

## New Harmony, Indiana: Including Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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As Posey County's first historian William P. Leonard once wrote: "No place in the country has a more interesting history than New Harmony, and it is probably more widely known than any other town of its size in the country."<sup>1</sup> The town in which Leonard describes is in the southwestern most region of Indiana, it quietly hugs the Wabash River and is surrounded by fertile floodplains, far stretching wilderness and an immense wildlife population. This attractive region has lured numerous occupants for thousands of years; however, the town of New Harmony did not come into existence until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. George Johann Rapp purchased the land and moved his religious devotees to their new communal dwelling in 1814. Utopian aspirations did not end with the so called "Rappites" for when the town went up for sale once again, it was promptly purchased by a man with an equally idealistic vision.<sup>2</sup> Robert Owen, who was a self-proclaimed proponent of industrialism and education reform seized the town and within two years had moved much of his family and numerous intellectuals of the time to New Harmony. While neither of these communal groups had long-lasting occupation, the impact left from both experiments can be felt many years after disbandment.

George Rapp and Robert Owen's communal experiments and the events that would follow proved to be incredibly important and particularly impactful on women. The opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard, William P. *History and Directory of Posey County [Indiana]: containing an account of the early settlement and organization of the county...: also, a complete list of the tax-payers, their post-office addresses and places of residence, together with a business directory of Mt. Vernon and New Harmony ... also biographical sketches of prominent citizens of the county.* (Evansville: A.C Isaacs, Book Printer and & Binder, 1882) 74.

<sup>2</sup> Blair, Don. *Harmonist Construction.* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Publications, 1964) 46.

both Rappite and Owenite ideologies created for women were pioneering in their day and resulted in an increasingly progressive environment, unlike any other in the region by 1859. The prospects changed as the occupants came and went. This can be broken down into the three phases of New Harmony residency in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the Rappite era (1814-1824), the short-lived Owenite period (1824-1827), and the post-communal society (1828-1861) that was left when the Owenite experiment eventually failed. Each phase can be deemed unique with entirely dissimilar intentions and outlooks for women, it is noted however, that in each phase there are quite different yet equally impressive displays of gender inclusion.

The idea of equality is a concept that is surely not foreign in the town of New Harmony. It's founder, Father George Rapp believed in humankind coming together and living as a singular entity. His sermons reflect a keen aspiration for achieving uniformity: "Society united in common feeling, as if so many were only one, one perfect man, there all ages and all nations meet. And what name shall be given to this great power of souls? HARMONY."<sup>3</sup> Certainly, Father Rapp made his sermons a reality when he and a group of some 700 followers moved from Wurttemberg, Germany to America. Initially the community settled in Pennsylvania in 1805, the name given to this original town being Harmonie. By 1814 however, the Rappites desired a change of location and Father Rapp promptly moved his disciples to their new residency in southern Indiana. This "New" Harmony offered river access to the productive members of the community and allowed for further distribution of the many products the group expertly crafted. While the society was rather rigid in its belief systems, there were many attractive aspects about

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<sup>3</sup> Rapp, George. *Thoughts on the Destiny of Man, Particularly with Reference to the Present Times*. (New Harmony: Harmony Society, 1824) 9.

the Rappite way of living—particularly for women. Originally in 1807 the practice of celibacy was introduced, and with this came the equally important precedent for people to not marry.<sup>4</sup> In early 19<sup>th</sup> century America and Europe women had very little say in what their futures held. Usually, societal pressures would have pushed a woman to get married, have sexual intercourse, which in turn would lead to several brutally painful childbirths and perhaps even death. The opportunity for celibacy gave women a way to avoid this social normality and have autonomy of their own body and mind. Along with these practices, women’s work was valued to the same extent as men. The enthusiasm Rapp held for this concept of uniformity crossed over into all realms of their society. The impressive artistry the Rappites showcased is increasingly evident when examining their skillfully-constructed buildings, and their great variety of goods whom everyone in the community helped create.

“These persons had in common their faith in the principles of primitive Christianity and a willingness to exercise their ingenuity, their industry, and their ability to produce in the furtherance of their cause.”<sup>5</sup> Wrote Don Blair when reflecting on the earliest structures of the resourceful Rappites. Every member of this society was equally valued for the work they contributed and were likewise rewarded for what they were doing. The establishers of the town set a high standard in which the future inhabitants would build from, utilizing the structures and resources, but also the concept of equality that was so strongly held by its original founders.

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<sup>4</sup> Blair, *Harmonist Construction*, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Blair, *Harmonist Construction*, 49.

When New Harmony went up for sale, it was Robert Owen who hastily inquired about the property which boasted: “180 buildings, dwellings and community houses for 800 people, two churches, four mills, numerous shops, a textile factory, a tanyard, distilleries, and a brewery...vineyards, orchards, and 2000 acres under cultivation...”<sup>6</sup>This remarkable town seemed to be just what Owen was looking for. He purchased the plot for \$125,000. When asked why he left the Wabash, Rapp insisted that the climate was not satisfactory for the German people and that he had accomplished all he had desired there.<sup>7</sup> Almost immediately after purchase, Robert Owen began to gather intellectuals of all fields, insisting that a new moral code was going to come to life in the town he had recently purchased. The mode of transportation being the esteemed Philanthropist—a ferry used to transport the first Owenites.<sup>8</sup> Arriving on this boat were perhaps some of the most important supporters of Owen. One of these people was a like-minded social reformer by the name of William Maclure. Maclure was so riveted by Owen’s cause that he even invested in the Owenite community before moving to the town in 1826.<sup>9</sup> With him, Maclure brought ideas of societal improvement like his passion for the Pestalozzi school of thought—a method of teaching which centered around children and their sense of self-awareness. This educational philosophy was heavily emphasized and universally taught to

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<sup>6</sup> Pitzer, Donald E. *America’s Communal Utopias*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 113.

<sup>7</sup> Owen, William. *Diary of William Owen from November 10, 1824 to April 20, 1825*. (Edited by Joel W. Hiatt. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1906) 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> Owen, Robert Dale. *To Holland and to New Harmony: Robert Dale Owen’s Travel Journal 1825-1826*, edited by Josephine M. Elliot. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Publications, 1969.

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<sup>9</sup> Historic New Harmony, *New Harmony at the Millennium: The Past and the Future on View*. (New Harmony: Historic New Harmony, 2000) 13.

children in New Harmony during and immediately after its Owenite period. Maclure brought a variety of worthy ideologies to New Harmony, perhaps his most notable being his own attitude towards women. This is a crucial detail to consider when examining the progress that was indisputably happening within the town of New Harmony. “The improvement of mankind has lost the aid of and assistance of half the population by the education of women being confined to their physical accomplishments and their mental facilities so much neglected...”<sup>10</sup> Maclure undoubtedly respected and revered women. He saw them as equals and in some cases, he even viewed them to be superior. In fact, when Maclure wrote out his will, he named Madame Marie Fretageot and Frances Wright as his sole trustees. These two very influential women that Maclure left such a momentous responsibility to prove just how much regard was given to women in the time of the Owenite occupation.<sup>11</sup> The two women previously referenced brought a great deal of leadership into the community. Frances Wright was born in Scotland in 1795 and was one of few women to come to New Harmony on her own.<sup>12</sup> Wright was a social reformer much like Robert Owen with a similar background and upbringing. She was also a talented writer, a feminist, and an abolitionist. Her strong opposition to slavery proved to be an inspiration when she created the experimental Nashoba Community in which slaves were emancipated from their slaveholders at no cost to their masters. Revolutionary ideas like this were born out of the Owenite communal experiment in New Harmony. Another equally impactful woman who lived within and contributed to the Owenite society was Marie Fretageot. “Madame” Fretageot, as she

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<sup>10</sup> Carmony and Elliot, *Robert Owen's Seedbed for Utopia*, 222.

<sup>11</sup> Carmony and Elliot, *Robert Owen's Seedbed for Utopia*, 223.

<sup>12</sup> Kolmerten, *Women in Utopia*, 112.

was referred to, helped educate the youth of Owenite New Harmony. Her familiarity with the Pestalozzian school of thought made her perfect for this position. Even when the society disbanded, she continued to ensure Maclure's visions of education reform lived on elsewhere for the remainder of the decade.<sup>13</sup>

The end of Owenite occupation can be boiled down to eventual creative differences between Robert Owen and William Maclure. These men both continued to develop new ideas that proved to diverge to the point in which they could no longer work together. The communality's financial means looked equally bleak and as early as March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1827 Robert Owen had published a farewell address to the community. This idealistic trial looks to be a failure when looking at the immediate effects, however, when assessing the long term results it is obvious that those who were left behind when the experiment failed had much more to offer than it first appeared. The many scholarly individuals introduced to the town by Owen and Maclure did not cease to reside in New Harmony following the exodus of its leaders, instead many advancements were made in their absence.<sup>14</sup> Those who stayed behind include Thomas Say a renowned entomologist, Virginia Poullard Du Palais an artist and musician, and multiple Geologists including Owen's son David Dale Owens who ensured that the U.S Geological Society would have its headquarters in New Harmony for 20+ years.<sup>15</sup> Owen's other son Robert

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<sup>13</sup> Carmony and Elliot, *Robert Owen's Seedbed for Utopia*, 224.

<sup>14</sup> Owen, Jane Blaffer. *New Harmony Indiana: Like a River, Not a Lake*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015) xxxi

<sup>15</sup> Cole, Margret. *Robert Owen of New Lanark*. (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, 1969) 158.

Dale even became a state representative for Indiana and helped to create the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>16</sup>

The vast array of intelligent individuals made the culture of New Harmony increasingly progressive as the 19<sup>th</sup> century went on. Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen (who personally wrote to President Lincoln, encouraging the emancipation) were surely among the most prominent abolitionists in their day. But it is likely that most people residing in New Harmony discouraged slavery due to the town's progressive and refined nature. With enlightened thought comes further advancement for women's rights. This is evident in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Minerva society is introduced in 1859. The Minerva Society was organized nearly 10 years before the Sorosis Club of New York which is often credited as being the first "professional" women's Club in the United States.<sup>17</sup> The pioneering Minerva Society had its first recorded meeting on September 20<sup>th</sup> 1859.<sup>18</sup> Constance Owen Fauntleroy founded the club and was the daughter of Jane Dale Owen—Robert Owen's lone daughter, and Robert Henry Fauntleroy, for whom the house is named after (in which these meetings occurred). The "Girls of '59" as they are affectionately referred, proved to be a culmination of over 40 years of continual efforts in favor of the progression of women's rights. These women met with the pure intention to discuss, enrich, and enlighten one another. They enjoyed each other's company and discussed literature, politics, and philosophy. Many of these women received a formal and well-rounded

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<sup>16</sup> Cole, *Robert Owen of New Lanark*, 159.

<sup>17</sup> Croly, J. C. *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America*. (New York: Henry G. Allen & Company, 1898) 18.

<sup>18</sup> Lockridge, Ross F. *The Old Fauntleroy Home*. (New Harmony: New Harmony Memorial Commission, 1939) 117.

education and many went on to have bright futures and careers. As the club's leader, Constance Fauntleroy helped to ensure these women had ample support and guidance that would carry them to thoughtful and prosperous lives. Author and historian Ross Lockridge describes the pictures of the women of the Minerva Society that today still hang in the parlor of the Old Fauntleroy Home: "The gradual veil of time upon this early photography has not effaced the strength of character, elegance of feature and, in many cases, rare beauty exhibited by the young women of these portraits."<sup>19</sup>

From the pious Rappites who founded their "New" Harmony here in 1814, to the women who formed the Minerva Society in 1859, New Harmony has proven to be a gender-inclusive environment far before its time. At any given moment during the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were people in New Harmony taking part in extraordinary activities, many of these actions directly effecting women. While historians have uncovered much of what is known about the various occupants of New Harmony, there is certainly much more research that can be uncovered in the years to come. Hopefully, forthcoming exploration will reveal even more insight into the lives of women who have resided in the town. The phases we see in 19<sup>th</sup> century New Harmony are separate entities perhaps, but they are marked solely by the inhabitants of the community at that time. The trend of inclusion of women remains despite the occupants who have come and gone in the town.

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<sup>19</sup> Lockridge, *The Old Fauntleroy Home*, 131.



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