

Antebellum communal experiments

Station 8: Utopian Societies

Prior to 1815, in the years before the market and Industrial Revolution, most Americans lived on farms where they produced much of the foods and goods they used. This largely pre-capitalist culture centered on large family units whose members all lived in the same towns, counties, and parishes.

Economic forces unleashed after 1815, however, forever altered that world. More and more people began buying their food and goods in the thriving market economy—a shift that opened the door to a new way of life. People's reactions to these changes varied: some people were nostalgic for what they viewed as simpler, earlier times; others were willing to try out new ways of living and working.

In the early nineteenth century, a number of experimental communities sprang up in the United States, created by men and women who hoped not just to create a better way of life but to recast American civilization so that greater equality and harmony could prevail. Indeed, some of these reformers hoped to attain perfection in human relations. The exact number of these new, alternative societies is unknown because many of them were so short-lived, but the movement reached its apex in the 1840s.

Religious utopian societies

Most of those attracted to **utopian communities** had been profoundly influenced by evangelical Protestantism, especially the Second Great Awakening. However, their experience of revivalism had left them wanting to further reform society. The communities they formed and joined adhered to various socialist ideas and were considered radical because members wanted to create a new social order rather than reform the old.

The Shakers

The **Shakers** provide another example of a community established with a religious mission. The Shakers started in England as an outgrowth of the Quaker religion in the middle of the eighteenth century. **Ann Lee**, a leader of the group in England, emigrated to New York in the 1770s after experiencing a profound religious awakening. She taught that God was both male and female; Jesus embodied the male side, while Mother Ann—as she came to be known by her followers—represented the female side. To Shakers in both England and the United States, Mother Ann represented the completion of divine revelation and the beginning of the **millennium** (in this context, millennium refers to the 1000 year period of heaven on Earth following the return of Jesus Christ, as prophesied in the Christian Bible).

In practice, men and women in Shaker communities were held as equals—a radical departure at the time—and women often outnumbered men. Equality extended to the possession of material goods as well; no person could hold private property. Shaker communities aimed for self-sufficiency, raising food and making all that was necessary—including furniture that emphasized excellent workmanship—as a substitute for worldly pleasure.

The defining features of the Shakers were their spiritual mysticism and their prohibition of sexual intercourse, which they viewed as a symptom of a lesser spiritual life and a source of conflict between women and men. Rapturous Shaker dances, for which the group gained notoriety, allowed for emotional release. The high point of the Shaker movement came in the 1830s, when about 6,000 members populated communities in New England, New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky.

John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community

Another religious utopian experiment, the **Oneida Community**, began with the teachings of **John Humphrey Noyes**, a Vermonter who had graduated from Dartmouth, Andover Theological Seminary, and Yale. The Second Great Awakening had exerted a powerful effect on him, and he came to believe in perfectionism—the idea that it is possible to be perfect and free of sin. Noyes claimed to have achieved this state of perfection in 1834.

Noyes applied his idea of perfection to relationships between men and women, earning notoriety for his unorthodox views on marriage and sexuality. Beginning in his home town of Putney, Vermont, he began to advocate what he called "**complex marriage**": a form of communal marriage in which women and men who had achieved perfection could engage in sexual intercourse without sin. Noyes also promoted "male continence," whereby men would not ejaculate, thereby freeing women from pregnancy and the difficulty of determining paternity when they had many partners. Intercourse became fused with spiritual power among Noyes and his followers.

The concept of complex marriage scandalized the townspeople in Putney, so Noyes and his followers moved to Oneida, New York.

Individuals who wanted to join the Oneida Community underwent a tough screening process to weed out those who had not reached a state of perfection. Noyes believed perfection was a state of self-control and did not want those who might display out-of-control behavior in his community. His goal was a balance between individuals in a community of love and respect. The perfectionist community Noyes envisioned ultimately dissolved in 1881, although the Oneida Community itself continues to this day.

Joseph Smith and the Latter-Day Saints

The most successful religious utopian community to arise in the antebellum years was begun by Joseph Smith. Smith came from a large Vermont family that had not prospered in the new market economy and had moved to the town of Palmyra in the "**Burned-Over District**" of western New York, so-called due to the large quantity of religious revivals that had taken place there.

In 1823, Smith claimed to have been visited by the angel Moroni, who told him the location of a trove of golden plates or tablets, which he found and translated. In 1830, he published his finding as *The Book of Mormon*. That same year, he organized the Church of Christ, the progenitor of the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints** (popularly known as the **Mormons**). He presented himself as a prophet and aimed to recapture what he viewed as the purity of the primitive Christian church, purity that had been lost over the centuries. To Smith, this meant restoring male leadership.

Smith emphasized the importance of families being ruled by fathers. His vision of a reinvigorated patriarchy resonated with men and women who had not thrived during the market revolution, and his claims attracted those who hoped for a better future. Smith's new church placed great stress on work and discipline. He aimed to create a "New Jerusalem" where the church exercised oversight of its members.

Anti-Mormon sentiment in New York led Smith and his followers to move to Kirtland, Ohio, in 1831. By 1838, they were facing financial collapse after a series of efforts in banking and money-making ended in disaster. They moved to Missouri, but trouble soon developed there

as well as citizens reacted against the Mormons' beliefs. Actual fighting broke out in 1838, and roughly 10,000 Mormons left for Nauvoo, Illinois, where they founded a new center of Mormonism.

By the 1840s, Nauvoo boasted a population of 30,000, making it the largest utopian community in the United States. Thanks to some important conversions to Mormonism among powerful citizens in Illinois, the Mormons had virtual autonomy in Nauvoo, which they used to create the largest armed force in the state. Smith also claimed to receive further revelations there, including one that allowed male church leaders to practice **polygamy** (having more than one wife).

Smith and the Mormons' convictions and practices generated a great deal of opposition from neighbors in surrounding towns. Smith was arrested for treason for destroying the printing press of a newspaper that criticized Mormonism. While he was in prison, an anti-Mormon mob stormed into his cell and killed him. **Brigham Young** then assumed leadership of the group; he led the Mormons to a permanent home in what is now Salt Lake City, Utah.

Secular utopian societies

Not all utopian communities were prompted by the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening; some of these communities were outgrowths of the intellectual ideas of the time, such as romanticism with its emphasis on the importance of individualism over conformity. **Brook Farm**—which took shape in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, in the 1840s—was based on such ideas. Founded by George Ripley—a transcendentalist from Massachusetts—in the summer of 1841, this utopian community gained support from Boston-area thinkers and writers, many of whom were important transcendentalists. Brook Farm is best characterized as a community of intensely individualistic personalities who combined manual labor, such as the growing and harvesting food, with intellectual pursuits. They opened a school that specialized in the liberal arts and published a weekly journal called *The Harbinger*, which was “Devoted to Social and Political Progress.” Brook Farm never had more than 100 members; it won renown largely because of the luminaries, such as Emerson and Thoreau, whose names were attached to it. Nathaniel Hawthorne, a Massachusetts writer who took issue with some of the transcendentalists' claims, was a founding member of Brook Farm, and he fictionalized some of his experiences in his novel *The Blithedale Romance*. In 1846, a fire destroyed the main building of Brook Farm. For a community already hampered by financial problems, the cost of the disaster was too great; the Brook Farm experiment came to an end in 1847.