen was born in northern Wales in 1771, and was only ten years old when he left home for London to make his way in the world. At nineteen, he had risen to the job of managing one of the largest cotton-spinning mills in Manchester, at the height of the industrial revolution in England. By 1800, he was appointed manager of Scotland's New Lanark mills, where he remained for the next twenty-five years.

As Owen experimented with factory reforms to raise the living standards of his impoverished workers, he became convinced that society needed to be transformed through a communitarian approach. At New Lanark, Owen improved working and living conditions, reduced working hours, raised wages and built a progressive school for the children. In Owen's own words,

'An idle, dirty, dissolute, and drunken population was transformed by the application of proper means into one of order, neatness and regularity.'

(Quoted in Rexroth, page 219)

There were, admittedly, limitations on Owen's success. The business went through several reorganizations, most goods and services had to be brought in from the outside (including food), and most of the two thousand employees were women and children.

Despite drawbacks, New Lanark continued to make a profit even in depression years. According to Owen, improvements in human character were the real success story. Owen came to believe that people were almost totally a product of their environment. By establishing the proper surroundings, lives would change for the better. New Lanark was proof that Owen's ideas could work a dramatic change in the behavior and attitude of the workers. Owen concluded that

'Any character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large.'

(Quoted in Bestor, page 67; emphasis added)

Because of the outstanding success of New Lanark, Owen became well-known in England among businessmen, politicians and nobility. Even the House of Commons asked for his views on factory reform. Owenite “clubs” began to meet to discuss Owen’s ideas, and several communal settlements were formed. His rejection of the “free enterprise” economy and his open hostility to organized religion continued to cause many to oppose him.

The New World seemed to Owen the obvious place to set up his New Moral World on a grand scale. The open frontier beckoned. Perhaps one successful communitarian experiment would be the example which would cause the entire nation to become converted. Alter the environment and people’s baser nature will be transformed. In 1825, then, Owen’s experiment began on the banks of the Wabash River in Ohio.

Initially, there was an immediate number of people who joined Owen and his followers from the surrounding Ohio countryside. Evidence suggests that this was partly because of the positive impression the Rappites had made. Americans, already familiar with the communitarian views of successful religious communities such as the Rappites and the Shakers, could adapt the experience to fit a purely secular mold.

In effect, what these men and women thought they discovered in Owenism . . . was a way of achieving the prosperity, the security, and the peace of a Shaker village without subjecting themselves to the celibacy and the narrow social conformity exacted by Shaker theology.

(Bestor, page 59)

Robert Owen’s first few weeks in America were spent meeting influential business leaders, publishers, university professors and politicians. After negotiating the purchase of the Ohio property from the Rappites in January, 1825, he spent the next three months touring the east, making speeches which outlined his radical “New System of Society.” Members of Congress, the Supreme Court and even President-elect James Monroe attended his lectures. Meanwhile, with Owen’s son William in charge, people began to arrive at “New Harmony,” as the community was named.

By May, 1825, over eight hundred persons had arrived. Owen was ecstatic as he predicted the beginnings of a new order for society.

‘This country is ready to commence a new empire upon the principle of public property and to discard private property and the uncharitable notion that man can form his own character . . . I believe the whole of the district north of the Ohio River comprising all the free states will be [ready] for the change before the [end] of the year 1827. Our operations will soon extend to the blacks [free and slaves] and the Indians’ (Quoted in Bestor, pages 113-114)

Owen clearly believed a new era in history was at hand. Would he be the “chosen prophet” to open the door to a socialistic “Promised Land”? In practical terms, how would the system work? How would free and equal privileges for all be translated into everyday reality? How would the “common property” be shared according to need? Owen had developed a proposal in England called “Rules and Regulations of a Community,” which he proposed to adapt to the specific set of circumstances in New Harmony. Meanwhile, however, he proposed a temporary constitution which contained plans for a “Preliminary Society,” which would eventually wither away into complete communism. As Director for the first year of operation, Owen would appoint a committee of member-directors who would replace him eventually. Joining members would be expected to furnish their own furniture and tools, and would be given “credit” for anything they brought with them (cows, horses) to donate to the community. Records would be carefully kept of people’s labor for which they would receive credit at

the community store. The store would be the supplier of all community necessities (food, clothing, farm and work supplies, etc.)

After only five weeks of operation, Owen felt the need to leave the experimental community for a lecture tour in England, supposedly to recruit more skilled workers, managers, and farmers. He left his thirty-five year old son William in charge of managing community life for a group of several hundred persons from a wide variety of backgrounds and abilities. All that was asked of new members was to sign the new constitution. Confusion reigned. While Owen, the father, talked to European audiences of expansion plans, Owen, the son, wrote letters complaining of an almost complete lack of any suitable building materials to expand with. Already there was a severe housing shortage at New Harmony and little capital, materials or skilled labor with which to solve it.

What was life like at New Harmony? During the seven months that Owen was lecturing, there was a general optimism which united the group. All looked forward to Owen's return. Meanwhile there were difficulties—fundamental ones. Housing was a problem. There was also a severe shortage of managers, factory supervisors, skilled craftsmen and farmers. In the first year, manufacturing and agricultural production was far below expectations. Some factory buildings were not being used due to lack of experienced help. People who might have been productive were idle, due to lack of organization plans. The accounting system was complicated. Everyone who had financial needs was given free credit, so that work incentives remained low. A weekly "allowance" was allotted, with individual increases granted by a committee as needs arose. The heavy losses due to underproduction had to be subsidized from Owen's personal fortune.

Upon Owen's return in January, 1826, things began to improve. A free public school was organized under excellent progressive leadership. Weekly dances and concerts were scheduled; public lectures and discussions were held regularly. Parades and marching drills provided color. Society meetings and libraries were organized. A newspaper, the *New Harmony Gazette*, discussed freely all points of view on a variety of social, economic and political questions.

Even with Owen's return and a new constitution, things continued to get worse. Members of the executive board could not agree on some basic economic issues and Owen was put back in charge to try to hold back a groundswell of discouragement. More constitutions were adopted, more impassioned speeches were made to try to promote unity and keep morale up. In March, two factions broke off from the main community: one in a dispute over religious policies; a second over agricultural methods and alcoholic restrictions (Owen rationed the supply of alcohol). Later, a Third Community broke off to maintain the independence of the Community School. By mid-1826 there were even personal attacks on Owen's leadership. There were disputes among the splinter communities and a refusal to cooperate with one another. Even Owen's two sons headed up a dissident group of intellectuals, unhappy with the loafers who were a constant drain to the community's resources.

Owen's speeches sometimes tended to make things worse. On July 4, 1826, Owen persuaded the New Harmonyites to approve a "Declaration of Mental Independence," which "forthrightly denounced religion, marriage and private property—all of which led to further and more serious schisms." (Rexroth, page 227)

In September, 1826, a fourth reorganization plan signalled the beginning of the end. By early 1827, eighty members left to form a new experiment further west, and most of the town was either up for sale or operated as a private business enterprise. Only the School Society remained true to the original community principles. A fifth and final reorganization plan included the expulsion of certain "undesireables." (Bestor, pages 197-200)

Owen said farewell to New Harmony in June, 1827, for England. His legacy at New Harmony was (1) a model for future social experiments; (2) an ongoing progressive educational enterprise which would greatly influence public education; (3) a blueprint of “do’s and don’ts” for community administration .

Owen had proven to be an enthusiastic visionary with a poorly thought out plan of action. The colonists had very little, besides the force of Owen’s personality and ideas, to bind them together. Owen’s well-publicized success with factory workers in New Lanark did not guarantee a successful socialistic experiment in the United States. Owen’s failure resulted in no new secular communitarian communities being established for over a decade. It wasn’t until the 1840’ s, with the Brook Farm and Fourierist Phalanxes, that secular communitarianism would see a revival. In the end, the failure at New Harmony was generally seen as a failure in leadership rather than principle; it was the failure of one man’s plan, not the failure of an ideology. The dream was still alive, carried on by the religious groups such as the Rappites and Shakers, who demonstrated the continued economic feasibility of communal living. It wasn’t until the sectarian groups fell behind economically in the 1860’s that the communitarian faith was finally shaken. Until that time, however, social and religious reformers would continue to plan and dream.

Could it still be possible, they wondered, that in this American “land of opportunity” a small community of hope might still emerge to lead the world into a new societal order, a theoretical “New Age?”

THE ONEIDA PERFECTIONISTS

John Humphrey Noyes was the founder of a religious utopian community known as the Oneida Perfectionists and remained its leader until the group abandoned the system of complex marriage in 1879. In 1881, Oneida became a joint-stock company involved primarily in the production of silverware which has continued to the present day.

Noyes attended Dartmouth where he studied law. After graduation, he studied theology at Yale and received his preaching license in 1832. It was in New Haven that Noyes first announced his radical belief that he was morally perfect and incapable of committing sin: New Haven Perfectionism was born with the establishment of a Perfectionist church in 1834. He subsequently set up a Bible School in Vermont, married a Vermont congressman’s daughter, and left New Haven to set up the Putney Community in 1841. His letter of proposal to his future wife Harriet , reveals Noyes views on love and marriage:

‘I desire and expect my [wife] will love all who love God . . . with a warmth and strength of affection which is unknown to earthly lovers, and as free as if she stood in no particular connection with me. In fact the object of my connection with her will not be to monopolize and enslave her heart or my own, but to enlarge and establish both in the free fellowship of God’ s universal family.’ (Quoted in Kern, page 215)

In 1846, the community in Putney decided to live together with all things (and marriage partners) held in common. In 1847, the good citizens of Putney had had enough of Noyes’ strange and eccentric ways and threatened to arrest him on charges of adultery and sexual immorality. Noyes and a few of his followers quickly left town and crossed into New York, where, in 1848, they were able to purchase forty acres of land in Oneida, in upstate New York. Later, they set up branch communities in Brooklyn, New York, and Wallingford, Connecticut.

Noyes' radical views on community life were partly a result of personal tragedy. Noyes had witnessed his wife, Harriet's suffering during five extremely painful pregnancies, with the result that four were stillborn. He vowed that never again would he subject his wife to such needless suffering. He discovered a practice he called "male continence," which led later to "complex marriage."

Noyes believed that the physical pleasures of sex were a God-given blessing. Pleasure, however, was often motivated by selfishness, which must be eliminated if the communal system were to succeed. If a husband, Noyes reasoned, would seek his marriage partner's physical pleasure and not his own, the man could "atone" for the sin of selfishness. According to Noyes' philosophy, a man needed to subject his body and sexual desires to the will of God; in doing so he would be seeking "perfect" self-control. Communal fellowship depended on successful performance. The male had to learn objective detachment through control of the will, or he would fall under the control of selfish passion, a threat to the well-being of the entire community.

In 1846, a year before the Putney lawsuit was filed against him, Noyes announced the workings of "complex marriage," or pentagamy, where every male was declared married to every female (and vice versa). Noyes believed that he and his followers were living in the Millennial Age, when monogamous marriage would cease to exist. What appeared to the pious citizens of Putney to be adulterous "free love", in actual practice, was not, since all sexual activity was intended to be supervised and highly regulated. Until 1867, living quarters were communal, and certain rooms designated for "social purposes." A change came about when Noyes' plan for scientific reproduction, called "stripiculture" was introduced. Coincident with stripiculture came the institution of individual rooms, which provided welcome privacy.

The stripiculture system necessitated a Stripiculture Committee, which had to give approval to all couples selected to be "parents", of an improved race of children. The parents were to be morally "perfect"; the children of these parents would progress even further beyond sinlessness. Noyes believed that learned moral characteristics would be transmitted to the children through the parents. The discipline and education of these children was not the parents' responsibility but a communal one. When the child was about a year old, he or she entered the community nursery during the day, and spent only nights with the mother. Then, at four years old, the child was placed in children's quarters, separate from the parents.

The system of mutual criticism was another unique feature of Oneida life. Mutual criticism required a community member to appear before a group of older members who would evaluate his or her personal strengths and weaknesses. Perfectionism was seen as a gradual process whereby individual human failings could be eliminated through collective correction. A rotating committee of four "criticized" each member of the community; then after three months the committee was replaced so that everyone would take turns being critic and criticized. This method served to discipline commune members, provided a forum for individual "testimony," and provided a way to help members (particularly new members) to adjust to community life. The overall goal, according to Noyes, was correction, not punishment. What was best for the life of the community was the evidence in the lives of community members of an heartfelt commitment to the principles and practices of "Bible Communism" as espoused by Father Noyes. They believed that whatever problems they identified, God would help them solve, whether that problem be spiritual, physical, sexual or emotional. Even the landscape and climate, Perfectionists believed, could be modified under the process of mutual criticism! Arriving at agreement was essential; mutual criticism should serve to unite the communal members and promote a spirit of renewed cooperation.

At first, the Oneida community believed it could recreate an environment much like the Garden of Eden, with fruit-growing their primary occupation. They believed they could bring horticulture to perfection, with God's

help.

After ten years, however, the Perfectionists abandoned dependency on horticulture and turned to business and manufacturing for their primary means of economic survival. In the year 1873, they sold over three hundred thousand dollars' worth of manufactured goods and farm produce. They built not only well-planned wooden frame houses, but also large brick buildings, including two central Mansion Houses, the later one (1870) built with twin towers enabling residents to overlook their vast domain. Adaptation was a key concept in their building efforts; there was a constant need for improvement in technique and function. Additions were always being constructed, and interior walls removed and repartitioned. One building, constructed in 1850, served at different times as a granary, chair factory, dormitory, broom factory, sawmill, silk spinning factory, and storage shed. (Hayden, page 199)

The achievements of the Oneidans were these: first, they were able to define an image of a community which had meaning to the members of the community. A collective spirit was cultivated and maintained by strong leadership and group decision-making. A second major achievement was in designing and building the community which they desired. Individual as well as group skills were fostered and utilized. There was a spirit of progressive experimentation in designing and perfecting practical things. They exercised control over their environment which was consistent with their moral and religious principles.

In the end, the Oneidans could not overcome human nature. In attempting to create an "Eden of heart-love" where all could enjoy the "feast of joy forever," (Nordhoff, page 299) Noyes had tried to create' an unselfish socialized system which went against the grain of personal sexual preferences. For over thirty years, John Humphrey Noyes had managed to maintain a utopian-religious experiment that served as a model community. Noyes was a remarkable leader who worked as administrator, cattle-breeder, farmer and blacksmith, and was involved in virtually all aspects of the community's economic life. But in the end, even Noyes' characteristic leadership was not enough to avoid the eventual breakup of the Oneida Perfectionist Community. In 1879, threatened legal action against Noyes for immorality forced him to flee to Canada. Before his departure, Noyes proposed a resolution to abolish complex marriage, which was accepted by the general meeting. With Noyes absent, the colony rapidly broke up, with Oneida becoming a joint-stock corporation in 1881. Looking back Noyes commented, "We made a raid into an unknown country, charted it, and returned without the loss of a single man, woman or child." (Quoted in Hayden, page 190). After thirty-five exciting years it was over. And it had been a fascinating building process.

SAMPLE LESSON PLANS

A. Lesson One : Student Survey

Objectives After completing this Lesson students should be able

1. To have a clear idea of the concept of "community";
2. To think in new ways about community life past, present and future.

Lesson Procedures

1. Write the word “community” on the chalkboard. Ask the students to think of as many related words as they can. Try to call on as many different students as possible, and write their responses on the board. Discuss some of the words, particularly those with the same root word (common, communist). Are some of these terms value-laden (communist)? Which ones? Why?
 2. Explain that the entire class is going to be given a “Community Survey” to fill out during the class period. The survey will not be graded. Answer all the questions as best you can in complete sentences. The questions in parentheses are discussion questions.
 3. Have the students fill out the survey. Before class ends, explain that tomorrow they will be assigned into “community groups.” Rules for organizing a community will be discussed.
 4. The assignment is to answer as many of the discussion questions from the survey (at least three) as you can, in complete sentences.
- NOTE: The survey is intended to be given at the end of the unit as a way of review and indicating how much students have learned during the course of study.

STUDENT SURVEY: COMMUNITY

1. In your own words what is a community? (Name a community you belong to. If you belong to more than one, list them.)
2. Name two things that help make a community a good place. (Give an example of a successful community or community organization and why you think it is successful.)
3. Why do some communities or community organizations fail? (Give an example and why you think this community or organization no longer exists.)
4. Are good leaders necessary in a community? Why or why not? (What leadership qualities should leaders have?)
5. Are rules or laws necessary for a community to exist? Explain. (Name three or four rules you think communities should have.)
6. Should people be required to work in the community? Why or why not? (Should work done by men and women be the same or different? What about children working?)
7. Should communities have goals that everyone is trying to accomplish? Explain. (Name a goal that a community could work together to get done, OR Explain why communities do not really need goals to work toward.)
8. Besides working, what community activities will help keep members happy and satisfied? (Should all community members be expected to participate in community events?)

9. Do families and family life play an important role in a community? Explain your answer. (Should family life or marriage be regulated in anyway? Explain.)

B. *Lesson Two* : Constitution-Making: The Basic Rules (2 days)

Objectives Students should be able, after this lesson

1. To list organizing principles of a community;
2. To list some requirements for good citizenship in a community;
3. To observe differences in the ways different communities are organized.

Lesson Procedures

1. Write the word “constitution” on the chalkboard. Ask the students what they remember about our constitution. Point out that many organizations and clubs have organizing principles that they choose to write down. What kinds of things might be included in these lists of basic rules? What are the advantages/disadvantages in writing these fundamental ideas down on paper? Would it make more or less sense as membership got larger and larger?
2. Tell students they will examine (in their groups, preferably) one or more sets of Articles or Covenant Agreements (constitutions) of some Independent Communities in the 1800’s. As they read , they should outline the document (each has numbered articles) and summarize the main point(s). Discuss each article in your group and see if all agree as to whether this is a “good” or “bad” (or unnecessary) article.
3. After reviewing the entire Articles they have been assigned, they are to prepare a set of Articles for their own “utopian” community. Each member of the group should be assigned something to write up for the entire group’s approval the next class day.
4. The next class day (Day 2) the group is to report to the rest of the class (1) a Summary of their “Community Articles” and (2) how their Articles are different/similar to the Articles they studied. After reporting, as time allows, members from other ,“Communities,” can respond. The teacher or another group member should summarize main points on the chalkboard.
5. Assignment: (Day 2) Reading on nineteenth century community life and history. Either the New

Harmony or the Perfectionist Communities for discussion the next day.

C. *Lesson Three* : Community Goals and Methods

Objectives Students should be able

1. To list several essential ingredients which are part of any community;
2. To distinguish between methods and goals;
3. To predict results based on preliminary facts (logical thinking).

Lesson Procedures

1. On the chalkboard, the teacher writes "Model Communities," on the board, with three subheadings: "Garden" (agricultural); "Machine" (industrial-technological) ; "Model Home" (design and style). Ask students to write down ideas for communities that fall under one of these three headings.
2. Ask students to discuss their responses. The teacher should explain that some community experiments in the American past had similar goals. Ask students which of the three "Models" would probably be more successful today? Why? Would your answer be the same in the early nineteenth century?
3. Factors or ingredients of a successful community. Ask students to evaluate the following in terms of a community being successful (lasting):
 1. Site (land, water, proximity to markets, etc.)
 2. Leadership (qualities necessary) and Organization
 3. Membership (qualifications?)
 4. Capital (investment)
 5. Purpose (goals: social, economic , religious)

In light of these observations made by class members, examine more closely the two main communities in this unit, the Owenites at New Harmony, and the Perfectionists at Oneida.

4. Homework: Students should write why the communities mentioned above eventually did not last. What circumstances and events led to their breakup? (The teacher can expose the students to as much information as he or she wants, but should withhold the actual “demise ”of each community for the next class period)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bestor, Arthur. *Backwoods Utopias . The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America : 1663-1829* . Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970. 300 pages.

Excellent discussion of Robert Owen’ s contribution to communitarian thought and practice in the United States. Demonstrates how communitarian experiences varied, but were part of the same basic philosophy. The last chapter, “The Owenite Legacy” is thought-provoking. Well-documented; essential to my research.

Harrison, J.F. C. *Robert Owen and The Owenites in Britain and America . The Quest for the New Moral World*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969. 392 pages.

Particularly full discussion of the New Lanark experiment and its impact in Britain. Treats Owen in a favorable light for the most part.

Hayden, Delores. *Seven American Utopias . The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism , 1790-1975* . Cambridge, Mass: The M.I.T. Press, 1976. 401 pages .

A most thorough work. Wonderful photographs, including building designs which illustrate the various communal attempts to design functional living-space. Divided into three sections (1) Seeking Utopia, (2) Building Utopia, and (3) Learning from Utopia, a thorough treatment of nineteenth-century communal experiments. Excellent bibliography, charts and Index.

Hinds, William Alfred. *American Communities and Co-operative Colonies* . Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Co., 1908. 608 pages.

The observations of a contemporary historian of over thirty communitarian groups including the Shakers, Owenites and the Perfectionists. Interesting reading, quite insightful. Good student text. (In paperback)

Holloway, Mark. *Heavens on Earth . Utopian Communities in America , 1680-1880* . New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1966. 246 pages.

A brief overview of the communities discussed in my unit (In paperback)

Kern, Louis J. *An Ordered Love. Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—The Shakers, The Mormons, and The Oneida Community*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981. 430 pages.

A fascinating look, well-documented, into the thought and theology of the Shakers and Perfectionists.

Nordhoff, Charles. *The Communistic Societies of the United States ; From Personal Visit and Observation* . London: John Murray, Albermarle Street, 1875. 439 pages.

Exhaustive personal study; a classic in-depth report on the Rappites, Zoar Separatists and Oneidans, plus others. Interesting concluding chapter titled, "Comparative View and Review."

Owen, Robert. *A New View of Society and Other Writings* . London: Everyman's Library, 1927. 298 pages.

Scholarly writings of Owen and various public addresses on his environmental determinism view of personal character formation and his overall vision for society as a whole.

Rexroth, Kenneth. *Communalism: From Its Origins to the Twentieth Century* . New York: The Seabury Press, 1974. 316 pages.

A "readers digest" version of American Communities with brief chapters on Oneida and Owen, plus an excellent section called "Early Communes in America," to set the historical stage. Recommended as student reading.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>