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THIS IS THE HOUSE THAT JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES BUILT:
THE ONEIDA COMMUNITY AND THE PLACE OF CHILDHOOD

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

This is the House that John Humphrey Noyes Built:
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This is the House that John Humphrey Noyes Built argues that the Oneida Community was shaped by children, that its innovative and provocative ideas about gender and marriage were haunted by the presence and absence of children, by the place children and childhood held in the broader nineteenth century zeitgeist. Their rise, their success, and their failure all involved children. Yet, children are largely missing from the Oneida story for reasons that are familiar to historians of childhood: they often didn't leave extensive written records and over time, descendants have determined that the records that were created by children were not worth preserving. This project seeks to remedy that absence and propose that the Oneida story is one about children. The project relied heavily on archival materials and uses the material world of the community to retell the Oneida story as one about children. Chapter One analyzes the childhood and youth of Oneida's founder, John Humphrey Noyes, contextualizing his tumultuous and frenzied religious past to better understand how the ideas he developed as a young man would impact the community and its relationship with children. Taken together, chapters two and three trace the progress of Oneida's built environment, specially the houses they constructed to

house the community's adults and children. By looking at this architectural history we can better understand how Oneida was shaped by the presence and absence of children. The final chapter explores Oneida's selective-breeding experiment known as Stirpiculture. The chapter argues that the Oneida Community's demise was inevitable given their child-rearing practices addressed in the previous chapters and their communal lifestyle created a second generation of Oneida dependents who rejected the community's culture and practices.

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PROLOGUE

THE ONEIDA STORY

The vision for a Perfectionist social utopia free of traditional marriage, exclusive affection, and maternal love started with John Humphrey Noyes. Born on September 3, 1811 in Brattleboro, Vermont, Noyes had a privileged upbringing in New England. His mother, Polly Hayes Noyes (aunt to President Rutherford B. Hayes), loved her children, cared for them, and worked hard to ensure that all the young Noyeses were raised in a Christian home. John Noyes, Sr. was a businessman and politician, serving in both the Vermont House of Representatives (1808-1810) and the U.S. House of Representatives (1815-1817). By his own account, John Humphrey Noyes's childhood was happy. He went to school, played with siblings and friends, and loved his mother. His relationship with his father was at times strained, but respectful. As Noyes grew up he received the best education, but he was aimless, going from Andover Theological Seminary to Dartmouth College to Yale Divinity School. It was at Yale that Noyes felt unsatisfied with what he considered outdated Protestant thinking and theology. In the fall of 1832 – his second year at Yale – Noyes became obsessed with his studies and troubled about sinful feelings. He converted to Perfectionism, broadly understood by Noyes to be a theological system that allowed man to become free of sin and spiritually perfect.¹

¹ There are only a handful of manuscripts on the Oneida Community, and only three that cover the community broadly. This prologue is common knowledge for scholars of

Increasingly concerned with the question of what sin is and how someone can be saved from it, Noyes became even more restless and his ideas more radical. Noyes closed himself off from most of the world around him and turned inward to find answers. Influenced by the teachings of the apostle Paul and his own unconventional readings of the Bible, John Humphrey Noyes developed a very loose, slightly illogical, belief system about sin and salvation. Noyes's early ideas balanced precariously on his reading of Paul's conversion to Christianity. He saw two Pauls: the pre-conversion Paul was a sinner (and everything he did a sin), post-conversion Paul was free of sin because of the presence of Christ. By accepting Jesus Christ, Paul's sins were erased. Noyes concluded that if one accepts Christ, then anything previously deemed sinful was no longer such. To Noyes, this new relationship with God didn't obligate him to follow man's moral laws or societal norms.²

On February 20th, 1834, John Humphrey Noyes – 23-years-old and a student at Yale – declared himself free from sin and spiritually perfect. His license to preach was quickly revoked and Noyes fell into a depression. He left Yale and wandered New York City. He became obsessed with women in general and a young Perfectionist named Abigail Merwin in particular. After suffering a

Oneida, but the information is largely drawn from the following general Oneida Community histories: Marian Lockwood Carden. *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969); Spencer Klaw. *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1994); Ellen Wayland-Smith. *Oneida: From Free Love to the Well-set Table*. (New York: Picador, 2016).

² John Humphrey Noyes's theology is explained in more detail in Chapter 1.

mental breakdown in early 1836, Noyes returned to Vermont and founded the Putney Bible School to preach his Perfectionist ideas and bring together believers who wished to follow his vision. At first, Abigail followed Noyes and believed fully in his radical Perfectionist ideas. But over time, Noyes's ideas became too much for Abigail, and his obsessiveness worried her. In 1837, Abigail married Merit Platt, and John Humphrey Noyes was outraged. He wrote an angry letter to a friend claiming, "When the will of God is done on earth, as it is in Heaven, *there will be no marriage.*"³ Noyes's "Battle-axe Letter," as it became known, was published in Theophilous Gate's *The Battle-Axe and Weapons of War* that same year and called for tearing down the wall between the sexes and an end to traditional marriage and mutual affection between one man and one woman. According to Noyes, the letter made him famous among Perfectionists and people came to Vermont to join him at the Putney Bible School.⁴

In 1838, Noyes married Harriet Holton and the two settled into domestic life, at least for a short time. Within the first six years of the marriage, Harriet gave birth five times. Four were premature. Only one survived (Theodore Noyes, b. July 26, 1841). Watching his wife continually get pregnant and lose a child distressed John Humphrey Noyes. He didn't think it was fair that Harriet

³ *The Witness*. (Putney, Vt.), Jan. 23, 1839: 49. Emphasis in original.

⁴ While the broad details of Noyes's early life are drawn from histories of Oneida, Noyes's own perspective is taken from his memoir: John Humphrey Noyes. *Confession of Religious Experience: Including a History of Modern Perfectionism, Part I*. (Oneida, NY: Oneida Community, 1849).

should experience such pain over and over. While building his school and dealing with his wife's struggles, Noyes gradually explored how some of the ideas he proposed in the Battle-Axe Letter could be put into practice through behavior. First, he needed to abandon traditional marriage. Noyes and Harriet entered into a quadratic sexual relationship with Mary and George Cragin, two of Noyes's most devoted followers. By 1844, Noyes and Harriet were living happily apart and the open-marriage experiment with the Cragins was going well. In fact, the relationship was expanded to include a few more couples by the end of the year.

Noyes also figured out a way to avoid unwanted pregnancies that (sort of) fit in with his Perfectionist ideas. By 1845, two of the most important foundational principles of the Oneida Community were established:

Complex Marriage expanded on Noyes's claim that traditional marriage between one man and one woman was against God's will. Still believing that being perfect meant that he didn't have to follow the moral codes of man, Noyes proposed that marriage should be open and communal: a man is married to all women, and a woman is married to all men. Sexual activity was open and free, with women having the control to accept or reject sexual partners.⁵

⁵ This project is in large part about building culture, specifically how the Oneida Community build their own world to live in, a world that functioned on their own terms while still drawing influence from the outside. Language is an important part of culture, and for that reason the Oneida formal beliefs and practices that have been blocked out

Male Continence was the community's form of birth control. Noyes sought to separate sex as an act of pleasure from sex as an act of procreation by having men withhold ejaculation. He argued that a man's ability to control his orgasm was an outward sign of his perfection. Children born from man's inability to control himself were unruly, according to Noyes. Male Continence allowed the Oneida Community to practice Complex Marriage without the worry of constantly dealing with pregnancy. The practice was successful with the community averaging one accidental birth a year.

In 1847, John Humphrey Noyes was arrested for adultery. Fearing that other men would also be arrested, Noyes and his followers left Vermont and settled in central New York where Noyes knew a Perfectionist with a large plot of land. Noyes and his followers officially established the Oneida Community in 1848 with the construction of their first communal dwelling which housed all the

and explained in this prologue will be treated as proper names throughout the project. This is done for two important reasons: First, to avoid confusion since some of the practices have names that could have a very different meaning when not used as proper names. For example, there is a difference between "Oneida's Complex Marriage" (referring to the formal practice and beliefs the community held sacred) and "Oneida's complex marriage" (more of a descriptor of marriage, rather than a formal practice). Second, the Oneida Community used these terms as proper names in their writings. Complex Marriage, Male Continence, Ascending Fellowship, Mutual Criticism, and Stirpiculture defined Oneida culture and they gave these practices – very specific practices – names in order to properly communicate their beliefs. Being able to give something a name is an act of power, and the Oneida Community's agency is dependent on these names.

adult members of the community in one large room without walls or privacy. Children were kept away from the adults – and the practice of Complex Marriage--in a separate building.

With more room, the Oneida Community grew slowly over the first decade. Community members didn't retain personal money or belongings when they entered into the community. All property and space was communal. Work was shared, with men and women expected to rotate duties every other week. Not only did the "family" – as members were sometimes called--sleep together (single men and women, however, were separated from married couples), they also ate together, worked together, spent leisure time together, and took care of the children together. Very early on, the community became so well-organized that at times they looked more like a small business than a family. Certain aspects of domestic life, such as raising children or cooking meals, were handled by committees, whose members were either voted in or volunteered to serve. Announcements and bulletins were posted daily in the communal living spaces and each member had her or his own mailbox for receiving personal letters from distant relatives or community members. Having established Complex Marriage and Male Continence, the 1850s were a time of small experiments for the community, a time to figure out how to make communal living work with the least amount of conflict.

Noyes's original vision for Oneida was Jeffersonian-- a pastoral life where the community survived on what they produced and didn't need to rely on the burgeoning market economy that was growing next door to them on the Erie Canal. Knowing that the community needed some money to construct buildings and buy equipment, Noyes and his followers first made animal traps to sell to the local hunters. The business proved successful and the community made enough money to construct not only their home, but also enough to buy farm equipment to grow their own fruits and vegetables, an important ability since the community was vegetarian. Noyes was determined to make his agrarian dream come true and by 1855 he sunk nearly \$47,000 into fruit production, hoping to at least transfer their business to farming. The fruit farm went bust, nearly ruining the community financially. Reluctantly, Noyes turned the community back to making animal traps.⁶

As the Oneida Community entered the 1860s, Noyes and his followers ignored the Civil War and the turmoil being wrought; instead, they focused more on themselves and Noyes tightened his authority over the community through stricter social control and rituals.⁷ Always grounding his ideas in vague and contradictory readings of the Bible -- and, at times, very loose interpretations

⁶ The Oneida Community's early industrial efforts don't get much attention in the scholarly literature on Oneida. In part, only one series of articles by George Cragin has survived about the early trap business. See: George Cragin. "Trap Making on Oneida Creek." *Circular* (Oneida, NY.), 27 June 1864.

⁷ The Oneida Community only wrote about the Civil War a few times in the *Circular*. There is no record or evidence to show that anyone from the community was involved with the war.

of the writings of Apostle Paul – Noyes established a stricter system of control. If the first decade of the Oneida Community can be seen as a time of experimentation, then the second decade was a time of ritual, the most important being Mutual Criticism.

Mutual Criticism – along with Complex Marriage – was the foundation of Noyes's religious/social beliefs at the height of the community's success. Every night, adult members would gather together and individuals – some voluntarily, some nominated by other members – would stand in front of the community and be publically criticized for behaviors, thoughts, hygiene, etc. The process was ritualistic and followed the same pattern for each person: the individual would stand before the adult members of the community and explain their faults (if they volunteered) or listen to whoever nominated them list their transgressions. The entire community would then be allowed to speak openly about the criticism. Depending on how the sessions went, members were either punished, allowed to continue as normal, or were assigned new duties within the community. Mutual Criticism was intended to help members confront their faults, which in turn would guide them closer to perfection.⁸

The practice of publically criticizing members of the community was a part of Oneida from the beginning, but once the community was financially secure and

⁸ See: "History of Mutual Criticism." *Circular* (Oneida NY), July 6, 1853.

had space where all members could gather together, Mutual Criticism became the most important part of one's day at Oneida. As community membership grew, Mutual Criticism became central to Noyes's Perfectionism and utopian vision. It defined daily life in Oneida.

The time period between the early 1860s to the breakup of the community in 1881 was both chaotic and exciting. The community saw their commercial enterprises grow and become even more successful. This allowed them to expand their living spaces and to hire outsiders to work in the factories. Growth meant more members and more members meant a stronger system of social control was needed. By the end of the 1860s, John Humphrey Noyes faced some difficult questions about how the community should proceed into the future.

In the mid-1860s, several community members were sent to Connecticut to learn how to manufacture silk thread. It wasn't too long before Oneida entered the thread business. Between traps and threads, the Oneida Community became a manufacturing giant along the Erie canal. One of the biggest ironies of this era of the Oneida Community is that as the religious and social life of the community became more reclusive and inward, their industrial success opened them up to more and more outsiders. Hiring outsiders to work in the factories opened up the community to judgment. Not surprisingly, this era also saw a rise in publications from the community, many of them written by Noyes in order to explain their beliefs and history. Behind the closed doors of the community

Mansion House, members continued to practice Complex Marriage and nightly criticisms. Occasionally, the community opened their doors to outsiders; they hosted an annual strawberry festival and regular sewing bees for locals and visitors.

Financial stability and commercial success ensured that the community could grow and that they could construct a material world to suite their unique lifestyle. In the early 1860s, the community constructed a brand-new Mansion House for adult members that included private rooms for individual and public spaces for Mutual Criticism. Over the decade, the building was expanded and renovated as Noyes developed new ideas and as the membership grew from 180 members in 1856 to 253 members in 1875. The community was so ambitious they constructed houses for outsider workers and established a post office, a Turkish bath, and a school.⁹ By 1875, the community employed over 200 outsiders. Their net worth also skyrocketed from \$185,000 in 1864 to well over \$500,000 in 1875.¹⁰

Daily life in Oneida during this period remained relatively consistent. Members spent their days working in the factories, meeting for committee work, or leisurely relaxing around the Mansion House or community grounds. Women and men alternated jobs and responsibilities with the expectation that everyone would share responsibility for everything throughout the year (i.e. men would,

⁹ The houses and public buildings constructed by the community eventually became what is known as Kenwood, New York today.

¹⁰ Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community*, 42.

at some point, care for children and women would work in factories). Clothing was simple and practical with women's dresses ending about eight inches from the ground to avoid fabric getting caught in machinery. In the evenings, the community would gather together in the large auditorium on the second floor of the Mansion House and listen to John Humphrey Noyes give one of his home talks (the community equivalent of a sermon, though they were less religious as time went on). Mutual Criticism followed. On weekends, members danced and/or listened to music performed by the Oneida Community band.

Complex Marriage was working well, and there are no records to indicate that members were uneasy with the system at this time.¹¹ Male Continence was also proving to be a success. Birth records from the community show that from 1849 to 1865 only a handful of unwanted pregnancies occurred. This was no small feat considering the sexual activity among members increased throughout the 1860s. This success had some disadvantages. Oneida's "free love" culture caused some problems when members developed affection towards specific individuals. These incidents of "exclusive love," were handled by Noyes alone. He chastised the individuals and restricted them from having sex with any

¹¹ Any statement about the daily life at Oneida and member's feelings about the system of control put on them by Noyes should be understood in the context of the historical record. While there are no records to show that community members were overall unhappy (members who questioned life at Oneida were free to leave whenever, and a few did), it's important to know that in the 1950s descendants of the community burned a large portion of personal records from the 1860s-1970s. Any statements about members' feelings are grounded in the records that have survived.

member until they atoned. What atonement meant for Noyes isn't clear.

Members were allowed to resume sexual activity when he granted permission.¹²

Aside from the occasional incident of "exclusive love," the Oneida Community ran smoothly and without many problems during the 1860s. The only significant change to Noyes's religious/social philosophy occurred after an incident involving a male member of the community who believed that the adolescent girls still living in the children's house were old enough to be involved in Complex Marriage.¹³ He would lure young girls into his private room and close the door, which was against the rules at Oneida (closing doors, not having young girls in your room). The community found themselves faced with a question that was inevitable: how to handle the community children who grow up and reach the age where they would need to be folded into the adult activities of the community (i.e., the open sexual activities). Similar to how he adapted Mutual Criticism, John Humphrey Noyes elaborated on a system of mentoring he established early on in the founding of the community.

Ascending Fellowship began as a way to explain how older more experienced members of the community were naturally more spiritually perfect than younger ones. In the early system, older members were expected to mentor younger ones, which sometimes involved sex. By the

¹² The most prominent example can be found in the diary of Tirzah Miller, Noyes's niece. See Tirzah Miller. *Desire and Duty at Oneida: Tirzah Miller's Intimate Memoir*. Ed. Robert Fogarty. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U Press, 2000), 59-65.

¹³ This story is expanded on in more detail in Chapter 3

1860s, the system evolved to include sexual initiation. Young community members ready to leave the children's house and enter into Complex Marriage would have sex with an older member of community to learn about Complex Marriage and the particulars of the community's "free love." To avoid pregnancy, young women would have sex with older men experienced at Male Continence and young men would have sex with post-menopausal women.

The change in Ascending Fellowship was just the beginning of the Oneida Community's experimentation with its younger members. As the 1860s came to a close, the Oneida Community would jump into their most ambitious experiment yet: breeding spiritually perfect children.

The idea that human beings could breed specific traits and behaviors into children was always a part of Noyes's vision. As early as 1848, Noyes wrote, "the time will come when involuntary and random procreation will cease, and when scientific combination will be applied to human generation as freely and successfully as it is to animal."¹⁴ In the 1860s, Noyes read Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the writings of Francis Galton. Influenced by the idea of adaption, Noyes saw an opportunity to shift his mission. Instead of

¹⁴ John Humphrey Noyes. *Bible Communism*. (Brooklyn, NY: Oneida Community, 1853), 52.

reconditioning people to be spiritually perfect, science provided the opportunity to breed perfect humans who wouldn't come into the community with any outside influence. Noyes would call his experiment in selective-breeding "Stirpiculture" from the Latin *stirps*, meaning stock, stem, or root.

Members of the Oneida Community accepted the Stirpiculture experiment. In fall of 1969, a group of men from the community signed a statement pledging their commitment to the experiment. This was followed by a similar resolution from several community women. The experiment was a community endeavor, but a formal committee--led by John Humphrey Noyes--was formed to keep records and make decisions about who was eligible to participate.¹⁵ Noyes was careful in selecting participants, choosing older members who he saw as spiritually more mature. In later years, he turned over control of Stirpiculture to his oldest son Theodore, who made decisions based on member's physical conditions and overall health.

If someone wanted to participate in the Stirpiculture experiment, they had to apply to the committee. Most often, members applied in pairs, but about a quarter of all pairings were suggested by the Stirpiculture committee. Female participants ranged in age from twenty to forty-two, with the medium age being thirty-two. Men's ages ranged from twenty-five to sixty-eight. The medium age for men was forty-one years. During the ten years of the Stirpiculture

¹⁵ Most of the Stirpiculture records were destroyed in the 1950 burning. See Note 11 in this Prologue.

experiment, fifty-eight children – known as “Stirpicults” --were born at Oneida to forty-four women. Most female participants gave birth to one child, but fourteen women gave birth more than once. There were far less fathers. John Humphrey Noyes fathered ten of the Stirpicults and his son Theodore fathered three. The rest of the men fathered one or two children each.

One-hundred and thirty-five children were reared in the Oneida Community before Stirpiculture. So by the time the experiment was underway, the community had a well-established routine for the care of children. Infants stayed with their mothers for 8 months before being weaned and taken into the children’s house. While in the children’s house, children and parents saw little of each other (Noyes feared that the love between mother and child was too strong). Children under twelve were cared for by different members on a rotating basis. They were schooled during the day and played in their free time. Like adults, children had nightly meetings, but Mutual Criticism was rare. A selection from the Bible was read to them and they were taught a simplified lesson that tied into one of the core beliefs of the community. Discipline was strict, but not harsh.¹⁶

For the last ten years of the Oneida Community, the Stirpicults were more important than anything else in the community.

¹⁶ More details about the life of the community children is explored in later chapters, specifically Chapters 3 and 4.

With so much success, the Oneida Community failed to see the changes that would lead to their collapse in 1880. Noyes's Perfectionism had shifted drastically over the community's thirty years. Originally grounded in religion and close-readings of the Bible, Noyes's "theology" became more social, more controlling. Theology and devotion to God had justified community life, but by the 1870s Noyes's control was much more influenced by social science, which made some members uncomfortable. The Stirpiculture experiment only made matters worse.

The Oneida Community ran into a deep generational divide. Whether brought into the community by their parents or born into Oneida, children raised in the community were taught to value the ideas of Perfectionism and communalism. They were taught the importance of Mutual Criticism as a way to self-reflect. They were shown that the province of God was central to spiritual perfection. They were raised to revere their elders and see all adult members of the community as their parents. The Oneida children should have been posed to enter into the community as young adults without any issue; some were literally bred for inclusion. But the Oneida Community failed to prepare children for Complex Marriage and sexual activity. Oneida historian Maren Lockwood Carden explains it best when she writes, "exposure to the system did not necessarily result in total acceptance of it."¹⁷

¹⁷ Carden, *Oneida*, 93.

The collapse of the Oneida Community happened over a year. Younger members in the second generation—those around Theodore Noyes's age—didn't agree with the system of social control put in place over the decades. There were factions of the community that wanted to be allowed to marry and be exclusive, but remain at Oneida. Others were upset over how Stirpicults were being raised. At the same time, John Humphrey Noyes was being accused of adultery from outsiders and his health was failing. Fearing that he might be arrested, Noyes fled to Niagara Falls, Canada with a small group of loyalists in June of 1879.

Noyes tried to run operations from Niagara Falls, but one faction of the second generation was convincing younger members to reject many of the rituals and ideas of Oneida. The Stirpiculture experiment was put on hold indefinitely. In August of 1879, Complex Marriage was stopped and members were encouraged to practice monogamy immediately. This proved to be the death knell for the Oneida Community. Fearing outsiders coming into the community to make arrests (rumors began circulating outside the community that Oneida men were raping young women), members quickly paired off and married. From the fall of 1879 to the summer of 1880, over seventy marriages were performed in the Oneida Community Mansion House.

Members who decided to remain at Oneida signed an agreement that they would convert the religious community into a corporation and work towards expanding their thriving trapping business. On January 1, 1881 Oneida

Community was legally transformed into Oneida Community Limited a joint-stock company.

INTRODUCTION

“[the child] breathes the atmosphere of the house. He sees the worlds through his parents’ eyes. Their objects become his. Their life and spirit mold him.”¹⁸

- Horace Busnell, *Christian Nurture*

This is the House that John Humphrey Noyes Built argues that the Oneida Community was shaped by children, that its innovative and provocative ideas about gender and marriage were haunted by the presence and absence of children, by the place children and childhood held in the broader nineteenth century zeitgeist. Their rise, their success, and their failure all involved children. Yet, children are largely missing from the Oneida story for reasons that are familiar to historians of childhood: they often didn’t leave extensive written records and over time, descendants have determined that the records that were created by children were not worth preserving. This project seeks to remedy that absence and propose that the Oneida story is one about children.

In histories of the Oneida Community, children are hidden, relegated to a page or two about the community’s sensational selective-breeding experiment, Stirpiculture. Louis Kern’s *An Ordered Love* (1981) briefly mentions Stirpiculture, but no children. Lawrence Foster’s two important works on Oneida, the

¹⁸ Horace Bushnell. *Christian Nurture*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1979), 106-107.

Mormons and the Shakers devote a few pages to Stirpiculture, but frames the experiment as being about social control of gender rather than the production of children. For Foster and his contemporaries – Roger Fogarty, Dolores Hayden, and Constance Noyes Robertson – the Oneida Community is a story about the denunciation of Victorian gender norms. Foster's *Women, Family and Utopia* (1991) analyzes the Oneida Community's Complex Marriage in light of nineteenth century attitudes about women and family and offers a brief psychological interpretation of John Humphrey Noyes. Foster's work, including his earlier *Religion and Sexuality* (1981), are seminal, and remain the most important scholarly works on Oneida.

Kern and Foster's works have had a significant influence on how the narrative of the Oneida Community gets told. A 1993 special issue of the *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* is devoted to the Oneida Community. With the exception of Michael Barkun's article on John Humphrey Noyes and millennialism, every article published in the special issue is about gender.¹⁹ Even popular histories of Oneida – Spencer Klaw's *Without Sin* (1993) and Ellen Wayland-Smith's *Oneida: From Free Love Utopia to Well-set Table* (2016) – offer little more than broad retellings of the gender-centric narrative offered by Kern and Foster. Benefiting from more archival material than was available to earlier writers, Wayland-Smith's history does provide us with more

¹⁹ See: *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 28, Vol. 2 (1993).

information on the lives of children, but she relies heavily on two published memoirs of growing up in the Oneida Community, Pierrepont Noyes's *My Father's House* (1937) and Jessie Catherine Kingsley's *A Lasting Spring* (1983). The newest book on Oneida, Anthony Wonderley's *Oneida Utopia: A Community Searching for Human Happiness and Prosperity* (2017), is meant to be a more "collective story" about the Oneida Community, one that is told from the point-of-view of its members. Children are only mentioned in passing, and aren't even found in the index.

The primary flaw in how previous scholarship has narrated the Oneida story is that almost all focus exclusively on John Humphrey Noyes and implicitly argue that the major turning point in the Oneida story was the moment that Noyes denounced traditional male-female coupling and romantic marriage. It's an important moment, for sure, but when looking at the history of the Oneida Community I think the turn from discouraging procreation to a systematic, social experiment in selective-breeding is far more interesting and central to the Oneida story. As such, this social turn is as much about children as it is controlling sexual relations. The Stirpiculture experiment wasn't just about sex; it was about procreation, about the creation of children. And those children became the center of Oneida daily life for the last decade of the community, a third of its existence. Their existence, their presence, their place in the community reshaped Oneida and disrupted the culture Noyes and members spend decades building.

What would happen if one was to rearrange how we think about the Oneida Community, and to *place* children at the center of the story (as much as one can given the limited information)? As a narrative history, *This is the House that John Humphrey Noyes Built*, finds a new turning point in the Oneida story, one that reframes Oneida as a community of adults constantly responding to childhood and children. Throughout, I will attempt to re-narrate the story of Oneida through the Oneida Community's writings and the structures they built to house themselves and their children, an exercise that I refer to as "placing children in history."

Placing Children in History

What is place exactly? Jeff Malpas has argued that "place is perhaps the key term for interdisciplinary research in the arts, humanities and social sciences in the twenty-first century."²⁰ Cultural geographers have argued over exactly what place means, but very little theoretical work has attempted to secure a definition of place. As Tim Cresswell has argued, "place is not a specialized piece of academic terminology" and this vagueness actually provides a lot of opportunities for researchers interested in using place as a framework.²¹ Phrases like "Do you want to see my place?" suggest ownership but also physical space.

²⁰ Qtd in Tim Cresswell. *Place: An Introduction*. (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 1.

²¹ Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 6.

To refer to a city or room as a “nice place” credits the space with evoking a feeling that makes one comfortable. More abstract uses complicate what place can be. To be “put in your place” refers to position in social order, often under someone else. To reprimand a child for misbehaving could be seen as putting a child in her or his place, reinforcing dependency, his or her status as a child. This kind of action doesn’t refer to the child’s exact physical location, but to his or her inferior status in relation to the adult.

As scholars like Cresswell have pointed out, using place as a framework for understanding is purposefully muddying the waters of how we think about location, status, relationships, and power. Place makes understanding easier because it’s a pervasive term, familiar and common; however, its ambiguity can add complexities to our understanding. But while place itself is a slippery term, it can get us to something fruitful, such as understanding meaning. John Agnew’s famous definition of place as a “meaningful location” highlights how place is obvious and ambiguous. Agnew defines places as having three elements: location, locale, and sense of place. Location is a “here and there” of the place, the fixed space.²² “Locale” is the shape of the place, its physical (or metaphorical) form. A room, for example, can have four walls. A bedroom has a bed. A kitchen has a place to cook food. It’s the locale of a location that turns a space into something more specific, something close to a place.

²² John Agnew. *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society*. (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

Sense of place is what interests me the most. As well as being located and having a shape, places must have a relationship to the people who produce them and interact with them. What Agnew means by sense of place is the emotional attachment people have to a location with shape. Fiction is constructed to evoke a sense of place, as it gives readers and viewers a feeling that they know where they are and understanding it. Theme parks do the same. Disneyland is built to make visitors feel a certain way. Its famous Main Street U.S.A. is an imagined, hyperbolic vision of the American nostalgia. Built at the very front of the park, visitors are forced to walk down the purposefully narrow corridor, buildings flanking them on either side. The buildings along Main Street are constructed using forced-perspective (oversized at ground-level, narrowing and shrinking towards the top) and the street itself slightly funnels in at the end. The idea is to make visitors feel enclosed and to frame the famous castle at the end of the street. Aside from evoking an idealistic vision of middle America, Main Street U.S.A. is meant to help visitors forget about the outside world they left behind and to focus on the fantasy in front of them. In other words, it's a place that is designed to put visitors in their place, to frame their world and focus their attention.

Beginning with Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood*, the historical study of children has not only sought to locate children in history, but to understand

their position within historical time periods and communities.²³ Scholars since Ariès, such as Linda Pollack and Hugh Cunningham, have been critical of his argument that the beginning of childhood, as a fixed idea, can be traced back to a certain time period.²⁴ The history of childhood in America has moved beyond discussion of when childhood begins and focused on locating and analyzing children's roles in specific historical situations, such as wars, labor, slavery, and politics.²⁵

Until recently, most historical work concerning children or childhood has focused on locating children and understanding their everyday lives. This approach to the history of childhood fits neatly together with the sociology of childhood's stance that children are social actors and childhood is socially constructed. Studies on American childhood specifically have taken this framework and looked at these capable, social actors in terms of dependence, disability, and education.²⁶ While this research has provided some fruitful

²³ See Philip Aries. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Trans. Robert Baldick. (New York: Knopf, 1966). and Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner, eds. *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook*. (Westport: Greenwood, 1985).

²⁴ Linda Pollock. *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900*. (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1984) and Hugh Cunningham. *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*. (London: Pearson, 1995).

²⁵ See James Marten, Introduction to *Children and Youth in a New Nation*, ed. James Marten. (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1-10; Wilma King. *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*. 2nd. Ed., 2011. (Bloomington: Indiana U Press, 1995); James Block. *The Crucible of Consent: American Child Rearing and the Forging of Liberal Society*. (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 2012).

²⁶ See Karen Sanchez-Eppler. *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2005); Anna Mae Duanne. *Suffering childhood in Early America: Violence, Race and the Making of the Child Victim*. (Athens, GA:

information and shed light on the role of children in America, some scholars have recently noted that the history of childhood has not developed beyond “locating children in history.”²⁷ Historian Patrick Ryan argues that the seemingly never-ending debate over Philippe Ariès *Centuries of Childhood* and the obsession over identifying agency have prevented the history of childhood from progressing in interesting and new ways. Ryan explains that historians of childhood need to confront the field’s history (he believes the Ariès debate is over, and it’s time to move on) and move past discussions of what constitutes childhood and how children exert agency. Instead, Ryan asks historians to look at childhood as a structure that’s formed by a variety of discourses.

The methodological approach to my project is informed by Ryan’s approach to the historical study of children. While I am interested in locating children in the Oneida and Mormon communities, I’m more interested in how these two communities positioned children in relation to adults and the outside world. What I derive from Ryan is the desire to think of new ways to understand children and childhood in a historical context, and I would argue that consideration of place and children provides this.

When Ryan writes that historians of childhood are too concerned with “locating children in history,” he doesn’t directly address his own diction in this

U of Georgia Press, 2010); Jaqueline Reinier. *From Virtue to Character: American Childhood, 1775-1850*. (New York: Twayne, 2006).

²⁷ Patrick Ryan. *Master-Servant Childhood: A History of the Idea of Childhood in Medieval English Culture*. (London, UK: Palgrave, 2013). 5.

statement, but I find the use of “locating” to be interesting and revealing. It implies that the work of a historian interested in children is largely about finding children in historical records. This was certainly true at the beginning of this project. Histories of the Oneida Community mention children in passing, mostly as a product of the Stirpiculture experiment, which—according to most Oneida histories—had nothing to do with children. Trying to find any records of children in Oneida proved to be a difficult task. John Humphrey Noyes rarely wrote about children, even when he led a decade long experiment to breed spiritually perfect children. What few stories exist about the Oneida children are dry accounts of child-rearing practices, most not unique to the time period.

I learned a few basic facts about Oneida childhood. Over the course of three decades, the Oneida Community raised children communally, physically separate from the adults, and put an intense amount of pressure on them to grow up not only spiritually perfect, but to grow and expand the community and Noyes’s vision of Perfectionism. Two generations of children were raised in Oneida. The first were born outside the community and brought in when their parents joined. The second were born in Oneida, most offspring of that first generation. I also learned that the tensions between members of the Oneida Community that eventually contributed to its demise were split across generations.

In order to understand children’s place (their status) in Oneida, we need to find different ways of locating children. In the absence of any child-produced

records, I turned to the Oneida Community Mansion House and the material world the Oneida adults built for themselves and their children. Essentially, I am using a place (the house) to understand place (the status of children). Houses are spaces produced with meaning, and the Oneida Community Mansion House is a funhouse of nineteenth century domestic ideas. Hallways were constructed to link rooms, but also encourage spying.

As a place, the house is imbued with meaning and shows us a lot about what Oneida thought about its children. They idealized communal living, and this is shown in their large dining room, common sitting rooms, and large auditorium where they gathered nightly. They didn't want men and women to get too emotionally attached, so bedrooms were small spaces furnished with narrow, single beds and no extra seating. Reading and learning was important, so a library was constructed. Bedrooms were kept small to keep Complex Marriage running smoothly. At first children lived in a separate building entirely, but eventually their physical space grew and children occupied one of the most state-of-the-art wings in the Mansion House.

Sense of Place in the Oneida Community

History has overlooked the place of children in the Oneida story, partially because the community itself was unsure how to handle children in light of their unusual marriage structure and sexual practices. Eventually, the community brought children into the fold, building their lives around them. But children

were always at the center of the Oneida story, even when they can't be seen in the writings of John Humphrey Noyes or the historical records left at the Syracuse University Special Collections. One way to rethink about the Oneida Community is this: The Oneida Community was built as a safe haven for adulthood, a place where adults could put aside children without giving up on them entirely. As out-of-place in the adulthood of Oneida, children were cared for communally which reshaped how adults thought about children and their importance. Everyone shared in the burden of raising children. Without sentimentality, the Oneida adults began to experiment with producing children, breeding spiritually perfect children. This resulted in a shift in community perceptions and behaviors. Children were brought into the fold of the community and their place in Oneida was more centralized. Everything began to revolve around children. The close proximity to children, and the constant messaging that these children were special, perfect, important again reshaped adult thinking and reinforced a sentimentality towards children the community had originally tried to break. This shift was jarring for the community and generational tensions grew until those who were raised to think of themselves as outside the community denounced the Oneida Community ideas and Oneida broke apart.

Previous studies on the architecture of the Oneida Community have focused entirely on the relationship between the physical spaces of the

community and the radical gender ideas of John Humphrey Noyes.²⁸ While some children are mentioned in these studies, it's often in the context of the community's attitude towards women and motherhood. Therefore, a more thorough reading of the domestic architecture and space of the community that specifically addresses the children is needed in order to place children in the Oneida story. What I am proposing is a rereading of the building history of the community, a reading that considers the Oneida buildings as spaces for (and not for) children. Such a reading allows for a different perspective on the Oneida Community architecture, but it also reveals an interesting transition in the community's philosophy, a move that shifted the focus of the community away from marriage and towards children, a population previously unwanted at Oneida, but ultimately rarified by the community's members.

Through the construction, reconstruction, and expansion of the community houses, the Oneida Community aligned themselves with children in a way that didn't sit well with some of Bible Communism's main tenets, most importantly Complex Marriage and Ascending Fellowship. Such an argument reconstructs the history of the Oneida Community from a different perspective, highlighting generational tensions (rather than tensions between genders), which would ultimately be the undoing of one of the nineteenth centuries most

²⁸ See Dolores Hayden. *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of communitarian Socialism*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975); Janet White. "Designed for Perfection: Intersections between Architecture and Social Program at the Oneida Community." *Utopian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1996): 113-138.

successful utopian experiments. Essentially, the presence of children and the need to create spaces for children complicated the Oneida Community in profound ways.

This is the House that John Humphrey Noyes Built reconstructs the history of the Oneida Community from two perspectives: the idea that the community was a *place*, imbued with complex meanings and power relationships and that children shaped the history of the community in profound ways that not even members could understand. By looking at how place is constructed in the writings and social systems of John Humphrey Noyes and how these ideas are reflected in the built environments of the community, I broadly argue that children moved from being “out-of-place” at Oneida to being the center of the community. Unlike the typical middle-class family of nineteenth century America, the Oneida Community didn’t thrive under a child-centered model of family. Instead, the drastic shift in the place of children contributed to the tensions and issues that would eventually lead to the Oneida Community’s collapse in 1881. Essentially, the absence of children built Oneida and the presence of children destroyed it.

CHAPTER ONE

THIS IS JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES

John Humphrey Noyes was born on September 3, 1811 in Brattleboro, Vermont to Polly and John Noyes. His parents came from deeply-rooted New England families, and the Noyeses--at least according to John Humphrey's memoir--exemplified the burgeoning New England middle-class ideal. John Noyes, Sr. was a politician and businessman who was elected to the Vermont State House of Representatives and the United States House of Representatives. The Noyeses had nine children between 1805 to 1819, and Polly devoted herself to raising her children and instilling in them a sense of religious devotion and duty. We don't know the specifics of what Polly taught her children; Noyes's memoir doesn't go into much detail about his childhood. We do know that Polly was deeply religious and she saw in young John Humphrey a passion for religion and believed he would become a "minister of the Everlasting Gospel."¹ Always putting the religious life of her children first, Polly moved the family from Brattleboro to Putney, Vermont in 1817. She believed the pastoral landscape of Putney was better for raising her children.

¹ Qtd. In Robert Allerton Parker. *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), 8.

Polly adored her first-born son, John Humphrey Noyes, and even though she saw a passionate anger in him, he was thoughtful and a natural leader in her eyes. “I can see him now,” Polly wrote, “marching off at the head of a company of his playmates, all armed with mullein stalks.”² Polly taught her children “to fear the lord” and was “more anxious that they should please God than they should attain any earthly applause.”³ In the spring of 1820, Polly took her children to a revival. We don’t know what kind of revival the Noyeses attended or who the minister preaching was, but we do know that John Humphrey Noyes was—in his own words—“converted.”⁴ Polly, however, worried that the effects would wear away as soon as they returned to Putney. She decided that John Humphrey needed to leave home and attend a school that would force him to focus on his religious and intellectual development. At nine years old, John Humphrey Noyes was sent to Andover Theological Seminary to study because seven children were proving to be too much to handle and Polly worried that her efforts to raise her children in a religious home weren’t as effective with so many children to look after.

Throughout the 1820s, John Humphrey Noyes attended several different schools, but it wouldn’t be until the end of the decade, at the height of the

² Qtd. in Parker, *A Yankee Saint*, 12. Credited as a “Personal diary.”

³ “One of the Four: A Memoir of Charlotte A Miller, II.” *Circular* (Oneida, NY). March 15, 1875.

⁴ John Humphrey Noyes. *Confession of Religious Experience: Including a History of Modern Perfectionism, Part I*. (Oneida, NY: Oneida Community, 1849), 19.

religious fervor of the Second Great-Awakening, that Noyes would begin his religious reform. During a revival by Charles G. Finney-- arguably the most famous preacher of the time--young Noyes turned towards religion instantly and with zeal. Six weeks after this conversion, Noyes began his religious studies at Andover Theological Academy in 1830. There he grappled with issues of free will, salvation, and his own sinfulness. According to Noyes's memoir, Andover was an unpleasant place and after a year of struggling, he transferred to Yale Seminary where he thrived until his turn towards Perfectionism -- the idea that one could free himself from sin in his lifetime--in 1834. Noyes's opinions on sin and his public declaration that he was as perfect as God and Christ led to the revocation of his preaching license and his expulsion from Yale. Years of personal turmoil followed with Noyes moving frequently between his family's home in Putney, Vermont to New York City. Records of this time grow scarce, and we are only left with Noyes's own recollections.

What we do know is this: Over the few years after leaving Yale, Noyes wandered aimlessly, spreading his unique message of Perfectionism. In some places his ideas were well-received, but in most instances, he was called blasphemous. During this time, Noyes also struggled with how to deal with his sexual urges. (If he was in fact perfect, was acting on such urges sinful? Was sex even sinful to begin with?). After being rejected by the love of his life, Abigail Merwin, Noyes fell into a depression and had a breakdown for several months. We don't know how Noyes pulled himself out of his depressive state, but soon

after stabilizing, he wrote a letter to a friend declaring that marriage between a man and woman – what Noyes referred to as “exclusive marriage” for the sake of simplicity--was against God’s plan. In order to restore the Primitive Church, the wall between the sexes had to be broken down and the exclusivity of marriage had to be abandoned.

This chapter in the story of John Humphrey Noyes is messy, which is why most historians of the Oneida Community see it as a major turning point. Something happened to Noyes during his youth, during those years before Abigail Merwin married another man and in the months before his public denunciation of marriage. Lawrence Foster and Roger Fogarty, the two most prominent and important scholars on the Oneida Community, point to Abigail Merwin, arguing that her rejection of Noyes caused him to turn against traditional marriage. For Foster and Fogarty, Noyes’s sexual anxieties were always at the root of his later social experiments in the community. One of the major limits in this reading of Noyes’s life is that it almost entirely ignored his early religious education and obsessions.

Biographies of Noyes have attempted to paint a broader picture of his life and show how his childhood and youth possibly influenced the early years of his Perfectionist ideas. Only two biographies have been written about John Humphrey Noyes: Robert Allerton Parker’s *A Yankee Saint* (1935) and Robert Davis Thomas’s *The Man Who Would Be Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the*

Utopian Impulse (1977). Parker's biography spans across the entire nineteenth century, beginning with Noyes's ancestry all the way through to the rise of Oneida Limited, the company formed after the utopian experiment collapsed. Parker's biography, while useful in getting a broad sense of Noyes's life, lacks any scholarly argument. *A Yankee Saint* makes up for this in the amount of primary documents it draws from that were destroyed in the mid-twentieth century by descendants of the Community. It remains the only place a scholar of the Oneida Community can access lost segments of Noyes's diaries and journals. Thomas's biography focuses on Noyes's youth and his religious conversion. *The Man Who Would Be Perfect* is a psychoanalytical biography and more scholarly than Park's biography; however, Thomas's story lacks any historical context and is solely focused on viewing Noyes through a Freudian lens. Other scholarship on the Oneida Community briefly mentions Noyes's youth, framing it as background to the more scandalous and provocative Oneida years. But Noyes's youth is important in order to understand anything about the Oneida Community. It's vital in understanding the religious zealotry, social control, and domestic reforms that would shape the community and the lives of its members, particularly the many generations of children that came into — and later bred into — Oneida.

This chapter asserts that John Humphrey Noyes is a product of his generation, especially of the religious revivalism that was rampant throughout

New England and New York during the early part of the nineteenth century. My aim is to not only tell the story of Noyes's life before the creation of the Oneida Community, but also to contextualize Noyes's turbulent youth described earlier. Noyes was an anxious and obsessive young man. First struck by what he referred to as the "revival spirit" at seventeen, he spent the majority of the following years chasing the feeling he first had at that revival. During his time at Andover Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School, he was elusive, at times abrasive, and didn't make friends easily. The charm and charisma that would define him later was not present in young Noyes. His pursuit of the "revival spirit" made him turn away from others and inward to his own thoughts and obsessions. Preferring to be alone, Noyes shifted between periods of calm, thoughtful reflection and periods of intense, mentally-exhausting anxiety.

This constant ebb and flow of emotions took its toll on Noyes and in the late 1830s he suffered a mental breakdown. This breakdown, along with the news that a woman he was obsessively in love with had married another man, broke Noyes and he projected all the anger, frustration, and obsession he was keeping to himself out into the world, first in a letter to a friend that would eventually be published and later in the organization of his first religious community in Putney, Vermont. The story told in this chapter ends with the publication of Noyes's infamous letter about marriage and casts the letter in light of Noyes's religious experience.

The portrait of John Humphrey Noyes in this chapter is drawn largely from three sources: Noyes's own autobiography, *Confessions of Religious Experience* (1849), published a decade after the establishment of the community, various home talks and articles Noyes published on his early years, and George Wallingford Noyes's collection of transcribed letters, diaries, and unpublished home talks housed at the Syracuse University Special Collections. John Humphrey Noyes's autobiography, of course, is a biased view of his childhood and youth, written primarily for community members and those interested in knowing more about Oneida's leader; however, it remains the most thorough resource about Noyes and the early years of the community. It also presents an intriguing self-portrait of a man who was obsessive, controlling, and often confused by his own limitations. Autobiographies are revealing glimpses into how someone sees him or herself, and Noyes's *Confession of Religious Experience* is no exception. *Confession* was published in 1849 just after Noyes relocated his social utopian community from Putney, Vermont to central New York, and twelve years after the publication of "The Battle-Axe Letter." It was an important year for Noyes and the community, and the publication of what was supposed to be the first of several memoirs was Noyes's way of celebrating a new era and reflecting on his achievements. The story he tells about his childhood and youth is relatively straight-forward, but contradictions are common throughout all of Noyes's writings, especially when they pertain to his ideas. The home talks, articles, and the George Wallingford Noyes collection

serve as a check on these contradictions. The G. W. Noyes collection is a large repository of letters, diaries, unpublished manuscripts and written confessions that were collected from descendants of the community in the early twentieth century. They highlight some of the more personal aspects of Noyes and community members, and a large part of the collection concerns Noyes's youth and the years struggling to realize his vision in Putney. Aside from a few personal reflections published in the *Oneida Community Circular*, the G. W. Noyes collection is the only collection of primary sources on these early years.

The Second Great Awakening and the Rise of New England Theology

John Humphrey Noyes wasn't actively involved in the revival movements of the 1820s and 1830s; instead he was a *product* of the movement, rising to fame almost a decade after the revival boom of the late-1820s and early 1830s. It's true that Noyes was converted at a revival in 1830, but much of his religious experience was academic. He studied religion and theology throughout his youth. By 1834, twenty-three-year-old Noyes abandoned his religious studies to spread his own unique teachings about salvation and Perfectionism. Noyes never actively participated in the revivals during his adolescence and youth, he watched from a distance, often turning inward—the Bible and then to himself—for answers. For this reason, he occupies a strange space in the culture of the Second Great Awakening, a figure who could have engaged with one of the most

important religious movements in American history, but who chose to remain distant.

The first place to start to understand how separated Noyes was from the Second Great Awakening is to consider the two major ways historians of the movement have framed the religious revivals and the people who were actively engaged in the movement during its height.

Historians have often found it easier to argue the significance of the Second Great Awakening (1790s-1830s) and its connection to political, social, and economic tensions of the period than they have explaining exactly what it was.

One reason for this has to do with the wide variety of religious movements that occurred during the period, each with their own internal debates and shifts.

Calvinism – the predominant Christian theology during the colonial period – saw huge swings in ideas (New Divinity, New England Theology, New Haven Theology) and membership between the 1790s and the 1840s. The revivalist spirit of the awakening produced new and radical religious groups and movements such as the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community.

Another reason it can be so difficult to define the Second Great Awakening is in how closely the religious fervor of the time was intertwined with other changes happening within the young United States. The market revolution (a shift from home labor to wage labor), the temperance movement, the women's rights movement, and abolition can all be traced to the religious revivalism of the early nineteenth century or can be shown as working in tandem with the religious

changes.⁵ Women's new responsibility as religious leaders in the family expanded their influence and power not just inside the home, but in the community as well. Homegrown churches and new religious groups offered Americans a way to exercise individuality and choice in their new democracy. All of this interconnectedness presents a problem when trying to understand the Second Great Awakening as a *religious* movement, as a movement of religious ideas and deep individual feelings.

Scholars of religion and American history haven't paid much attention to the larger theological and religious debates of the early nineteenth century.⁶ This is due in part to the pervasive historical argument that the Second Great Awakening was more of a social and political movement than a religious one. In other words, the religious fervor of the time period is a product of something else entirely. Scholars and works in this vein include Paul Johnson's *The Shopkeeper's Millennium* and Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity*. Johnson, discouraged by scholarship that only theorized how the Second Great Awakening grew, attempted to systematically figure out how and why citizens

⁵ For overviews of the Second Great Awakening see: Whitney R. Cross. *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850*. (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950); Donald G. Mathews. "The Second Great Awakening as an organizing process, 1780–1830: An hypothesis". *American Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1969), 23–43; Linda K. Pritchard, "The burned-over district reconsidered: A portent of evolving religious pluralism in the United States." *Social Science History* 8, no. 3 (1984), 243–265; James D. Bratt. "Religious Anti-revivalism in Antebellum America", *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 1 (2004), 65–106.

⁶ See David Varel. "The Histography of the Second Great Awakening and the Problem of Historical Causation, 1945–2005." *Madison Historical Review* 8, no. 1 (2011), 1–28.

found comfort in revivals. Using Rochester, New York as his focus, Johnson used a quantitative approach to understand the people – focusing on their socioeconomic background--who were drawn to the movement. Johnson argued that the Market Revolution, which quickly industrialized the Northeast and moved the country from an apprenticeship system to one in which workers earned wages, created two distinct classes in Rochester: a working-class and a middle-class. In Johnson's reading of the SGA, revivalism became a way for the middle-class to reassert their dominance in their communities by using religion as a social control over the working-class.⁷

Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* forgoes the qualitative, localized approach of Johnson and argues that the SGA was a national movement that allowed citizens to exercise the rights and freedoms earned through the American Revolution. Hatch argues that the "rise of evangelical Christianity in the early republic is...a story of the success of the common people in shaping the culture after their own priorities rather than the priorities outlined by gentleman."⁸ Whereas Johnson's argument of social control reinforced

⁷ Johnson's work has been criticized for many reasons, the most relevant to this project being the lack of attention given to the significant role women played in religion during the early nineteenth century. Two histories that address this issue directly are Mary Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle-Class* and Carol Smith-Rosenberg's *Religion and the Rise of the City*. Both studies use Johnson's quantitative approach and focus on specific locations, but they differ greatly by arguing the centrality and importance of women in the SGA. Women and their role in the Second Great Awakening will be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 2.

⁸ Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 134.

authoritarian control, Hatch argues that the SGA shows us how individual citizens, especially those in the working-class actively participated in the post-revolutionary country. The growth of the church membership and rise in new religions prove for Hatch that citizens used religion as a way to practice and perform democracy. Anti-authoritarian beliefs fueled the growth of religion, according to Hatch.⁹

Johnson and Hatch's work is significant to my reading of John Humphrey Noyes not only because they offer two different ways of understanding the Second Great Awakening, but also because they provide very little in terms of a framework for understanding John Humphrey Noyes. The greatest irony of Hatch's anti-authoritarian argument is that it doesn't explain the phenomenon of religious leaders and preachers who were admired, followed, and--some might say--worshipped. Even in his own examples of the Mormons and the Disciples of Christ, Hatch discusses religious groups formed around single men, men who were authoritarian by any measure of the term, but he doesn't engage in these men's stories or even acknowledge the immense power and control they yielded over followers.

⁹ Hatch's argument remains popular. Scholars who have taken issue with his work have focused on his lack of going deeper into the regional and ethnic divides in the country at the time. See John Boles. *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005); Janna Lazeorow. *Religion and the Working-class in Antebellum America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

John Humphrey Noyes is a similar figure. He wasn't a populist by any definition of the term; in fact, he was an elitist and he most definitely wanted to have control. As early as 1837 Noyes declared, "I would never connect myself to any individual or association in religion unless I were acknowledged leader."¹⁰ The populist argument might explain why new and radical religious groups formed and grew during the early nineteenth century, but it doesn't explain how men like Noyes came to be; it doesn't explain what in the Second Great Awakening inspired them to go out and seize control for themselves. Johnson's social control argument also ignores religious leaders, assuming they are another product of economic anxieties.

John Humphrey Noyes was not a man who worried about money. He grew up fairly wealthy, in a prominent New England family, and his youth was spent attending the best schools. It's doubtful he was concerned with losing his place as a man of privilege in New England society. According to his memoirs, the young John Humphrey Noyes was concerned with religion, with what he was feeling about God, Christ and his own heart and soul. Social control did come, but it wasn't born out of a drive to protect his economic standing as Johnson and other scholars of the Market Revolution might argue; rather, Noyes gravitated towards strict social control as a way to enclose his religious ideas and

¹⁰ George Wallingford Noyes Papers. *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*. 55. Oneida Community Collection (hereafter OCC). Syracuse University Rare Books and Special Collections

protect them. No single study can cover all of the theological and religious changes that occurred during the early nineteenth century. Since the aim of this chapter is to understand what in the Second Great Awakening influenced Noyes, the awakening presented here will be focused on New England, specifically the rise of New England Theology in Andover, Massachusetts, which Noyes found himself immersed in during his time at Andover. The questions Noyes began to ask at Andover, questions that have a lineage in New England theological history, would continue to plague him throughout the Oneida Community experiment.

The beginning of the Second Great Awakening is usually dated to the local revivals that slowly crept through Connecticut in the 1790s. The new movement was in part a continuation of a slow schism that started in the 1740s (the First Great Awakening) and divided New England Congregationalists into two camps: New Lights, who favored revivals and a more personal and emotional religious experience, and the Old Lights, who did not. Many Old Lights became rationalists, rejected traditional doctrines (some would later call themselves Unitarians). New Lights, in contrast divided up into smaller groups, the largest and most diverse – in thought, at least – was New Divinity who heralded the 1790s revivals as an “awakening,” an attempt to continue the work famed American theologian Jonathan Edwards started fifty years early with his New Lights revivals.

The New Divinity movement and ministers are a perplexing group and the hodgepodge of beliefs and subtle differences in theologies have made it difficult for historians to explain the movement as a cohesive one.¹¹ In Connecticut and the surrounding area, the New Divinity movement can be broadly defined as Congregationalists who followed in the tradition of Samuel Hopkins, who, in turn, was following in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, particularly his beliefs in free will and sin. Free will, Hopkins's brand of New Divinity argued (Hopkinsian), was a natural ability that all men possessed. All men had the ability to sin, just as all men had the ability to be good. Sin, for New Divinity ministers, was the "free, voluntary exercise of the mind."¹² Because of this free will, man did not possess a natural sinfulness or goodness, Hopkins argued, rejecting the notion of original sin in the Calvinist sense.

The New Divinity movement in Connecticut during the 1790s wasn't as concerned with awakening something new as they were with awakening something older that they felt wasn't finished: the revivalist spirit of Jonathan Edwards and the First Great Awakening. Led by ministers with ties to the colonial awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, the Connecticut New Divinity movement used personal recollection and history to tie the new revivals with the

¹¹ The nuances of all the different New Divinity movements are too cumbersome to discuss here. See: William Breitenbach. "The Consistent Calvinist of the New Divinity Movement." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1984), 241-264.

¹² E. Brooks Holifield. *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 143.

colonial ones, creating a lineage and tradition in the minds of young ministers and converts. Historian Joseph Conforti has argued that this “invention” of a heritage also separated the New England revivals from those that were also forming in Kentucky and other parts of the American south.¹³ “Personal claims on the past,” Conforti argues, “encouraged New Divinity men to use the authority of history against a more localized threat: the invasion of Methodist preachers in New England.”¹⁴ Two significant observations can be taken from knowing how important it was for the New Divinity ministers to have their movement connected to the last great revivalist movement in the country. First, it illustrates that the Second Great Awakening wasn’t just born out of the economic and political anxieties of the time; it is also a continuation of a religious movement that might have lost some momentum, but never entirely disappeared. Second, the “beginnings” of the Second Great Awakening in New England was concerned with the question of sin (what is sin and is man inherently sinful?) and salvation (how can man be forgiven for his sins?). These are the questions Noyes would become obsessed with in later years.

The Second Great Awakening was a far-reaching movement and looked completely different in various parts of the country, but in New England at least, the movement centered on New Divinity ministers and their followers. Books

¹³ Frank Conforti. “The Invention of the Great Awakening, 1795-1842.” *Early American Literature* 26, no. 2 (1991), 99-118.

¹⁴ Conforti, “The Invention of the Great Awakening,” 101.

have been written about the nuanced debates and heated fights about theological issues that broke out during the turn of the century through the 1830s, but for the purposes of this chapter (and to keep the focus on the world of John Humphrey Noyes) I will use Andover, Massachusetts as a case study to understand the Second Great Awakening and the important theological issues that arose during the time. Andover is the perfect case study because not only was it the place John Humphrey Noyes found himself when he experienced his first, and most important, religious conversation, it was also the center of the New Divinity movement, which influenced Noyes in profound and interesting ways.

Andover may not have experienced the revivals of the 1740s, but by 1807 it was the location of one of the first theological schools started by New Divinity ministers. The Andover Academy found itself in the middle of a local break between traditional Calvinists, who by 1812 had moved towards Unitarianism, and New Divinity ministers, who espoused the importance of revivalism. The Andover Seminary remained in the Hopkinsian tradition while the town of Andoversplit, the north parish going toward Unitarianism and the south parish fully embracing the revival spirit. This is the stage upon which the Second Great Awakening played out in Andover.

In his study of Andover, Richard Sheils argues that the SGA occurred in two phases. For the two decades following the 1812 break, clergy organized their followers into parties and voluntary societies. In the few years after 1830, revivals took over the area and Andover was completely immersed in the

revivalist spirit of the Second Great Awakening.¹⁵ While the majority of the country was seeing an uptick in religious revivals in the early 1830s, Andover is interesting because the turn towards revivalism was sudden and came on the heels of long period where the town saw continuous debate between the old (traditionalists) and the new (New Divinity).

It wasn't just the town of Andover that saw a shift in theology and tensions over old and new guards. Andover Seminary Academy was founded in 1807 by New Divinity ministers and Old Calvinists who opposed Unitarianism, but by the 1820s, New Divinity had evolved into what was becoming known as New England Theology and tensions grew between the two factions within the school.¹⁶ New England Theology was designed to retain the Calvinist doctrines of divine sovereignty and predestination while supporting the revival strategy of preachers encouraging the sinful to seek conversion. The strategy was meant to appease Unitarians, who saw the Calvinist God as saving the elect only, and evangelicals, who charged Calvinists with being inconsistent when encouraging conversion.¹⁷ Historian of American theology, E. Brooks Holifield has laid out

¹⁵ Ricard Sheils. "The Scope of the Second Great Awakening: Andover, MA and a Case Study." *Journal of the Early Republic* 5, no.2 (1985), 223-247.

¹⁶ New England Theology was initially a term used to describe both the Old Calvinists and the New Divinity ministers work together at Andover, but it quickly became a shorthand for the new direction that New Divinity was heading.

¹⁷ See: Douglas A. Sweeney. "Edwards and His Mantle: The Historiography of the New England Theology." *The New England Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1998), 97-119 and Oliver Crisp. *After Jonathan Edwards: The Courses of the New England Theology*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

five assertions that New England Theology was built on and it's worth quoting them.

- (1) Theologians had to accept the truths of the Bible even if they seemed to be paradoxes that defied reason, but they had to read the Bible with "common sense."
- (2) God was a benevolent moral governor of free and responsible creatures, but God was also a sovereign who will determine both the destiny of every person and the course of history.
- (3) The guilt of sin resided in the sinful choice and not the imputation of Adam's guilt to his posterity, but sin was inevitable as a result of his fall.
- (4) Every sinful person had the natural ability to repent, but the nonelect would be damned because they would not make the use of this ability.
- (5) Spiritual rebirth was the irresistible result of the immediate power of the spirit, but the spirit exerted that power in ways consistent with human freedom.¹⁸

There are a lot of contradictions in New England Theology, but being explicit about these contradictions was partially the point and it fit with the system of being Calvinists who supported revivalism.

There are two important takeaways from the above list, with the first two being more important in my later discussion of Noyes's theological struggles. First are the concepts that the "guilt of sin resided in the sinful choice" and every person has the ability to sin and repent. As I'll argue later, these ideas creep into Noyes's own ideas about sin and salvation and became important to Noyes during his years at Yale when he began to form his own unique ideas about sin and salvation, ideas that shape Noyes's early theology, then his experiments in

¹⁸ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 343.

social control. The second is in the first assertion, that the Bible should be read with “common sense.” Noyes was a reasonable man, and though he enjoyed lively intellectual conversation, he tended to develop ideas that appear overly simplistic and unnuanced (which they were), but served his larger view that religion should be rational and make sense.

John Humphrey Noyes Turns Toward Himself

In his youth, John Humphrey Noyes had two interests: religion and sex. They wouldn’t intersect until after Noyes declared himself perfect in 1837. The latter part of Noyes’s youth (his year at Andover and the first two years at Yale Divinity School), was a time of deep personal conflict. By the time he published his scathing critique of marriage and the relationship between the sexes in 1837, Noyes had suffered a few breakdowns, lost his license to preach and was rejected by several women, and this upset Noyes deeply. Noyes’s youth is a tricky story to tell. Few records exist about his time at Andover and Yale; all we have are his own memories and a few letters and diary fragments. The story, as it is told by Noyes, is at times dark, at times uplifting, but always grandiose.

When Noyes wrote the first part of his memoirs in 1849, he thought his audience would be outsiders, non-believers who were curious about his teachings on Perfectionism, but who needed a slight push in the right direction. In the introduction, he wrote:

For the sake of giving those who have taken an interest in my career as an editor and an author, some information which perhaps they have the curiosity and the right to possess, and also with a view to preparing the way for subsequent confessions of social experience and social principles, I propose in this first part, briefly to “tell my religious experience.”¹⁹

Figuring out who read Noyes’s memoir is impossible, but given the numerous references to it in the personal letters and diaries of the Oneida Community members, a safe assumption is that more members of the Community read about his religious experience than did outsiders.

In September of 1826, John Humphrey Noyes – now fifteen years old-- entered college at Dartmouth. Where Noyes should go to college divided the family. John Noyes wanted to see his son go to Yale, like the sons of other businessmen and politicians he knew. Polly, however, feared that New Haven would corrupt her beloved child’s soul. The city, she assumed, would put Noyes in close proximity to sinfulness. The materialism of the city would be too enticing for young Noyes. In the end, Polly won, and Noyes was sent to Dartmouth.

Noyes’s independence was growing alongside his interest in religion. In 1827, Noyes experienced a subtle spiritual awakening. A childhood neighbor of Noyes, Captain Benjamin Smith had recently moved to Gouverneur, New York and during a visit to Putney, Vermont told the young Noyes about a revivalist

¹⁹ John Humphrey Noyes. *Confessions of John Humphrey Noyes, Vol. 1*. (Putney: Oneida Printing, 1849), 1.

preacher, Charles Finney, who was at the beginning of his career and who had shaken the town of Gouverneur with his preaching. Smith's two sons, notable trouble-makers while children in Putney, had been converted. John Noyes wrote to his son about Finney and the changes Captain Smith saw in his son. A few months later, John Humphrey Noyes was visiting his family at the same time the Smith boys were in town. Noyes recalled that the Smiths would walk around town and stop anyone to praise the preaching of Finney and ask, "Do you know that you are on the road to hell?"²⁰ Naturally, their presence in the town, and their confrontations, caused a stir. John Humphrey Noyes, however, remained distant and was unimpressed by the Smiths overly emotional assaults. Deep down, though, Noyes was intrigued by the religious fervor of the Smiths, but in his diary, he remained apprehensive about the revival spirit. "I looked upon religion, at least I endeavored to do so," Noyes wrote, "a sort of phrenzy [sic] to which all were liable, and feared lest I should be caught in the snare."²¹

Upon graduating from Dartmouth in 1831, Noyes had every intention of studying law. But that summer in Putney changed his mind and wanting to learn more about these new revivals (and possibly) Noyes set off to attend Andover Seminary. Historians have tried to pinpoint the exact revival that converted Noyes, but by his own admission Noyes didn't find religion through the teachings of one minister. He describes the atmosphere of the time:

²⁰ Noyes, G. W., *Religious Experience*, 19.

²¹ Noyes, G. W., *Religious Experience*, 35-36.

The year 1831 was distinguished as 'the year of revivals.' New measures, protracted meetings, and New York evangelists had just entered New England, and the whole spirit of the people was fermenting with religious excitement. The Millennium was supposed to be very near. I fully entered into the enthusiasm of the time; and, seeing no reason why backsliding should be expected, or why the revival-spirit might not be maintained in its full vigor permanently, I determined with all my inward strength to be a 'young convert' in zeal and simplicity forever. My heart was fixed on the Millennium, and I resolved to live or die for it.²²

We don't know what the tipping point was for Noyes. Latter followers of Noyes claim he saw Charles G. Finney preach and was overcome by the revival spirit, but Noyes makes no such claim (though he does admit to seeing Finney preach, but at a different time).²³ He seems to have just gotten caught up in the movement and devoted himself to the pursuit of religion, not a completely uncommon occurrence among young men of the time, but Noyes didn't just want to feel the power of the spirit, he wanted to stand in front of others and have them feel that spirit through him. Noyes wanted to be a minister, but his personal insecurities stopped him from becoming a public figure he believed he was destined to become.

The year spent at Andover wasn't a pleasant one. Noyes spent a lot of time alone and his mind would obsess over religion. "Whether it was because my conscience was newly awakened and legality worked wrath in me with unusual vigor, or whether it resulted from the spiritual contagion of the place, I

²² Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*, 3.

²³ See: Thomas, *The Man Who Would Be Perfect*. Chapter 1.

know not," Noyes recalled about his time in the seminary.²⁴ Noyes wanted to learn about religion, and in his diary from the period writes about his excitement of learning Hebrew and being able to engage in theological discussions with his father. But he was restless, and the "temptations of sensuality" were too much at times.²⁵ Confused and conflicted by what was happening around him, Noyes turned more and more inward during his year at Andover. He also became more obsessed with his own sinful nature. In his diary, he writes, "I found a satisfaction in confessing my sins, and expressing to some of my classmates, especially my roommate, my determination in regard to my future course. I found others who could sympathize with me in opposition to the prevailing sins of the Seminary, and a prayer meeting was established with a view to effecting our purpose."²⁶

The year at Andover was also the point when Noyes started to equate his health with his religion. Sin was so deep inside Noyes that it affected his health and in his diary Noyes drifts from sin to health that the two ideas are interchangeable. "My religion," he wrote in his diary, "is of too dubious a character to afford me much comfort, and yet my health is so poor that I cannot conscientiously impose upon myself the effort which is necessary to faithful self-examination, though I would most gladly make it, if my body would bear it."²⁷

²⁴ Noyes, J. H. *Confessions*, 4.

²⁵ Noyes, J. H. *Confessions*, 4.

²⁶ Noyes, G. W. *Religious Experience*, 44.

²⁷ Noyes, G. W. *Religious Experience*, 45.

Poor health was a symptom of a sinful soul, and with the “temptations of sensuality” growing stronger with each day, Noyes’s health experienced its own ebbs and flows. After experiencing a horrifying dream about cholera, so intense he wrote in his diary that he could feel the disease ravish his body, he woke up and began to pray, hoping that being forgiven from his sins would heal his body. Much of Noyes’s writings on sin and the “temptations of sensuality” are vague and it’s impossible to know for certain what thoughts and ideas were wrecking havoc on his soul and body. What we do know is that Noyes was devoted to his studies and spent hours reviewing his notes from lectures and courses in order to get a better understanding, but not so much the big picture of theological thought. Noyes’s theological pursuits weren’t intellectual exercises, they were personal. When he looked to the Bible, he did so to find answers to help himself:

I searched the Bible and the library in regard to a question of conscience, and found beyond a doubt that I had been committing a heinous sin. I was never more deeply convicted of my *meanness*, of my desperate wicked-ness before God, and of my utter impotence to resist temptation. I prayed, I wept; and I trust God gave me repentance. Oh, that I could set up a monument on this spot, which should evermore remind me of my promises before God!²⁸

Noyes took the New England Theology idea that religion was personal, that it should be felt, to heart. As mentioned earlier, we don’t know the exact reasons why Noyes was overcome with the revival spirit and decided to pursue an education at Andover, but what we can see from his short time at the academy is

²⁸ Noyes, G. W. *Religious Experience*, 46.

that Noyes wanted to know how to help himself above all else. During his religious studies at Andover, Noyes turned inward and he started looking towards himself for answers about sin.

One of the most peculiar rituals Noyes writes about developing during his time at Andover involved how he “derived principle nourishment of [his]mind and heart” through reading the Bible quickly, taking notes, reading his notes, and then rereading his notes repeatedly until he found the answer to his question.²⁹

My method was this: I selected some specific trait in the character of Christ, or some vein of truth in his instructions, and with my eye on that, read the four Gospels through in one sitting, noting with my pen all the passages relating to the point of interest. When this reading was finished, I reviewed my notes, meditated on them, and endeavored to obtain a concentrated and comprehensive view of the trait or truth selected for examination.³⁰

The peculiarity in this exercise isn't in the studious reading of the Gospels or Noyes's desire to find inner-harmony through careful reflection of the Bible. What is peculiar is how far away from the Bible Noyes gets with each reflection. In his memoirs, he doesn't mention rereading the Bible, just his notes. When he writes that his “interest in the subject would steadily increase as light beamed forth from one passage to another” it's not clear if the light is beaming from the Bible or Noyes's own notes.³¹ This obsessive exercise, which Noyes admits to

²⁹ Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*, 5.

³⁰ Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*, 5

³¹ Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*, 5

doing daily for months “opened a fountain of spiritual life in [his] soul” and caused his “heart to burn within [him]”.³² Personalizing the religious experience wasn’t unique in the early nineteenth century, and was the intention of the revivalist movement, but Noyes’s language about his religious experience appears narcissistic. Noyes forgoes prayer and “communication with brethren;” instead, he finds insights in reviewing his notes and reflecting on his own thoughts about the Gospel.³³ All of these leads Noyes into “a blessed fellowship with the spirit of him whose beauty [Noyes] sought for and beheld.”³⁴ At first, this passage appears to be about Noyes’s connection to Christ, but throughout his memoir Noyes capitalizes him when referring to Christ. The “him” in this passage is suspiciously not capitalized. We can’t know for sure if this is intentional or just a typo but stuck in the middle of a long explanation as to how Noyes found solace and answers in his own thoughts, it isn’t much of a leap to see the possibility that what Noyes finds in this exercise is a way to position himself as his own teacher and student. He was, after all, spending more time reading his own writings than he was the Gospels. Not getting much out of Andover, Noyes decided after a year of study that he needed to transfer to Yale in order to gain a better understanding of his own sinfulness and how he might find salvation.

³² Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*, 5

³³ Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*, 5.

³⁴ Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*, 5.

John Humphrey Noyes's Perfectionism and the Apostle Paul

At Yale, Noyes also continued his practice of combining religious study with self-control. He boasted that he could study over twelve hours straight without stopping, and when not studying he would devote at least three hours a day to praying in his closet. These isolated houses of meditation might be bragging on Noyes's part, or they could be a symptom of some deep psychological issues. Regardless, they do show just how isolated Noyes was becoming and how important removing himself from the outside world was to his spiritual growth. By his own account, Noyes didn't just sit and think, he literally locked himself away, alone in a closet to pray. It's in this interior that Noyes became infused with the loving spirit of Christ, which erased his sins and filled him with bliss. Noyes could subside on the "burden of spiritual joy" for days at a time, his physical body becoming weak as his soul became enlightened.³⁵ "I was no longer tormented with inordinate alimentiveness and other temptations to sensuality," Noyes wrote in his memoir about his internal change at Yale, "I had conquered my nervous system, which for a long time after my first religious agitation had been morbidly excitable."³⁶

But Noyes didn't just come to appreciate his new self-control. He was also developing the bedrock of his brand of Perfectionism. Noyes had been

³⁵ Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*, 13.

³⁶ Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*, 13.

studying Perfectionism—the theory that one could obtain spiritual perfection akin to Christ—since his first year at Yale, but by 1834, Noyes had reached a revelation: the second coming of Christ had already occurred at some unknown time and he—and everyone around him—were living in a new era. Instead of living in an age of prophecy and promise, Noyes believed that he was living in an era of fulfillment. Sin, in Noyes's opinion was an outward act that God either did or did not approve of. To figures in the Old Testament (Moses is Noyes's primary example), holiness was outward obedience to God, holiness was in one's actions. The arrival of Christ, Noyes believed, offered a reconstruction of holiness wherein holiness is not about action but intent. According to Noyes, good intent would lead to good action, therefore if one's intent was always towards good, then action didn't matter because all action that came from good intent was good.³⁷ Simplifying things further, Noyes believed that the second coming of Christ clarified that good intention came from love towards Christ and Man.

Simplicity was the point of John Humphrey Noyes's theology, and it was evident in his burgeoning ideas about sin and salvation. For his early followers, the simplicity of the ideas is what made Noyes's brand of Perfectionism palatable. Old (and unnuanced) Calvinist ideas of human depravity were unfashionable among New England elites and ministers. Even in the New

³⁷ Noyes's early thoughts on salvation can be found throughout both Noyes, G. W., *Religious Experience* and Noyes, J. H., *Confessions*.

Haven circles Noyes would have frequented, ministers and theologians were rethinking the relationship between sin and free will. Nathanael W. Taylor, founder of New Haven Theology and one of John Humphrey Noyes's teachers at Yale, argued that God was sovereign, and man was not born depraved but rather freely chose sin. Unlike Noyes, Taylor supported conversion as a means of salvation. Noyes, however, saw no reason for anyone to convert, for anyone to take in the spirit of the revival. In his final months at Yale, Noyes lost all interest in trying to hold onto the "revival spirit" he sought at Andover.

Instead, Noyes wanted to feel like Paul, who he saw as an example of a sinner who attained perfection. To say that Noyes was obsessed with Paul would be an understatement. We have Noyes's memories because he wanted to trace his religious experience, like Paul. Quotes (and misquotes) from Paul appear throughout Noyes's writings and in the Oneida Community's Circular. Noyes's reverence for Paul was simple. Before Christ, Paul was a sinner. After Christ, Paul was saved.

For Noyes, getting people to live like Paul--to go from sin to salvation--would be his life's work. The only thing in his way was figuring out how to live like Paul in this new era. Paul's greatest achievement was in admitting his sinful past, which freed him. Again, Noyes simplifies his understanding of Paul. For Noyes, the love for Christ is what freed Paul from sin. In Noyes's reading of Paul's past, Paul never intended to do bad, but his actions were judged as bad. Christ's arrival clears the way for a better understanding that sinfulness is in the

intention not the action, therefore nothing Paul did before Christ was sinful since his intention wasn't to do bad. Paul's "sins" were misunderstood. Noyes concluded that if nothing Paul did was a sin, then none of his "temptations of sensuality" could be considered sinful either.

This was a freeing revelation for Noyes, and on February 20th, 1834, John Humphrey Noyes declared himself as perfect as Christ himself. Just as quickly as he embraced a religious life he turned and started exploring ways he could use his new revelation to reimagine the relationship between men and women, because just as Noyes was realizing his true calling as a Perfectionist leader he was also falling in love with a woman by the name of Abigail Merwin and the "temptations of sensuality" were still strong.

The Collapse of Exclusive Marriage

The charisma that would define Noyes in later years was not present early on. He was shy, awkward, and notoriously uncomfortable around women, a surprising beginning for a man who would later be described by his followers as extraordinarily charming and sexually desirable.³⁸ Years after the community fell apart in 1880, Noyes's son Theodore would reflect on his father's ability to hold sway over the women of the community. He did this, Theodore wrote, "by

³⁸ Descriptions of Noyes's charm and sex appeal can be found in nearly all the literature on Oneida, but particularly Carden, *The Oneida Community* and Spencer Olin, "The Oneida Community and the Instability of Charismatic Authority." *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 2 (1980), 285-300.

his intellectual power and social magnetism, superadded to intense religious convictions to which young women were very susceptible.”³⁹ Given the countless records acknowledging John Humphrey Noyes’s numerous relationships with the women of the Oneida Community, when Theodore writes of his father’s “social magnetism” he is undoubtedly referring to his father’s sex appeal. But in the 1830s and early 1840s, this magnetism wasn’t immediately apparent. Tall and slender, with bright blue eyes, sandy blonde hair, and a square-jawed face, Noyes was handsome, but he wasn’t self-confident about his appearance (Figure 2). “I looked so uncomely,” he later recalled, “that I never expected to make myself agreeable to women as a lover.”⁴⁰

The 1830s were a tumultuous and pivotal time in Noyes’s life. Professionally, his license to preach was revoked and he nearly suffered a mental breakdown in New York City in 1834, causing his family to wonder if young John was indeed mentally insane. He was obsessed with women, and often fell in love quickly. Around the same time he suffered his breakdown, he met Abigail Merwin. Noyes instantly fell in love with Abigail, and when he returned from New York City he intended to marry her. But in his absence, Abigail had lost faith in Noyes’s vision of Perfectionism. Their relationship became strained, and in 1837, Abigail married Merit Platt. Noyes was outraged, saddened, and

³⁹ Letter to Anita Newcomb McGee, April 15, 1892, Box 71, Folder “Noyes, Theodore R.”, OCC.

⁴⁰ Qtd. in Spencer Klaw. *Without Sin: Life and Death of the Oneida Community*. (New York: Penguin, 1993), 12.

betrayed by this marriage. This would be the final straw for Noyes in regards to courtship.

After sustaining the emotional punch of Abigail's betrayal, Noyes denounced traditional marriage and he expressed his anger in an 1837 letter to a friend, who would eventually publish the letter. The "Battle-Axe Letter," as it would become known, is a passionate and angry treatise on the dangers of traditional male-female coupling.⁴¹

When the will of God is done on earth, as it is in Heaven, *there will be no marriage*. The marriage supper of the Lamb, is a feast at which *every dish is free to every guest*. Exclusiveness, jealousy, quarrelling, have no place there, for the same reason as that which forbids the guests at a thanksgiving dinner to claim each his separate dish. [. . .] In a holy community, there is no more reason why sexual intercourse would be restricted by law, then why eating and drinking should be. God has placed a wall of partition between the male and female during the apostacy [sic], for a good reason, which will be broken down in the resurrection, for equally good reasons. [. . .] I call a certain woman my wife — she is yours, she is Christ's, and in him she is the bride of all saints. She is dear in the hand of a stranger, and according to my promise to her, I rejoice. My claim upon her cuts directly across the marriage convent of this world, and God knows the end.⁴²

"The Battle-Axe Letter" is raw and angry. It reads more as a manifesto than a religious awakening. But the ideas in the letter would become central to Noyes's unique take on Perfectionism, and his philosophical ideas would eventually be shaped into Oneida's social programs and religious life. Most importantly, the

⁴¹ The name Battle-Axe Letter comes from where the letter was published, Theophilous Gate's *The Battle-Axe and Weapons of War*.

⁴² *The Witness*. Jan. 23, 1839: 49. Emphasis in original.

letter highlights Noyes's early obsession with the emotional and sexual relationship between the sexes. Completely denouncing marriage ("there will be no marriage"), Noyes moves into a metaphor that essentially compares sexual intercourse to eating and women to food. Even though his comment about a wall between men and women eventually coming down may inspire thoughts of equality, the letter positions women as objects to be consumed freely by men. Noyes did tone down the rhetoric as time went on, but it is clear that his main concern is with the relationship between adults. The metaphor of a wall coming down, however, would stay present throughout Oneida's history. As we'll see later, the community's first house was constructed without any walls in the main sleeping space. By the time the community would begin the Stirpiculture experiment, its experiment in human breeding, they had moved to the opposite direction, constructing walls not between the sexes but between individual members. Separation, division, and otherness are always present in the Oneida Community and this would manifest in the way Oneida established the relationship between adults and the place of children in regards to this relationship.

After the publication of the letter, which was never meant to be public, Noyes was bombarded with questions and allegations of improper behavior.⁴³

⁴³ Noyes wrote about the controversy in several articles published in *The Witness* from February to May. See also Lawrence Foster. *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 82.

He responded by admitting he was the author of the letter and explaining himself in a September 23rd letter published in *The Witness*, a periodical focused on Perfectionist ideas. The Noyes in this letter is not the insecure young man of his youth, nor does he appear to be angry. Something happened inside Noyes after the publication of the Battle-Axe Letter. He appears more self-assured and more confident in his beliefs. He revels in the idea that people think of his letters as an “astonishing testimony” and while he does regret that his ideas were made public, he isn’t worried about persecution but rather that “[his] liberty should become a stumbling-block to others.”⁴⁴

The controversy over the Battle-Axe Letter only seemed to fuel Noyes’s desire to consider the potential of his ideas. The controversy surrounding the letter also led Noyes to imagine how his ideas of marriage and social order could be carried out on a practical level. While Noyes would expand on his ideas in the Battle-Axe Letter, it is easy to see evidence of where he would be headed. Reflecting on the letter in 1874, Noyes saw it as not just the beginning of his ideas on marriage, but the seed that would eventually grow into Oneida’s communal philosophies. “From the time of the publication of that letter,” Noyes writes, “I felt that I was called, even under the heaviest penalties, to defend and ultimately carry out the doctrine of communism in love. I accepted the commission with a good heart.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *The Witness* (Putney, VT), September, 23, 1837.

⁴⁵ *Circular* (Oneida, NY), August 24, 1874.

When Noyes writes, “there will be no marriage” he doesn’t exactly denounce the entire practice or idea of marriage. What he’s referring to is the concept that marriage is monogamous and private. Again, we can see Noyes’s distain for social conventions that divide people. When Noyes continues that “the marriage supper of the Lamb, is a feast at which every dish is free to every guest,” he doesn’t just question marriage as between two people, he opens it up and redefines it as a social and semi-public performance. The nineteenth-century “cult of domesticity” is at the heart Noyes’s anger over marriage.⁴⁶ By the time Noyes wrote the Battle-Axe Letter, the American family was becoming an increasingly private institution. Industrialization took many men out their homes, which had once been the primary site of production. Factory villages and market towns create a wage-class, which meant that men were away during the day and women remained in the home. Not only did this change create a wall between the sexes, but it “privatized” the American family by taking industry out of the home, which, in turn, made the family more of an emotional center, one that needed to be protected.⁴⁷ Noyes’s concern over marriage and the family is a very nineteenth-century one, but his reaction is uniquely John Humphrey Noyes.

⁴⁶ Nancy Cott. *Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*. (New Haven: Yale, 1977).

⁴⁷ Mary Ryan. *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865*. (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1981), 146-147.

If Noyes's is rejecting the anti-patriarchal and private family that's beginning to form in the mid-nineteenth century, then what kind of family does he envision as beneficial instead? The biggest tell is in what Noyes sees as having "no place" in marriage: exclusiveness.⁴⁸ Noyes mentions that jealousy and quarrelling also have no place in marriage, but these aren't as odd as saying that a marriage should not have any exclusivity. Noyes is obviously referring to sexual relationships, but he's also addressing affection and love.

It would be another 10 years before Noyes was able to articulate fully his ideas about marriage, exclusiveness, and the family. To imagine a world without traditional marriage was one thing, to convince others to give up their marital ties and social conventions would be another. In the context of the larger shifts and trends that were occurring in the shape and place of the American family, Noyes's ideas are not radical solely for their blunt sexual freedom, but also because he doesn't once address the place of children in this new reconceptualization of marriage. By the 1830s, the "democratic family," to use Alexis de Tocqueville's phrase, was characterized by marriage between one man and one woman that was built on companionship and affection. Men and women's roles within the family were being divided by the place of children in this new family. As Steven Mintz and Susan Kellog have noted, "family life was

⁴⁸ *The Witness* (Putney, VT). Jan. 23, 1839: 49.

becoming increasingly child-centered.”⁴⁹ What Noyes does with the Battle-Axe Letter is to restructure the family and remove any center it might have. The family isn’t about material production, love, or even children. In Noyes’s view, the family is an open feast, one that should be public – which is why he never seemed upset by the attention he would receive from the public over his ideas. Before Noyes could realize his vision of an open and non-exclusive marriage and family, he had to address the reality that with increased sexual activity comes pregnancy and child bearing

⁴⁹ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellog. *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life*. (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1988), 43.

CHAPTER TWO

THESE ARE THE IDEAS JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES HAD: Sex, Family, and the Question of Children

One of the challenges in understanding how childhood was experienced as well as constructed in the Oneida Community generally, and in the theologies and philosophies of John Humphrey Noyes in particular, is that much of Noyes's writings before the 1860s are nearly completely devoid of any mention of children in the ways historians and scholars of nineteenth century childhood have come to expect or look for. Noyes wrote almost nothing specifically about children, and the community wouldn't really commit their communal child-rearing beliefs to paper until the mid-1860s, and even those materials are sparse and incomplete. This could be taken as evidence that the Oneida Community did not see children as being important or that they didn't share typical nineteenth-century beliefs on children and childhood.

I would argue, however, that this not the case. Much of what Noyes wrote about, specifically his theologies and philosophies on marriage and sex, are haunted by the absence of children. This is to say that the absence of children from the writings of John Humphrey Noyes doesn't suggest that children were not important to his beliefs. In fact, I argue that this absence suggests that children were a point of tension with Noyes and later the community.

Scholarship on nineteenth century childhoods tend to favor sources that provide explicit commentary on thoughts about and the actions of children.¹ While John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community occasionally mentioned children, they had no strong explicit ideas about the nature of childhood or the ways in which children should be treated and raised. This is surprising for a group famous for its radical restructuring of the family. In order to understand childhood in the early years of the Oneida Community, specifically in Noyes's unique social-religious ideas, one must interrogate the *absence* of children and childhood in these writing and ideas.

There are a few central questions in this kind of endeavor. Why are children absent from such radical writings on marriage and the family? What does this say about the Oneida Community's attitudes towards children? Lastly, if children are absent from the writings of Noyes, then what is their place in the community? That final question becomes more difficult to answer given that there are no surviving documents from the Oneida children until the late 1870s. Voice and agency, often thought of as the gold standard in the history of childhood and childhood studies, aren't useful when dealing with the Oneida Community. My concern in this chapter, as it is throughout the project, is not so much to understand *how* children lived within the Oneida Community, but

¹ For brief look at the limited documents available to historians of childhood see James Marsden. "Childhood Studies and History: Catching a Culture in High Relief." *The Children's table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities*, ed. Anna Mae Duane, (Atlanta: U of Georgia Press, 2013), 52-67.

rather the meaning of children *to* the Oneida Community. For these early years, meaning comes from the absence of any deep discussion of children.

The starting argument of this chapter is that John Humphrey Noyes held strong opinions on children and childhood despite not writing about either, and these opinions would result in children being out-of-place in the community. The apparition of children in these early years is vital in understanding the drastic changes that will occur within the community over its thirty-three-year history. Noyes's sexual-spiritual awakening shaped the structure of the community along with setting the foundation for its infamous religious and social practices. Noyes's obsession with rejecting affection and encouraging open sexual intercourse wouldn't leave much room for children in the new family structure of Oneida. To further cast children as being out-of-place in the community, Noyes developed the theory of Male Continence, a form of birth control that would be successfully practiced by the community, thus keeping the child population of Oneida down. Without the burden of procreation, the members of the community were free to embrace Complex Marriage, which eventually becomes physically manifested in the community's first mansion house, a large farmhouse without any space for children, another sign that children did not belong in the social and physical structures of the community.

By examining Noyes's shift from theology to social control and the development of Male Continence and Complex Marriage a complicated picture of children as being out-of-place within the community begins to develop. When

talking about “place” in the Oneida Community, I am referring to ideas of belonging. Colloquial uses of the word “place” often refer implicitly or explicitly to belonging. To “know your place” is to understand where you do and do not belong. “Putting someone in their place” is to tell someone where he belongs, often by starting from where he doesn’t belong.

Place isn’t purely spatial; it’s not just a physical space with boundaries and objects. Place makes meaning. Someone belongs in one place, but not another. My claim that children were *out-of-place* in the early years of the Oneida Community argues that children did not belong in the community, but it also implies that children were somehow transgressive in the context of the community. This becomes more apparent as the community begins to build their massive mansion, designing spaces to keep children away from adults. Later chapters will further examine the relationship between Oneida’s built environments and the place of the children, but in this chapter, I focus on the child-as-specter and the out-of-placeness of children in the very early years of John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community. First though, it’s important to highlight the stark difference between John Humphrey Noyes in the previous chapter and where we find him in this chapter. This difference is best illustrated in a brief meeting between two women who each played a pivotal role in the formation of the Oneida Community, yet who knew two very different John Humphrey Noyeses.

“Who is my female correspondent?”: A Meeting of Two Noyseses

In May of 1851, two women sat across from each other in a modest parlor in New York City. Mary Cragin had never met Abigail Platt (formerly Abigail Merwin), her host for the afternoon, but she felt “an irresistible desire to make an attempt to see her.”² Mary had come all the way from Wallingford, Connecticut just to meet with Abigail. Both women were born and raised in New England and their families could arguably be described as middle-class for the time period. They both married young. Abigail was childless; Mary had a young son. Mary and Abigail were also deeply religious women, and in their youth they got swept up in the frenzy of religious revivalism that spread across the United States, but most heavily focused in New England and New York. Before their meeting, Abigail had never heard of Mary Cragin. Mary, however, had heard stories about Abigail Merwin (she was always referred to by her maiden name), of her beauty and her deep devotion to Perfectionism, which Mary had fully committed to over a decade before.

Perfectionism was the purpose of this sojourn. The community of Perfectionists Mary belonged to had recently relocated from Vermont to central New York and their leader, John Humphrey Noyes, was experiencing anxiety over the future direction of his community. As one of the first converts to

² Letter from Mary E. Cragin at Wallingford to Harriet Noyes at Oneida, May 4, 1851, Box 4, OCC. A Portion of this letter is also reprinted in George Wallingford Noyes, *Free Love in Utopia*, 88-90.

Noyes's brand of Perfectionism, Mary Cragin was deeply devoted to Noyes's Perfectionist ideas and social experiment, but--more importantly--she was obsessively devoted to Noyes himself.³ Her marriage to George Cragin, Noyes's right-hand man, was cold and distant. Before joining Noyes, she suspected her husband was having several affairs. Noyes—according to the records that have survived—felt close to Mary, perhaps closer than he ever felt to his wife Harriet Holden.⁴ She was one of his primary confidants and perhaps one of only two women he ever loved. The other was Abigail Merwin, who, sixteen years before her meeting with Mary, had rejected John Humphrey Noyes's proposal of marriage. Afterward, the young Noyes was enraged and vowed to break down conventional marriage and completely restructure the social relationship between men and women.

On that day in May 1851, in that quiet parlor in New York City, two of the most important figures in the formation of the Oneida Community, and in the life of its founder John Humphrey Noyes, sat together. If we were to snapshot that moment and pause to consider its meaning we would find in these women John Humphrey Noyes's past and his present. Mary Cragin went to New York—

³ Biographical information on Mary Cragin is drawn from Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community Profiles*, 27-4 and Parker, *A Yankee Saint*, chapters 2-5.

⁴ Since much of Noyes's ideas were rooted in the belief that affection was sinful he never explicitly expressed his "love" for Mary or Abigail, but he did write about Abigail compulsively and after Mary's sudden death by drowning in July 1851, Noyes swore he would never drink alcohol until he was able to do so with Mary in Heaven. Some community members even remarked that had Mary lived the community would have looked very different.

under orders by Noyes – to convince Abigail to join his movement. “Sixteen years ago,” she told Abigail, “you publically confessed the doctrine of holiness in this city, and it was through your influence that Mr. Noyes gained admission to the Free Church; and it was through your withdrawal that the testimony of salvation from sin has been repressed here. Christ has many people in this city who are captives, and you are holding the door shut which would liberate them.”⁵ Abigail--in the eyes of Noyes and the Community--was the reason the Community existed at all. Noyes told story after story about Abigail Merwin, her beauty and her devotion to his brand of Perfectionism. She was his first convert, according to his memoirs, and when she rose to join him in singing a hymn, her voice elevated him and “opened for [him] an entrance into the free church.”⁶ In Noyes’s own words, Abigail is a holy figure in the origin of the Oneida Community.

Unlike Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, John Humphrey Noyes never claimed to have divine intervention. He wasn’t visited by angels and he never claimed that God had spoken directly to him. His theology and social ideas came from the material world around him, from his emotional highs and lows, and from the Bible. The only vision John Humphrey Noyes claimed to have was of Abigail Merwin in 1835.

⁵ Letter from Mary E. Cragin at Wallingford to Harriet Noyes at Oneida, May 4, 1851, Box 4, OCC. Mary writes that she told Abigail this verbatim.

⁶ Noyes, J. H., *Confessions of Religious Experience*, 21.

I saw [Abigail], standing, as it were, on the pinnacle of the universe, in the glory of an angel; but a voice from which I could not turn away, pronounced her title - "*Satan transformed into an angel of light.*" I gave her up, and cast her from me as one accursed.⁷

Despite being "Satan transformed into an angel of light," Noyes continued to obsess over Abigail, going so far as to follow her home some nights. Eventually he wrote to her that he had another vision, this time she was "clothed in white robes, and by the word of the Lord you were given to me."⁸ But Abigail was engaged to another man, and the news broke Noyes. He angrily announced that marriage between one man and one woman was against God's vision. This not only attracted attention, but also became the bedrock of Noyes's theological principles. The conflicts he felt in his youth over his call to a religious life and his sexual desires were projected onto Abigail.

For Noyes – and later his followers – Abigail Merwin wasn't so much a person as a representation of one of the most important periods in Noyes's life, and in the origin of the Oneida Community. In Abigail Merwin, the Oneida Community had a figure that encapsulated all of Noyes's early history: his tumultuous youth, early religious ideals, and sexual mores. The Oneida Community's attempts to convert Abigail in the late 1840s and early 1850s illustrate how important she was, but also shows how important Noyes's past and youth were to Oneida. Abigail was the most significant rejection Noyes ever

⁷ Noyes, J. H.. *Confessions of Religious Experience*, 42.

⁸ "Noyes to Abigail Merwin." December 28, 1835. Noyes, G. W., *Religious Experience*, 353.

faced. She turned her back on what he was about to become. Bringing her back into Perfectionism, back into the control of Noyes, would have meant a reconciliation of the present with the past.

Mary Cragin's visit was meant to facilitate that reconciliation. If we see Abigail as a representation of Noyes's religious past, then Mary Cragin was the embodiment of Noyes's domestic present. In other words, what Abigail rejected in 1837, Mary fully believed in and followed in 1851. Mary and her husband George joined John Humphrey Noyes in 1839 after Mary read a pamphlet by Noyes and immediately converted to his Perfectionism. The Cragins and the Noyeses (by this point John had married Harriet Holden) were close and by the mid-1840s, George Cragin admitted his affection towards Harriet, and John openly admitted his feelings towards Mary. "After these avowals," Mary wrote in her diary, "we considered ourselves engaged to each other, expecting to live in all conformity to the laws of this world until the time arrives for the consummation of our union."⁹ That time would be in May of 1845, when John and Mary, unable to control their desires, formed an open sexual relationship with George and Harriet. This quartet would be Noyes's first exercise in what he would later call Complex Marriage. Mary completely embraced Noyes's sexual control and radical domestic ideas. In a June 11, 1849 letter to George, Mary was enthusiastic over Noyes's decision to allow a new couple to enter the marriage,

⁹ Qtd. in Parker, *A Yankee Saint*, 111.

writing, “if Mr. Bradley is in a good state [. . .]he can have liberty with Ellen and Philema if he wishes it [. . .] Also hint to those girls that they exercise some conservatism, and not allow themselves to be made too free with by all sorts.”¹⁰ Mary was a believer, and when she met with Abigail Merwin in 1851, she was prepared to defend her life choices and John Humphrey Noyes’s beliefs. Abigail told Mary that she would never see John Humphrey Noyes again because, in her eyes and in the eyes of God, he was a married man and any feelings he had towards her were sinful. She was not looking for a husband. Mary, parroting Noyes’s own words, replied, “The point is, not to help you to a husband or lover, but to have you do the right thing by Christ and his gospel.”¹¹

John Humphrey Noyes saw the connection between Abigail and Mary – between his past and his present – but only after Mary tragically drowned in July of 1851. He drew comparisons between Abigail’s refusal to marry him and Mary’s death. “Mrs. Cragin’s death,” he wrote in July of 1851, “will lead me to overcome death just as Abigail Merwin’s marriage stimulated me to break up the marriage system.”¹² By September, Noyes spoke before the community and asked – to himself and to the community--“who is my female correspondent?”¹³

¹⁰ George Wallingford Noyes Manuscript Collection, Paper 14, Box 3, OCC.

¹¹ Letter from Mary E. Cragin at Wallingford to Harriet Noyes at Oneida, May 4, 1851, Box 4, OCC.

¹² See Parker, *Yankee Saint*, 85.

¹³ Home-Talk by Noyes. September 4, 1851, Box 3, OCC.

He had thought it was Abigail, whose holy image inspired him; instead, Noyes admitted that Mary was his equal.

The female heads of the Primitive Church were all Marys, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary whom Jesus loved [. . .] The thoughts I had about Abigail Merwin have been and are being fulfilled in Mrs. Cragin [. . .] There was a difference between Abigail Merwin and Mary Cragin. Abigail Merwin drew my heart out but did not respond to it. Mrs. Cragin drew it out with equal if not greater power, and responded to it not only with love but union.¹⁴

With Mary's death, John Humphrey Noyes stopped looking back, stopped trying to chase after Abigail Merwin and his younger days that she came to represent. His youth – the obsessions, anxieties, and religiosity – had shaped him enough to get him to the Complex Marriage quartet with Harriet, George, and Mary. By that point Noyes's focus was less on religion, on the ideas of sin and salvation, and more on how he could take his ideas and use them to build a community, to control others.

Those early years – first in Putney, Vermont and later in New York – would be the first stage in John Humphrey Noyes's social-religious utopian experiment. Everything that comes later – all the buildings, all the controversies, all the experiments – were a result of Noyes's religious obsessions in his youth and that first decade of perfecting sexual control and rebuilding the domestic life, a result of what Abigail Merwin and Mary Cragin represent in the story of

¹⁴ Home-Talk by Noyes. September 4, 1851, Box 3, OCC.

the Oneida Community. This chapter is about this first stage. Oneida scholarship often frames Noyes's early religious education and emotional ups and downs as proof of mental instability, and his denunciation of exclusive marriage and early attempts to build a social utopia as the beginnings of Noyes wanting to control the relationship between the sexes. It's a covenant narrative, but only reads the surface of Noyes's early religious experience. These two elements of Noyes's theological and social beliefs do work together and they are intermingled, but that relationship, I will argue later in this chapter, is much more intersected with children than scholars of Oneida have previously argued. Nowhere is it more obvious than in the Oneida Community's mandatory birth control.

"the woes of untimely and excessive child bearing:" Male Continence and the Meaning of Children

According to Noyes, the subject and practice of Male Continence, the Oneida Community's successful birth control method, attracted a considerable amount of attention from outsiders.¹⁵ One English clergyman wrote to Noyes asking for more information on the practice because he believed it "would be

¹⁵ Reference to inquiries about Male Continence are all taken from Noyes's 1871 pamphlet, *Male Continence*. There is no evidence to prove whether or not these letters actually existed, but it is safe to assume that, like all practices in the Oneida Community, Male Continence did pique the interest of the general population. They are presented here as legitimate inquiries.

exceedingly useful to me and to some of my brethren in pastoral work.”¹⁶

Another clergyman, this time a Congregationalist minister writing from America, wanted more “reliable information” about the practice and writes honestly about personally wanting to find some “safe means to prevent conception in the future” since his wife had just given birth to their seventh child.¹⁷ In 1866, a future medical student, who stated that he did not agree with Noyes’s religious theories, felt it was his obligation as a future “medicine man” to understand “legitimate Male Continence.”¹⁸ The most emotional letter came from a mother, who didn’t address Noyes directly, but rather reached out to a female member of the Oneida Community. The woman, a Godly and a devoted mother, told of her daughter’s struggle with several pregnancies. The first was joyous, and the second was sudden, but the baby was born healthy and the daughter readily embraced motherhood. The third pregnancy, however, sent the woman’s daughter into a fit of madness. This would be her third pregnancy in about two years, and the young mother was desperate. The woman detailed her daughter’s numerous visits to a doctor who agreed to perform “an operation pre-formed.”¹⁹ After several failed attempts at aborting the pregnancy, the young mother gave

¹⁶ John Humphrey Noyes. *Male Continence*. Oneida, NY: Office of the Oneida Circular, 1872: 1

¹⁷ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 2-3.

¹⁸ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 5.

¹⁹ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 4.

birth to a child she resented. According to the woman, her daughter had lost all joy and “does not appear like the same person she was three years ago.”²⁰

Noyes sympathized with this mother and felt honored to have the attention from such “intelligent and respectable persons.”²¹ His 1866 reply to the young doctor outlined the basic principles of Male Continence, and was published several times in various publications over the next decade. In the letter, Noyes credited Thomas Robert Malthus’s thoughts on population, particularly his philosophies on preventative checks (i.e, birth control, late marriages, and celibacy) with inspiring his initial thoughts on Male Continence. Noyes also drew on arguments from Robert Dale Owens, who suggested that “withdrawing immediately before emission” was the surest solution to population control, and the complete prohibition of marriage and sex as practiced by the Shakers.²² For Noyes, however, none of these methods seemed reasonable and many were in opposition to the communal principles he was attempting to make a reality in Putney, Vermont and Oneida. The methods outlined in the letter fall into three categories: the prevention of intercourse (Malthus and Shakers), the prevention of “the natural effects of the propagative act” (Owen), and the destruction of the “living results of the propagative act” (the doctor in the woman’s letter).²³ Believing that these options were

²⁰ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 4.

²¹ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 2.

²² Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 6-7.

²³ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 7.

unsatisfying, and unreasonable, Noyes felt that a fourth option existed, but it needed a thorough understanding of sexual intercourse.

The act of sexual intercourse, as Noyes understood it, has a beginning, middle, and end. It begins with “the *presence* of the male organ in the female,” followed by a “series of reciprocal *motions*.”²⁴ The entire act ends on “a nervous action or ejaculatory *crisis* which expels the seed.”²⁵ Male Continence is the ability to stop the final stage, the crisis. Comparing sex to the rowing down a river towards a waterfall, Noyes writes that the purpose of Male Continence is not to fight the current of the waterfall, but avoid getting close enough to feel any current. “A skilled boatman,” Noyes writes, “may choose whether he will remain in the still water, or venture more or less down the rapids, or run his boat over the fall.”²⁶ The practice of Male Continence is meant to make a skilled boatman out of all men. For Noyes, Male Continence is the ultimate form of self-control, an ideal held in high regard within the Oneida Community. The ability to control animalistic urges is both primitive and progressive in the eyes of Noyes. Sex is as primitive an act as anything humans are capable of, but the ability to control one’s sexual responses is lost on animals and brutes. Male Continence helps men and women “elevate their sexual performances above those of the brutes.”²⁷

²⁴ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 7. Italics in original.

²⁵ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 7. Italics in original.

²⁶ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 8.

²⁷ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 9.

This letter clarifies and expands on a section from Noyes's 1848 *Bible Argument* entitled "How the sexual function is to be redeemed and true relations between the sexes are to be restored."²⁸ In this argument, Noyes outlines Male Continence (without naming it), in much the same way as above. What is different about this publication is that Noyes attempts to make his argument in biblical terms. Drawing on the story of Adam and Eve, Noyes argues that reproductive organs have three functions: urinary, propagative, and amative. The last two purposes, Noyes argues often get confused. As Noyes sees it, before the fall of Adam and Eve, their sexual relations were strictly amative, meaning they engaged in sex without procreating. Noyes goes on to explain:

Amativeness was the natural agency of the distribution and mutual action of these two forms of life. In this primitive position of the sexes, (which is the position of the sexes in Christ,) each reflects upon the other the love of God; each excites and develops the divine action in the other. Thus amativeness is to life, as sunshine to vegetation.²⁹

For Noyes, amativeness is the most primitive of sexual relationships. To have sex without procreating is to return to the way Adam and Eve existed before the fall and exodus from the Garden of Eden. The burden of Male Continence was on men, but Noyes also argued that the ability to perform Male Continence was one for the greatest accomplishments because it required complete self-control, a

²⁸ No copy of *Bible Argument* has survived, but the pamphlet was reprinted in Noyes's most famous writing *Bible Communism: a compilation from the annual reports and other publications of the Oneida Association and its branches; presenting, in connection with their history, a summary view of their religious and social theories*. (Brooklyn, NY: Office of the Oneida Circular. 1853). All quotes taken from *Bible Communism*.

²⁹ Noyes, J. H., *Bible Communism*, 44.

virtue that was not apparent to the Oneida Community, but was a very nineteenth-century idea.³⁰ “If he is willing to learn,” Noyes ends his letter, “experience will teach him the wisdom of confining his exertions to the region of easy rowing, unless he has an object in view that is worth the cost of going over the falls.”³¹ This “object,” of course, is a child.

The theory and practice of Male Continence has as much to do with children as it does with the relationship between the sexes. Noyes’s journey towards Male Continence did not begin with spirituality, but with children. In a brief history of his discovery of Male Continence, Noyes explains that during the early years of his marriage, his wife “went through the agonies of five births,” four of which were premature and did not survive.³² Harriet Noyes sunk deeper into depression; the idea of having children became a frightening one. Not wanting to further hurt his wife with more failed births, Noyes began looking for a way to have sexual intercourse that would not result in pregnancy. Eventually, Male Continence would be linked to Noyes’s more spiritual beliefs, and the details of its practice would be outlined in *Bible Argument* and linked to larger theological and philosophical ideas. But while the majority of writings on Male Continence are concerned with its religious or scientific impact there is no

³⁰ See Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz. *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Vintage, 2003) and John D’Emilio and Ectelle B. Freeman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1988.

³¹ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 8.

³² Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 10.

ignoring the fact that Noyes set out to find a different way of having sex because the idea of procreation, of potentially having more children, had become painful.

In the early years of the Oneida Community, and in Noyes's writings, the ambivalence to the potential presence of children would drastically shape the community's ideas on childhood. Procreation, and with it the presence of children, were directly linked to the fall of Adam and Eve in *Bible Argument*. In writing about the shame Adam and Eve felt after their fall, Noyes wrote,

"Another cause of shame is found in the *woes of untimely and excessive child bearing*, by which the sexual organs and offices contract odious associations."³³

Whether explicit or not, this argument situates the presence of children as a punishment. Noyes's argument is flimsy at best, but throughout most of his writings on Male Continence he regularly returns to the idea that children can be a burden on mothers and fathers and proof that a man is incapable of self-control. More so, given how much Noyes admired a man's ability to control his body, the presence of children also signaled that the man was incapable of controlling his sexual urges and responses. Children were the physical figuration of a man's imperfection.

But Male Continence was not meant to completely avoid procreation and children. "We are not opposed [. . .] to the increase of population," Noyes wrote,

³³ *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association: Exhibiting Its History, Principles and Transactions to Jan. 1, 1849*. (Oneida Reserve: Leonard & Co. Printers, 1849), 35. Emphasis in Original.

“we believe that the order to ‘multiply’ attached to the race in its original integrity, and that propagation, rightly conducted and kept within such limits as life can fairly afford, is a blessing only to sexual love.”³⁴ What Noyes objects to, and what he became afraid of, was *involuntary* procreation. Noyes argued that the majority of children were born under the “present system” and parents eventually began to resent each new child. Male Continence is not opposed to children all together, but rather to “excessive, and of course, oppressive procreation” and “random procreation.”³⁵

Issues of gender and power played a major part in the development, acceptance, and eventual disintegration of the practice of Male Continence, but the practice can also be read as an issue that directly affected the community’s perception of childhood.³⁶ As Lawrence Foster has argued, Male Continence “prevented the complications which having children would have posed to establishing the primary loyalty to the community in all things.”³⁷ Noyes did see a mother’s love for her children as one of the greatest forms of attachment, and in later writings would admonish mothers who loved their children above the

³⁴ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 15.

³⁵ Noyes, J. H. *Male Continence*, 15.

³⁶ For discussions on gender see: Lawrence Foster. *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons*. Syracuse: Syracuse U Press, 1991; Kern, Louis. *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community*. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1981); Louis Kern. “Breaching the ‘Wall of Partition Between the Male and the Female’: John Humphrey Noyes and Free Love.” *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 28, no. 2 (1993), 87-116.

³⁷ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 98.

community. But in those early years, Noyes was less concerned with breaking down the attachment between mother and child (that would become more of an issue during the Stirpiculture experiment) than he was with ensuring that the community did not suffer by having to deal with unwanted children.

According to Noyes, involuntary, excessive, and random procreation potentially produced unruly children, children that were not well cared for, children whose resentful parents would neglect them. "Such children," Noyes writes in his pamphlet on Male Continence, "cannot be well organized."³⁸ There is no explanation for what this means, but this odd statement sits in the middle of a lengthy paragraph about the dangers of involuntary procreation. The "such children" Noyes refers to are the kinds who are born from involuntary procreation, the kind who are seen by their parents to be a "curse." Whether a comment on the natural state of these children or on how they are raised, the statement does link the state of childhood to how children are conceived. There is also the interesting idea of "organizing" children. To organize something is to find a place for it in relation to the place of other things. If these kinds of children cannot be organized, then they either have no place in the community or they will not remain in whatever place they are given.

The successful practice of male continuance, I would argue, is the beginning of Oneida thinking of children as out-of-place in the community. In

³⁸ Noyes, J. H., *Male Continence*, 15.

an 1857 home talk, Noyes asks if children can be spiritually minded.³⁹ To Noyes, the natural state of childhood is no different from that of adulthood. Children are capable of understanding that “they are not separate, isolated beings; but that their life is a part of other life” and that they are only immature in their passions, not their spirit of intellect.⁴⁰ For Noyes, children did have a place in the world, though he could never fully articulate what this was. What Male Continence shows is that while children may have had a place in the world, they did not necessarily have a place at Oneida. In those early years of the community, Noyes was clear to his followers that Male Continence was to be practiced, therefore any children born accidentally were unwanted under the Male Continence system. This does not mean that the community disliked children or even restricted couples with children from joining the community. As I’ll demonstrate in the next section, the community openly welcomes couples with children and communally cared for all children. But the community did not let children live in the same spaces the adults occupied.

³⁹ Home Talks in Oneida were essentially sermons, given periodically by Noyes to the Community. They often addressed large theological and philosophical issues, but they also covered more everyday issues within the community such as committee work

⁴⁰ Noyes, John Humphrey. “Can Children be Spiritually Minded?” *Circular* (Oneida, NY). January 29, 1867, 2, 6.

Being Out-of-Place: Introducing Complex Marriage and the Old Mansion House

Often when people, practices, or objects are considered out-of-place, as I argue children were in the early years of the Oneida Community, they are thought of as pollution or dirt that must be removed from whatever pre-existing classification is established. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has defined dirt as “matter out-of-place” and argued that the stronger the spatial classifications the greater the desire to expel or exclude.⁴¹ The Oneida Community believed in social order and control, and constructed their built environments to reflect their unique social system. But during the first decade at Oneida, the community was more concerned with building environments that allowed the adults to engage in Complex Marriage, Noyes’s more systematic approach to the ideas he presented in the “Battle-Axe Letter.” The story of the Oneida Community and *place* is largely the story of the creation of place through built environments. But one of the potential pitfalls of focusing on the creation of built environments, in the case of Oneida, their houses, schools, and leisure spaces, is that it can lead to an understanding of place as being solely about what is “inside”. But children were not exactly “inside” the community proper at Oneida. They were certainly seen as important, and they were cared for carefully and with love. But in terms of their place within the community, children were more “outside” than in. The

⁴¹ Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 201), 36.

out-of-placeness of children is mostly due to the introduction of what would become the lynchpin of Oneida's social theory: Complex Marriage.

Two years prior to their arrival in New York, the Perfectionists began instituting the very early stages of complex marriage. Since the publication of the "Battle-Axe Letter" and his marriage to Harriet Holden, Noyes had been trying to figure out a way to systematically implement his ideas, particularly those about the relationship between the sexes. The "Battle-Axe Letter" and his straight-forward marriage proposal to Harriet were just the beginning. Noyes sought financial stability and devoted followers before he could publically express the details of Complex Marriage. The success of establishing a community in Putney provided this for Noyes and between 1842-1847, Noyes wrote many articles and letters about the nature of marriage and the relationship between the sexes. But it wasn't until May of 1846 that Noyes and a small group of followers willingly and openly experimented with Complex Marriage. By the end of 1846, Noyes and Harriet along with three other couples (including Noyes's sisters and their husbands) agreed to share all property and each other with the group.⁴² Noyes's experiment would be short-lived in Putney. As the nature of this arrangement became more public (mostly due to Noyes's preaching), the local townspeople were outraged and demanded that Noyes and

⁴² There is no evidence to suggest that Noyes and his sisters engaged in an incestuous behavior. The original agreement between Noyes, Harriet, and the Cragins was meant only to appease growing sexual attractions between the two couples. See: Carden, *Oneida*, 21.

his followers leave. It seems as if Noyes needed more than just financial stability and willing followers in order to realize his radical social and religious vision--he also needed a place of his own.

In 1848, John Humphrey Noyes and his followers moved from Putney, Vermont to central New York State and settled into a group of buildings on some recently purchased property near the Oneida Creek. Central New York was the perfect location for Noyes to realize his vision. Throughout much of the nineteenth-century, the region was ablaze with religiosity, earning it the nickname the "burned-over district" because religion was so prevalent and strong that it burned over the area. Religious and utopian communities popped up all over, from the Great Lakes, across the Finger Lakes, and all the way to the Hudson River. Groveland, NY was the site of a small but important community of Shakers, three Owenite communities appeared between the 1820s and 1840s, and several Fourier phalanxes struggled to keep going. Several years before the arrival of Noyes, Joseph Smith proclaimed to have seen a vision of an angel and translated the Book of Mormon in Palmyra, and in 1844, the Millerites in Rochester were disappointed when Christ did not return as they had hoped. Noyes and his followers could not have picked a better location to begin building their community and begin realizing their social experiment. This was the perfect place for the Oneida Community.

Looking to build on Bible Communism's ideas of communal living, Noyes and his followers soon started work on what would become the old Mansion

House of the Oneida Community. Before the existence of the old Mansion House, accommodations at Oneida weren't controlled. The small band of families that joined Noyes amounted to thirty-one adults and fourteen children who occupied whatever cabins and barns already existed on the property. Upon their arrival, the original Perfectionists weren't concerned with their living space. With the upheaval of moving and trying to keep the group together, Noyes focused on keeping his vision of Perfectionism alive. At least for the moment, the spaces at Oneida were just spaces. They held no meaning and even in Noyes's writings, the Oneida reserve was simply a space to live until something better could be figured out. In her history of the Oneida Community, Maren Lockwood Carden writes:

[. . .] anyone who professed inner perfection must work to bring his outer behavior into line with that inner state by improving his moral and spiritual character, by developing his intellectual capacities, and by working to realize all his potentialities.⁴³

Carden's observation is astute and touches on an aspect of Oneida that is rarely discussed in the limited scholarly literature on Oneida. The early years of the Oneida Community weren't so much about constructing a utopia, but more about understanding the inner-self. Meaning-making was done internally and individually. The search for inner perfection was reflected in the community's built environments. House after house and wall after wall would be constructed over the thirty-three years' history of Oneida and with the placement of each

⁴³ Carden, *Oneida*, 23.

new brink and the design of each new space, the community began to build a physical model of what they felt inside themselves. But eventually, the community would close itself off too much, and focus too heavily on its interiors. As the community progressed, social control would become more prominent, and the stifling world of Noyes and Oneida would eventually lead to its demise. But Oneida was most successful when its physical and material world reflected the “inner perfection” of the community.

As the number of community members grew, the most important project was to build a house that would not only function as a living space, but also physically reflect the Perfectionist ideals the community was striving for in those early years.

Erastus H. Hamilton, a young architect from Syracuse, NY, was given the responsibility of seeing through the design and construction of the community’s first home. Having joined the community in the spring of 1848, Hamilton had proven himself to be a capable and dependable worker in the community and shortly after his arrival was made the chief of the industrial department of Oneida, which oversaw the building of the first Mansion House (later known as the Old Mansion House).⁴⁴ Demonstrating the industriousness that would carry them through some tough years in the future, the Oneida Community managed

⁴⁴ Primary sources on the Old Mansion House refer to it by several names – First Mansion House, the Mansion House, Old Mansions House, Wooden Mansion House. For the sake of simplicity, I will call the Oneida Community’s first house the Old Mansion House.

to procure a saw-mill and find enough lumber to get their home up quickly and efficiently. Everything except plastering was done by the community members, and all adult members, including women, worked on the house whenever time allowed. As Harriet Worden writes, “The building of a *home* was the first enterprise that enlisted the whole community; and it was one in which all were equally interested.”⁴⁵ Worden’s words point to a subtle and important distinction: what the community was building was more than just a house, a space with walls, it was a home, a place that would be lived in and become meaningful.

The building of the Old Mansion House was pleasant and by the beginning of the year, the house was ready to be occupied. That winter, 58 adults occupied the Old Mansion House. The remaining Oneida members, twenty-nine children, were divided by age and housed in the older buildings scattered throughout the property. The best of the original houses, known as the “White House,” was converted into a nursery for the children between the ages of two and twelve (seventeen in total) and the other house, the “Burt House,” was used to house the six infants.⁴⁶ The decision as to where to place the children wasn’t discussed until after construction of the Old Mansion House began. Perhaps the community forgot about the housing of the children or they simply assumed that the children could live comfortably in the other buildings.

⁴⁵ Harriet Worden. *Old Mansion Memories*. Kenwood, NY: Oneida Limited, 1950: 5.

⁴⁶ Worden, *Old Mansion Memories*, 9.

Another reason for this decision could have to do with the community's desire to practice fully Complex Marriage, which would quickly become the focus of social and religious life at Oneida. Regardless, the adults in the community saw the separation as necessary and enjoyable. Harriet Worden reflects on the comfortable arrangements:

The separation from the main household proved to be very favorable to the comfort and good-breeding of the children, at the same time saving the older people from much noise and confusion. The women who served as mothers and attendants of the children found the business not a burden, but a pleasure.⁴⁷

Again, the idea that children can be a burden arises. The transition into the new arrangements might not have been as smooth as it seems. Having recently "left ordinary society," some of the mothers did experience distress over being separated from the children and not being in complete control of their care and feeding. Occasionally, a "melodramatic scene would occur."⁴⁸ No details about such scenes have survived, but it is clear that from the beginning the Oneida adults favored the children being separate from "the main household."⁴⁹

There is a lot of interest in Worden's observations, but particularly telling is her choice of words in saying "the separation from the main household." "Household" implies not just a group of people all living together, but also a relationship between those people. Since the Oneida Community saw

⁴⁷ Worden, *Old Mansion Memories*, 9.

⁴⁸ Worden, *Old Mansion Memories*, 9.

⁴⁹ Worden, *Old Mansion Memories*, 9.

themselves as one family, referring to everyone together as a “household” isn’t surprising. What is surprising is that Worden’s phrase implies that children were not a part of the household given that they were separated. The adjective “main” further complicates this separation by suggesting that there was another household outside the main one. In other words, to say that children were “separated from the main household” suggests that children were not just out-of-place from the main classification system of the community, but also that children’s spaces could potentially be households themselves, a very real threat to the community in later years.

Excluding children entirely from the design of the Old Mansion House reveals the out-of-placeness of children occupied in the community. In 1849, Oneida was first and foremost a community of adults.⁵⁰ The family that was beginning to form within the walls of the Old Mansion House was comprised of adults. Children weren’t neglected; they were cared for by a rotation of adults who all spent time in the various buildings managing the children. But in any discussion of the community and its success, children were secondary and they most definitely did not live in the main household.

While no plans or blueprints exist of the Old Mansion House (or “main household”), some sketches and photographs have survived. One of the most prominent of these sketches is an 1851 pencil drawing of the exterior of the house

⁵⁰ Harriet Worden acknowledges this when she writes about the Mansion House being the site of “adult activity.” Worden, *Old Mansion Memories*, 1.

that would later be published in the Community's *Circular* (Figure 3).⁵¹ The sketch shows a simple, presumably white, farm house. With three floors and a pitched roof, the house is unassuming from the road and its architectural design is not uncommon for the central and western regions of New York during this time. From the outside, the Old Mansion House didn't look like the kind of place a community of free-lovers would inhabit, but then again what would such a place look like on the outside? For the Oneida Community, the external aesthetics of the house weren't as important as the way the interiors were designed to reflect communal living and encourage active participation in Complex Marriage.

The interior of the Old Mansion House was simple (Figure 4). The first floor was divided into a kitchen, dining room, cellar, and laundry facilities. The second floor had several sleeping rooms, but also a parlor and a schoolroom. The third floor is where the most interesting rooms were located. Originally meant to be a floor of sleeping rooms, time and money caused the community to create the "Tent Room." This celebrated space was "a series of several double sleeping compartments surrounding an opening directly onto a central sitting area."⁵² The compartments were divided by curtains hung on wires, which

⁵¹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). November 30, 1851.

⁵² White, "Designing for Perfection," 116.

could be pushed back to the walls to open the room up for communal activities — thus the name “Tent Room.”⁵³

Members saw many benefits to the set-up of the Tent Room, including greater ventilation, more light shining throughout the space, and a general “beauty” in the light colored cloth draping down from the ceiling and onto the floors.⁵⁴ More importantly though, they saw the space as a perfect reflection of their religious ideals and it soon became an important space and place in the community. “The most obvious objection to this singular combination of house and tent,” they wrote in 1849, “is that its accommodations are not favorable to privacy; but the principles and habits of the association, being somewhat more gregarious than usual, made the sacrifice of privacy a small affair in comparison with the advantages of consolidation”⁵⁵ For the social practice of Complex Marriage to work, the community needed spaces that encouraged socialization. Individual rooms would have created privacy for couples, but they would have also literally kept the couples apart. Being “more gregarious than usual” the Oneida Community turned the open space of the Tent Room into a place where couples had to socialize and where Noyes’s “wall of partition between the male and female,” didn’t just come down, it was never built to begin with.

⁵³ *Circular* . April 25, 1852.

⁵⁴ Harriet Worden also discusses the Tent Room, even listing the names of original occupants in Worden, *Old Mansion Memories*, 8

⁵⁵ *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association: Exhibiting Its History, Principles and Transactions to Jan. 1, 1849*. Oneida Reserve: Leonard & Co. Printers. 1849. 8.

Unknowingly, the community designed their living space to reflect Noyes's original vision of marriage, one that didn't separate individuals but brought them together. Until the mid-nineteenth century, American homes did not often include separate bedrooms for sleeping. It wasn't until the 1840s and 1850s, that architects and pattern book writers began encouraging middle-class Americans to build bedrooms in their homes. More often than not bedrooms were "linked directly to the public reception rooms."⁵⁶ This link served as easy access to important rooms such as the kitchen and parlor, not as a way to open the bedroom up as a social space. In fact, the existence of a separate bedroom just for sleeping indicates that by the 1840s the American home was moving towards designs in which the bedroom was the most private space in an increasingly private home. The Oneida Community wasn't concerned with access to other parts of the house as much as access to other people. The Tent Room conflates the functions of the bedroom and the parlor; it's both private and social. In encourages intimacy with the community as a whole.

Observers of the American family home often used "home" and "family" interchangeably throughout the nineteenth century. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing from his observations in the 1830s, remarked that "when the American retires from the turmoil of public life to the bosom of his family he finds in it the image of order and peace [. . .] While the European endeavors to forget his

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Collins Cromley. "A History of American Beds and Bedrooms". *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 4. (1991), 178.

domestic troubles by agitating society, the American derives from his own home that love of order which he afterwards carries with him into public affairs.”⁵⁷

For white, middle-class Americans in the nineteenth century, the physical space of the domestic home was a symbolic representation of family ideals. Housing reformers of the mid-nineteenth century “fused their conception of innovative housing designs with their idealization of the family.”⁵⁸ Decades early, the American home was already beginning to change, with additional rooms and layouts meant to reflect republican simplicity and burgeoning ideals of the family. Houses were described in moral terms – good, bad, dishonest, etc. By the time the Oneida Community built the Old Mansion House, the American home had already become a refuge from the outside world. It had also become a quasi-religious space. “One of the holliest [sic] sanctuaries on earth is the home,” one religious almanac state and pattern-book author Sereno E. Todd puts it best when he writes:

Home is not merely four square walls adorned with gilded pictures but it is where love sheds its light on all the dear ones who gather round the sweet home fireside, where we can worship God, with none to molest or make us afraid.⁵⁹

The physical characteristics of the home reflected the values and morals of the single-family that dwelled inside. The word “moral” appears throughout

⁵⁷ Alexis Touqueville. *Democracy in America, Volume 1*. Trans. Henry Reeve. (New York: J. & H. G. Langley, 1841), 332.

⁵⁸ Clifford Clark. *The American Family Home, 1800-1960*. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1986), 4.

⁵⁹ Qtd. in Clark, *The American Family Home*, 29.

many of the popular and influential writings about the home in the nineteenth century. While the exact specifics of what an ideal domestic home should look like differed wildly across writings, the majority of architects, pattern book writers, and builders saw a strong connection between the moral nature of the family and the physical space they inhabited. This intersection of space and meaning is what turns a *place* into a *home*. In their pattern book, Henry Cleaveland and William Backus write, “he who improves the dwelling-houses of a people in relation to their comforts, habits, and morals makes a [. . .] lasting reform at the very foundation of society.” The most famous, and arguably influential of nineteenth century plan book writers, Andrew Jackson Downing, build his design philosophy on the idea that “there is moral influence in a country home” and that if a home is designed correctly it will encourage the family to pursue a more moral existence.

Even after the Old Mansion House was torn down, the Oneida Community looked back on the Tent Room as an important place. Their reflections aren’t just about the material aspects of the room, but also about its meaning and importance to the members and its history. In the history of the Oneida Community, the Tent Room is a good example of a space that becomes a place through meaning-making. Likening the room to the tent of “Abraham down,” the community saw the Tent Room as a place that connected them to the

Primitive Church they wanted to rebuild.⁶⁰ “For our part,” they expressed in the *Circular*, “we find every moral sentiment and refined feeling is aptly encouraged by the degree of frankness which [the Tent Room] requires.”⁶¹ What is expressed in these sentiments about the Tent Room is not only a love for the space they have created, but also an understanding that space can reflect ideas and shape behavior.

⁶⁰ *Circular* (Oneida, NY), April 25, 1852.

⁶¹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY), April 25, 1852.

CHAPTER 3

MOVING INTO PLACE: The Wooden Children's House, Schools, and the Beginnings of Ascending Fellowship, 1849-1869

Shortly after construction finished on the Old Mansion House, the "Wooden Children's House" was started and completed by the end of 1849. Located thirty-six feet north of the Old Mansion House, the Wooden Children's House was a forty-three by twenty-four foot building with two stories and an attic. From the outside, the building was physically separate from the Old Mansion House, but there was an underground tunnel that connected the two structures.¹ This simple home, built for the children of the Oneida Community, would stand for nearly twenty years. With the success of Male Continence, the child population at Oneida never grew past 50 children in a given year. In fact, the child population drastically dropped during the years the Wooden Children's House stood; in 1851 thirty-four percent of the Oneida population was under the age of sixteen, the age of adulthood for the community, and by 1864 that fell to about 16 percent.²

¹ Story of Mansion House, 1-2, Box 17, Folder: Buildings, OCC.

² Joseph Krishner. "Dance of Three Generations: Generational Tension and the Eugenics in the Oneida Community." *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 13, no. 2 (1983), 21.

In one of only two studies on the children of the Oneida Community, Joseph Krischner defines the second generation of Oneida as those children who were born or bought into the community between the 1830s and 1850s.³ This cohort is important for two reasons. They are the first group of children to be raised in the Oneida Community under the communal child-rearing practices and the first to live separate from their parents. Those children born into the community (or brought in at a very young age) after the construction of the Wooden Children's House knew no other domestic life than the one in which adults lived in one house and children in another. These children would also grow into the adults who would participate in Stirpiculture, Oneida's selective-breeding experiment in the 1870s. Most importantly, as this cohort grows and changes, so does the community's attitudes towards the place of children at Oneida. Over the 20 years between the construction of the Wooden Children's House and the beginning of the Stirpiculture experiment, these children would need to be educated in community principles, thus creating a need for structured schooling and social programming that included children, which Complex Marriage and Male Continence did not.

This chapter examines not only the buildings designed and built for the Oneida children, but also two incidents that caused John Humphrey Noyes to think about the realities and problems caused by raising children away from

³ While Male Continence was successful, accidental births did occur, but at a rate of no more than two a year. Children Born in the O.C. Box 17, OCC.

adults. Initially, the built environments of the Oneida Community reflected the out-of-placeness of children, but as time went on, the community moved from thinking about the presence of children as out of place. Early tensions between children and adults would bring Noyes to an understanding of children as a part of the community though inferior to adults. The inferiority of children would manifest itself in Noyes's call to Oneida adults to guide children into the "spirit of the association." Two separate houses — one for adults, and one for children — along with schools and libraries would reflect this idea, but as children grew up, the community would be faced with the reality that these children, who had lived separately from the adults, would have to be brought into the Mansion House, into the place for adults.

Essentially, this chapter argues that this middle period of Oneida's history saw a shift in thinking about children not so much as being out-of-place, but as "moving into place." This required a much deeper understanding of the built environments for children, particularly their home and schools, which resulted in turning the children's spaces into places. In cultural geography, space is understood as realms without meaning, and this is essentially what the original spaces for children were, just buildings where the children were raised, separate and outside the main household. Once people invest meaning and intent to a given space it becomes a place, which is what the Wooden Children's House became to the Oneida Community. As children grew, they would need to be moved from the children's spaces into the main household. Given that the main

household is where Oneida practiced Complex Marriage, it is easy to see how tensions would arise over exactly what to do with children knowing they would eventually be folded into the marriage, and how to deal with young adolescents who would need to understand the principles of Complex Marriage and Male Continence. These tensions, and the systematic construction of buildings specifically for children resulted in thinking of children as people waiting to move into the community proper and the spaces built for them as places where adults could help children understand that they were waiting to move into the place of the adults, into the community.

A Place Outside the Old Mansion House: The Wooden Children's House

Even before the design and construction of the Wooden Children's House, the Oneida Community was succeeding in keeping the children separated from the adults. "By systematic, but kindly discipline," Harriet Worden writes, "in connection with religious instruction, good order was easily established in the household of the older children [. . .] there was less turbulence and confusion in that family of seventeen, than there had been under previous arrangements in families of only four or five children."⁴ By Worden's own recollection, the children of Oneida were seen as separate families, obviously broken down by age. Sometimes children would be mentioned as part of the Oneida Community

⁴ Worden, *Old Mansion Memories*, 9.

as a whole (often in generic phrases such as “men, women, and children”) but the earliest records refer to the children as their own family. Here the family of seventeen children were defined against what was assumed to be a traditional family of adults *and* children as opposed to the Oneida conception of just adults. This family of children is no less a family than the adults living in the Old Mansion House, but the separation of children from adults has left children presumably more well-behaved.

This would be the beginnings of one of the most interesting spatial arrangements of the Oneida Community: the idea that children not only needed to be kept away from adult spaces, but that they also needed a place of their own. Private letters and diaries from community members during the first decade were burned by descendants in the 1960s, so not many records have survived to help us understand what life was like for the children of Oneida between 1849-1860, but what few materials have survived support the argument that the community worked to establish a children’s culture separate from that of the adults.⁵ The most important records aren’t as much about children as they are about the Wooden Children’s House, “the novelty and beautiful results attracted much attention and admiration from visitors and the community around.”⁶ The decision to build a separate house for the children was initially a

⁵ A brief explanation of why these records were burned can be found in Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 96.

⁶ Worden, *Old Mansion Memories*, 9.

practical one, but within the first years of the two houses existing side-by-side, the Oneida Community began to see a benefit to having the children in a separate place. Women benefited from the separation and “mothers soon learned to value their own freedom and opportunity of education” and were freed of the “sickly maternal tenderness” of motherhood when they witnessed how well their children were doing in the new house.⁷

One way of understanding the significance of the Wooden Children’s House is placing it in the context of other domestic children’s spaces up to the mid-nineteenth century. A separate space for children was not unique to the Oneida Community. The late eighteenth century saw larger houses and expanded domestic spaces, including nurseries, which were either rooms where nursing mothers slept with their children for the first few months or the space occupied by young children and a nurse or older siblings. But the slight growth in popularity of nurseries didn’t mean that parents invested money into building new spaces or that houses were designed with nurseries. Often times, nurseries were makeshift spaces; an extra room in the basement, attic, or back of the home would be converted into a nursery for as long as was necessary. After all, nurseries are only needed when an infant is in the home. As children grew, they eventually slept in other parts of the house, most of the time sharing space with

⁷ Worden, *Old Mansion Memories*, 10.

other children, servants, or extended family.⁸ As Karin Calvert points out, “Americans for the most part, never followed the English fashion of reserving a series of rooms for the children’s use, which included a day room, sleeping room, and sometimes also a school room.”⁹ To some degree, the Wooden Children’s House was more in keeping with British trends in children’s spaces. While some American children slept in temporary nurseries at night, all children spent their days outside or with their family in communal spaces.

But the Oneida Community didn’t simply design their living space to have “series of rooms for the children’s use,” they constructed an entire house, completely separate from the main living space of the community. Children were not just afforded their own space; they were literally given their own home. Referring again to the image of the Old Mansion House and the Wooden Children’s House from the *Circular* (Figure 3), we get a clearer idea as to how the physical position of the Wooden Children’s House reinforces the initial out-of-placeness of children. The two houses stand beside each other, but they do not appear to be touching, nor is there any outside evidence that they are connected. This aesthetic detail is significant in understanding the tension between the Oneida adults and the presence of children. There is nothing in the records to indicate that the adults kept children out of the Old Mansion House completely,

⁸ Karin Calvert. *Children in the Home: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900*. (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern Press, 1994), 67-68.

⁹ Calvert, *Children in the Home*, 68.

but to anyone unfamiliar with the Old Mansion House there would appear to be no direct connection between the two structures. The only physical connection between the buildings was hidden, literally buried underground.

Only children over the age of four were allowed to stay in the Wooden Children's House, and like the Tent Room, the adults of Oneida were proud of what the separate house meant for the community.¹⁰ As discussed in the introduction, one of the main tenants of the Bible Communism at Oneida was an allegiance to the community. One of the strongest perceived threats to this collectivism was the intense affection a parent feels for a child, and vice versa. From the early years in Putney, John Humphrey Noyes advocated for a communal approach to childrearing. With the freedom to design and construct their own spaces at Oneida, the Perfectionists were able to fully realize communal childrearing. Separating the children from the adults was a necessary step in achieving this goal.

Talking about the houses as two separate worlds was common within the community. In a very early report on the state of the Children's Department, the committee of adults elected to make decisions concerning the care of children, it was noted that a group of boys, who had previously "had some trouble," were doing much better thanks in part to the attention they could be given by being in

¹⁰ The breakdown of age is described in Buildings of the Community, Box 17, Folder: Buildings, OCC.

the Children's House.¹¹ The main concern in the report was whether or not infants, currently being housed separately from the children, should be moved into the Children's House. "There is a general feeling in favor of placing the infants under the same roof as the older children" the Children's Department reported, "the infants will then have the advantage of being helped by the older children, and the older children the advantage of taking some care of those more helpless."¹² It seemed that the community saw an advantage in children spending time with other children rather than adults. Echoing this, Harriet Worden wrote that, "the periodical visits of the mothers to the nurseries, and of the children to the Mansion house [sic], were found to be occasions of more genuine pleasure, than could ever be derived from constant personal attendance."¹³ The children's interactions with their parents were scheduled and brief; whereas, they had unlimited time to spend with the other children of the Wooden Children's House. Worden's recollections reinforce that the Children's House also benefited adults, particularly women who "once given their children up to the care of others, a new sphere of existence opened to them."¹⁴

Discussions of the family in the nineteenth century almost always highlight the gender divides, with the "cult of domesticity" absorbing the world

¹¹ The story of these boys will be explored in more detail later. Noyes, G. W. "The Children's House, Box 2, Folder: G. W. Noyes Papers, 1848-1852, p. 211, OCC.

¹² Noyes, G. W. "The Children's House, Box 2, Folder: G. W. Noyes Papers, 1848-1852, p. 213. OCC.

¹³ Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 10.

¹⁴ Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 9.

and culture of children. This is certainly true when we look at the general attitudes towards domestic architecture reforms throughout much of the nineteenth century, but particularly in the mid-century. Architectural historian Clifford Clark writes that “the greatest emphasis [. . .] was placed on designing the rooms to fit the needs of the woman in the family.”¹⁵ Careful attention was given to the parts of the house that were public and the parts that would be private. In homes of middle and upper-class white Americans (classes that the Oneida Community came from and would aspire to), women were given domain over the private spaces, but they were also encouraged to have their own spaces where they could practice domestic duties, relax, or read. Domestic pattern books writers such as Andrew Downing Jackson and Garrett Wheeler, focused on the place of women in their new domestic designs. Wheeler’s only mention of age is gendered when he encourages families and builders to give young girls and women their own room upstairs. He wrote:

“the young girl that, finding no intrinsic pleasure at home, nor regarding it otherwise that as the sphere of her domestic duties, would seek away from its shelter, and with other companions [. . . find] pleasure and excitement neither so wholesome or refining as a fond parent would.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Clifford Clark. “Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History: The Romantic Revival and the Cult of Domesticity in America, 1840-1870.” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7, no. 1 (1976), 50.

¹⁶ Wheeler, Gervase. *Rural Homes: Or, Sketches of Houses Suited to American Country Life, with Original Plans, Designs*. (New York, NY: Scribner, 1852), 277.

These divides between private and public spaces within the family home not only gender the nineteenth century family, but reinforce a sense of individualism on the part of each family member. “The family,” Clark writes, “was not an organic unit but rather was made up of separate, unique individuals who each had a specific role to play [. . .] interaction with family was to take place in specifically designated areas.”¹⁷ In other words, the family home in the nineteenth century became a place where individuals lived out their separate lives, but were also given places within the home to come together.

The Oneida Community’s buildings reflected this definition of the family, but instead of dividing spaces by gender, they placed a far greater emphasis on age. The adult spaces of the Old Mansion House were more open, with very little privacy. Even individual bedrooms were more used as office spaces than sleeping quarters. Men and women shared spaces and were encouraged to interact through work and leisure. The Old Mansion House wasn’t built with any spaces for children, and given the building of the Wooden Children’s House, children were even more out of place *in* the Old Mansion House.

If the nineteenth century domestic house was meant to be a material reflection of the ideal middle-class family, then the Wooden Children’s House can be understood as more than just children’s space. The separation from adult spaces is meaningful and the mere fact that it is an entire house, complete with

¹⁷ Clark, “Domestic Architecture as an Index,” 52.

its own kitchens and communal spaces makes it both more place than space. Looking back on John Agnew's definition of place that was presented in the introduction, the Wooden Children's House has the two most important aspects that make place a meaningful location: locale and sense of place. The locale, or material setting for social interaction, is the house itself, which has walls, hallways and rooms, but it is also designated for use by children specifically. As a material environment, the Wooden Children's House is built with use in mind and with a pre-established idea of social relationships. This is a place for children and it is not attached to the place for adults. Also, as a "house," it was meant to stand alone, to hold a complete social unit like a family, with its own kitchen, eating areas, and parlor. The sense of place, that emotional attachment people have to a space, is obvious in what documents have survived. Harriet Worden's recollections alone show a fondness for the older system of having the children completely separate from adults.

The Oneida Community might have used the Old Mansion House to tear down the wall between men and women, but their construction and use of the Wooden Children's House went further: not simply building a wall between adults and children, but additionally constructing a place where children were free from adult influence. This freedom would quickly cause concerns for John Humphrey Noyes and the community, because the children were beginning to build a culture all their own. The sense of place that was being established in the

Wooden Children's House was not falling in line with what Noyes and the community envisioned.

Dealing with the Place of Children: Two Houses and Tensions over Peer Culture

It's easy to see why the community thought it best to separate the children and keep them out of the Old Mansion House. First, given the community's very public practice of Complex Marriage and the perception that this so-called "free love" community was nothing more than a group of adults wanting to commit adultery with each other, letting children live alongside the adults would only raise concerns from outsiders. Second, in the early years of the community, growth was almost solely dependent on new members joining. According to records, most new members to the community were adults, and the majority of these adults brought children with them. Between 1848 and 1850, over fifty children under the age of sixteen were brought into the Oneida Community.¹⁸ Given that new members were drawn to Oneida because of Complex Marriage, it's safe to assume that allowing children to sleep in the same space as the adults would have deterred some perspective members, along with making the practice of Complex Marriage nearly impossible.

¹⁸ A full list of children can be found in: List of children brought here under the age of 16: alphabetical list, chronological list 1848-1876, Box 17, OCC.

The separation between the Old Mansion House and Wooden Children's House can also be read as revealing an underlying discomfort with children. As mentioned in the previous chapter, John Humphrey Noyes prohibited procreation while at Oneida. Prohibiting members from procreating might be seen as an attempt to rid the community of all children. On the other hand, families with children were more than welcome into the community and effort was put into the care of children. Building an entire house just for the children is a bold undertaking for any group of people, and does show a respect for the care and nurturing of children. At the same time, however, the Wooden Children's House was islanded from adults, and whatever connection existed between adults and children was to be hidden away (Figure 5). Outsiders to the community would not only see a group of people who cared enough about their children to build an entire house for them, but also a group of people who were unsure as to where children belonged in their experimental religion and social order.

While the Children's Department may have seen benefits in putting all the children together and encouraging them to learn from one another at first, John Humphrey Noyes soon became concerned that the children of Oneida were becoming too close to each other, which went against the community's stance against affection, and the authority of the adults was not being respected. Noyes had high expectations for the children of the community, but he did see them as different from the adults. "Children can be modest, if they cannot reason,"

Noyes wrote in 1850, "it is a trait that belongs to their condition, and renders them beautiful and attractive to their superiors."¹⁹ Noyes didn't expect children to understand "all the movements of the Association" simply because their minds were not "enlarged" enough to comprehend the complicated religious and social ideas the adults were trying to achieve.²⁰ Wanting the community to come together as one, the difference between children and adults posed a problem for Noyes. But this didn't mean that Noyes wanted the children to understand the world of the adults. "How can two persons be at peace with each other when one is a great deal wiser than the other?" Noyes asked himself. Children, being inferior, could not possibly understand everything about adults, just as Noyes, being merely human, could not understand everything about God. In the end, Noyes settled for basic obedience. "What I want in the children," he expressed, "is to settle it in their hearts that I am a man of God, and that I am right whether they understand it or not."²¹ This submission to Noyes's authority would give the adults the "strength to prevail" should the children cause problems for the community, which they did from the very beginning.²²

Noyes's tensions with the children of the Oneida Community didn't come from out of nowhere. For several months, the children had been causing

¹⁹ Noyes, John Humphry. "The Campaign Among Children, November 24, 1850," Box 2, Folder: G. W. Noyes Papers, 1848-1852, OCC.

²⁰ Noyes, J. H. "The Campaign Among Children, November 24, 1850," OCC.

²¹ Noyes, J. H. "The Campaign Among Children, November 24, 1850," OCC.

²² Noyes, J. H. "The Campaign Among Children, November 24, 1850," OCC.

problems (rowdy behavior and not listening to adults) in the community, and the adults were becoming frustrated. Perhaps because of its uniqueness, Oneida attracted a wide variety of people, and records show that on occasion Noyes and community leadership would take issue with some members' behaviors.

Dealing with the transgressions of adults was easy for the most part. When Emma Woolworth first came to Oneida, she did so reluctantly. As part of the original group at Putney, Emma is documented as being cruel and insensitive. Her mother and sister were members of Oneida and one of the charges brought against her by Noyes was her "cruel" treatment of her family and her "disrespect and ingratitude" toward Noyes.²³ Emma left the community several times only to repeatedly return. Correspondences between Noyes and other community members show that they were not fond of Emma Woolworth, but for the sake of her husband and newborn child they allowed her to remain at Oneida, though she slept separately from the rest of the community in a private room, one of the few recorded instances of this. Separating adults from the rest of the community became a common punishment in Oneida, and in the case of Emma Woolworth, it worked since she gave herself fully over to Noyes and the community by 1852.

The transgressions of children were an entirely different matter for Noyes. It was not uncommon for children to be brought before the community of adults

²³ Noyes's Charges Against Emma Woolworth, Box 2, Folder: G. W. Noyes Papers, 1848-1852, OCC.

and publicly chastised for their behavior and if the community deemed it necessary, physically punished. One September 4, 1850, three young boys were brought over from the Wooden Children's House and questioned about their "lying, thievish, and insubordinate spirit."²⁴ Moving the boys out of the Wooden Children's House suggests that the community preferred to punish children in the Old Mansion House instead of the children's home, which shows a major difference in the two places in Oneida. By not punishing children in the Wooden Children's House, the community conveyed to the children that Old Mansion House was the place of authority, the place where rules and repercussions came from. The boys argued with the adults, and when two of them refused to apologize for their behavior, the community decided corporeal punishment was necessary.

What the adults did learn from this session is that these boys were not alone in causing mischief, and that their behavior stemmed from the influence of one adult in the community, Francis Hyde. Hyde came to the community sometime between 1849 and 1850 and Noyes would later write that Hyde was only interested in "dancing, gossiping, external labor, flirtation, sexual intercourse, eating, and drinking."²⁵ Finding the adults of the community

²⁴ Francis Hyde Case: September - December, 1850, Box 2, Folder: G. W. Noyes Papers, 1848-1852, OCC.

²⁵ Francis Hyde Case: September - December, 1850, Box 2, Folder: G. W. Noyes Papers, 1848-1852, OCC. Hyde is not mentioned in the Oneida family registry and he has no biography in any of the family records. The only mention of him is in the papers of George W. Noyes and brief allusions to his behavior during the Mills affair discussed later in this chapter. His age is unknown.

intolerable, Hyde spent time with the older boys of the Wooden Children's House, encouraging them to drink and dance and cause a scene.²⁶ Hyde was excommunicated from Oneida by the end of 1850, but this decision was only reached after the adults of Oneida understood the profound influence Hyde had over the children in the Wooden Children's House.

On September 7, 1850, a meeting was held in the Wooden Children's House because the boys who had been punished the previous day were continuing to act out, drinking and smoking. The adults found the punishments had not humbled the children, and they seemed at a loss with how to handle the deviant behavior. By all accounts, Hyde was a transgressive figure in the Oneida Community, but he was also a scapegoat for deeper concerns. As community adults tried to punish the boys, they began to uncover a major problem with leaving the children alone in their own house – peer culture, children turning to one another for guidance instead of the adults. At first the adults thought only three boys were misbehaving, but over several days they saw an increase in rowdy behavior among more and more boys. The original three boys were punished on September 5, the next day four more children were brought before the community and publicly punished. Eventually, the community found it necessary to send several young boys away for a few weeks to Oneida's branch

²⁶ There is some evidence to show that a similar issue occurred a few months before Hyde with a man named Otis Miller, but he is only referenced in sources and no detailed account has survived.

community in Brooklyn, New York in order to get them away from the influence of their peers.

After the dust settled on the Hyde Case, Noyes and the community failed to reevaluate the culture in the Old Mansion House; instead, Noyes used the Hyde case to warn the adults of the Oneida Community of the dangers of peer culture in the Wooden Children's House and to publically state his opinions on children in the community. "The children have been within the family circle," Noyes writes, "yet not to any great extent under the community spirit."²⁷ Noyes's concern is that the children were being influenced more by their peers than the adults. This "horizontal fellowship," as Noyes referred to it went against community ideals and practices. So in 1850, Noyes introduced the beginnings of what would become known as Ascending Fellowship, a practice that would call on the adults of the community to work with the children and guide them into adulthood. The purpose of Ascending Fellowship at first was to keep children from relying too much on each other and to reduce peer culture in the community. Essentially, Ascending Fellowship institutionalized adult authority over children.

In the fall of 1861, plans for the New Mansion House were announced in the *Circular* (Figure 6). Having learned that their space shaped the practice of their beliefs, the community used the discussion of building a new house as a

²⁷Noyes, J. H. "The Campaign Among Children, November 24, 1850," OCC.

way to attempt to identify their own “community architecture” or “a style of building which shall be adapted to the character of our institution, and which shall represent in some degree the spirit by which we are actuated.”²⁸ Seeing space as a means through which to practice their beliefs, the community debated the best type of space necessary to fully live the communal life they wanted. Some wanted to abandon the traditional rectangular house in favor of something more circular or octagonal, while others looked to hotels, with their small rooms and social spaces, as a model for communal living. In the end though, the New Mansion House retained much of the same structure from the Old Mansion House, just bigger and more expensive. There were meeting places for activities, housekeeping facilities, children were housed separately from adults, and sleeping rooms opened into larger social spaces. The one major change to the house was with the sleeping rooms (Figure 2). Rather than separate rooms for couples, the New Mansion House had dorms for single women and men, which meant that everyone slept alone in a small bedroom. Gone was the Tent Room, but in its place was a dormitory style sleeping arrangement that provided privacy, but also prevented married couples who entered the community from rooming together. The one major change made to the space of the New Mansion House was a physical reflection of the success of Complex Marriage, but also of the growing necessity for privacy in communal living. With separate, private

²⁸ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). September 24, 1861.

rooms, members were no longer obligated to socialize. Socializing with the community was a choice after the completion of the New Mansion House and with multiple “sitting-rooms” throughout the house, community members often formed cliques.²⁹

Despite changes made to the New Mansion House, the Wooden Children’s House remained intact until the late 1860s. This meant that even as the spaces of the adults were changing to reflect the community’s growing comfort with Complex Marriage and communal living, the spaces for children remained the same. Still islanded from the world of the adults, the Oneida children were not technically a part of the community. They may have been raised by the community as a whole, but they were not a part of Oneida’s foundational elements and practices. Also, by 1860, the number of children under the age of sixteen had grown, and many of the first group of children brought into the community were adolescents or older. It also was a significant year for education at Oneida, not surprising considering education and the building of schools would become an important undertaking for the community. Having learned from the troubles and tensions of the Hyde case, the Oneida Community set out to create a systematized approach to caring for and educating children. And this was done by building new spaces for children, spaces that would become places of influence, places that would reinforce the

²⁹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). January 18, 1869.

growing sense within the community that children needed to be guided into the ways of the community and help them move into their place within the community proper.

A Place of Influence: Schools and Educational Spaces in the Oneida Community

From the earliest years in Oneida, building schools and spaces for education was an important initiative. In 1853, a visitor to the Oneida Community observed that the “enthusiasm for study [. . .] prevailed” at Oneida and that many of the members spent a great deal of time reading and learning about new things. Despite obligations to work and keep the community running, some members freely chose to spend their time studying.³⁰ By 1855, evening classes were offered on several subjects.³¹ Several years later, however, the need to keep the community house running and food on the table became so much more important than reading and studying, that John Humphrey Noyes publicly announced that leisure activities, mainly reading, was only to be done if all work had been completed for the day.³² According to Noyes, concentrated learning was best for everyone as it would not only free up members to complete

³⁰ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). October 19, 1853.

³¹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). October 4, 1855.

³² *Circular* (Oneida, NY). April 14, 1859.

their work, but also enhance learning. This soft moratorium on learning was short lived.

Beginning in 1860, the community undertook a rather large experiment when twenty-six young men, were given half of each day to devote to systematic schooling.³³ The age of these “young men” isn’t clear from the records, they are mentioned as living in the Wooden Children’s House, so they had not yet entered into the community proper and more than likely would not have been more than fifteen-years-old. But these men were expected to study business and economics, no doubt in order to help the community expand their manufacturing enterprises. With a population of just two-hundred members, sparing twenty-six young men from work meant a fairly large shortage in the workforce. It also meant that these men had to go somewhere in order to study. With no schoolhouse or academy (the idea of building one was just beginning to be discussed), the men were offered “the use of the [Old Mansion House] parlor.”³⁴ The social space that was primarily used for gatherings and social events had now also become a space of learning and education. The young men were expected to behave themselves while using the parlor and “carefulness of the household rights and immunity.”³⁵ The use of the parlor to educate the children is one of the very few times in Oneida history when the line between the adult

³³ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). November 22, 1860.

³⁴ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). November 22, 1860.

³⁵ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). November 22, 1860.

space and the children's space blurred.³⁶ This blurring of spaces is a significant milestone in the history of children's spaces at Oneida. With the parlor acting as a classroom, the adults had begun accepting the presence of children within their space. Children were not prohibited from the Old Mansion House, but there is no record to indicate that they were allowed to use any of the space intended for adults as their own.

But the use of the parlor as a shared space was short-lived as by the Autumn of 1861, a wide variety of classes were being offered to most members, and children were being educated in the original Wooden Children's House. One pressing issue, however, was the need for a separate space for older and adult students. The adults didn't see a need for another schoolhouse, but instead deserved a well-planned and designed university created for the adult learners in the community.³⁷ Again, the issue of building separate spaces for children and adults arose. One school was not enough for everyone. Adults needed a different kind of space, one that was separate from children, who would presumably not even be allowed to use it.

Along with major changes to the physical spaces of learning at Oneida, there were also pedagogical changes. Children under the age of six were to be kept in the nursery and tended to by the adults. Children between six and

³⁶ Because of the practice of Ascending Fellowship, in which adolescents are sexually initiated into the Community by an older member, residents of the Children's House could sometimes be as old as 16.

³⁷ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). September 4, 1862.

twelve years old were to be in school to learn reading, writing, spelling, obedience, manners, and prayer. Adolescents (between twelve and twenty) were to attend a school under a system of professorships which covered a fairly wide curriculum. These students were then expected to graduate and continue on in a professorship position for the next generation.³⁸ Like all plans at Oneida, the system was elaborate and forward-thinking. With the desire to create a private university, the community was putting into place an educational system that would circulate members back into the community. The design also reflected the community's Ascending Fellowship philosophy. Older members were positioned in places of power and dominance, expected to educate and initiate younger members. Education in Oneida was just another initiation process, like the sexual education of Ascending Fellowship. More importantly though, the new system further divided the community by age and even so far as to separate the older children from the young ones.

Shortly after initiating the new education system in the community, adult members became concerned over schooling young people in large groups. By April of 1864, schooling grew "less in favor with the community, only as they may be limited to small children."³⁹ The community preferred education in the "family sphere" so that individual students could receive attention from some

³⁸ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). September 4, 1862.

³⁹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). April 11, 1864.

“superior associate of private tutor.”⁴⁰ The concern over the education of children wasn’t just about the quality of education, it was spatial. The community was beginning to see that older children, starting at about the age of ten, begin to resist authority and not see their elders as figures to look up to. Instead, these children were susceptible to “atmospheric influences” and it was becoming harder for teachers to counteract the “aggression of the schoolers.”⁴¹ In other words, the children were forming bonds with their peers and peer influence was a problem in the schoolhouse as the “horizontal attraction prevails over the ascending,”⁴² Children were not looking *up* to adults as they were expected, but were instead looking *side-to-side* at their peers. The place of influence was shifting within the community. The adults of Oneida intended the schoolhouse to be a place where children could learn from those more experienced. But putting large groups of children together in one place resulted in peer influence usurping that of adults. Combine this with the fact that the children would leave school only to spend their evenings in a house with mainly their peers to keep them company and influence them, it’s not surprising to see how such strong peer bonds formed among the children.

At least for a short while, the schoolhouse was not the primary place of education at Oneida:

⁴⁰ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). April 11, 1864.

⁴¹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). April 11, 1864.

⁴² *Circular* (Oneida, NY). April 11, 1864.

Let [the children] not pack in schools, but be retained in the family circle, and if in the circle there is a lively taste for knowledge, they will get their education by contagious enthusiasm. Where the family is a school, as it is in the community, young folks need not be separate class; and this is a great advantage.⁴³

While significant enough to be published in the *Circular*, the situation with the children and school eventually resolved itself because by November of 1864 the older children were again put into classes with their peers.⁴⁴ Despite the possibility of children being heavily influenced by their peers, the Oneida adults were more comfortable with children being educated away from the majority of adults.

Throughout the rest of the 1860s, the community moved forward with their educational projects. Children received a liberal education that included mathematics, various sciences, art, music, and literature along with lessons in Greek and Hebrew, the Bible and the *Berean*, a collection of John Humphrey Noyes's writings that is often characterized as the Bible of the Oneida Community.⁴⁵

Another space that created a complicated relationship between children and adults was the Oneida Community Library. The Oneida Community valued literacy and actively encouraged its members to read widely. The community's *Circular* was often filled with articles about good reading habits (often reprints

⁴³ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). April 11, 1864.

⁴⁴ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). November 14, 1864.

⁴⁵ Constance Humphrey Robertson. *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1854-1876*. (Syracuse: Syracuse U Press, 1970), 175.

from other periodicals) and updates as to what members were reading. During each decade of the existence of the community, Oneida members read widely and voraciously. In one 1873 *Circular* article, members were encouraged to read whenever a free moment was available and reminded that “the brain is quickened and our toil lightened” even after just a few moments of reading anything.⁴⁶ For the Oneida Community, it was “the habit of reading rather than the time at our command that helps us on our road to learning.”⁴⁷

The Mansion House library was one of the most treasured rooms in the entire house. With its wall-to-wall bookshelves, glass-door cupboards, and large windows that overlooked the Oneida property, the Mansion House library was more elaborate than what the community had in its early years. In the earliest formation of the community dwellings, the library was simply a “large bookcase, (made of butternut)” on one wall of the sitting room.⁴⁸ The 1850 Second Annual Report of the Oneida Community details a slightly more elaborate set-up:

A Library has lately been fitted up in the parlor of the mansion house, of about 700 volumes. There is a growing appreciation of Music in the Association; and our facilities for its cultivation are valued highly. We see however a sacredness in the soul of this art, which indisposes us to trifle with or prostitute it to the spirit of mere sensual amusement. It is the fitting expression and complement of all the inward harmonies.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). August 8, 1873. 10.

⁴⁷ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). August 8, 1873. 10.

⁴⁸ Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 13.

⁴⁹ *Second Annual Report of the Oneida Community*. (Oneida: Leonard and Company, 1850),

By 1869, the Mansion House library held over 4,500 volumes, excluding schoolbooks. The library was continuously expanding due to new members donating all their books along with magazine subscriptions and new book purchases when the community saw a need. What was once a collection of “much light reading” had, over the years, expanded into an impressive collection of books on all kinds of topics, including philosophy, botany, astronomy, and religion. In the early 1860s, some members saw the library as being “defective” (most likely due to the large amount of fiction) and the library holdings saw a turn away from fiction towards science materials and nonfiction books.⁵⁰ As one community member observed the library was the community’s “tool” and reflected the unique needs to the utopian society where “there are no professional students among us — no book-worms. We are all practical men and women; the library is our tool. We try to keep close to God and realities: the signs of things are secondary.”⁵¹

By the time the Oneida Community began the Stirpiculture experiment in 1869, they had built a seminary for both children and adults. With new, shiny desks that were fastened to the floor and eight big windows that made the building “light [and] airy,” the new education space was popular with the children of the community.⁵² Communal rooms in the Mansion House were still

⁵⁰ Details of the library’s holdings until 1869: “Our Books” *Circular* (Oneida, NY). 1869.

⁵¹ “Our Books” *Circular* (Oneida, NY). 1869.

⁵² *Circular* (Oneida, NY). October 2, 1869.

used for occasional classes, but for the most part the education of children took place in the separate seminary building across the street from the New Mansion House. The late-1860s also saw a significant shift in the relationship between the community and children. Many factors contributed to this shift, but I would argue that one incident in particular caused such upheaval that Noyes expanded Ascending Fellowship to include sexual intercourse.

The Mills Affair: Young Girls Moving into Place and the Turn in Ascending Fellowship.

William Mills was born in 1812 and entered the community on February 28, 1857 with his wife, Grace, two daughters, Ellen and Grace, and three sons, William Jr., Thomas and Charles. From the very beginning, the Mills family caused trouble and anxiety for John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community. Prior to arriving, Mrs. Mills had obtained a legal separation from her husband, citing to the court that she feared for her own safety and that of her children.⁵³ Years later, her children would recall that their father was an abuser and on many occasions had physically harmed their mother.⁵⁴ Originally, the family was welcomed into the community fully. William arrived in February with William Jr. and Thomas; his wife, Grace, came with the two daughters and youngest son several months later in May. Mills seceded from the community

⁵³ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Nov. 14, 1864.

⁵⁴ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Dec. 19, 1864.

on April 11, 1859 only to return in November and be voted out on November 8, 1864. To the members of the Oneida Community, William Mills was a “parasite.”⁵⁵

The time between Mills’s initial departure from the community and his return in 1859 would foreshadow the kind of trouble he would create for the community. When William Mills left the community he demanded to have all of his money, with interest, returned to him.⁵⁶ After threatening to seek a lawyer and sue the community, Mills was given his money with interest and returned “to the west” where he attempted to form his own community with adventurer Andrew Rickels.⁵⁷ After a series of fights about which man would lead the new community, Mills sued Rickels, only to lose. Unable, or unwilling, to pay, Mills fled back east without paying either Rickels or his lawyer. During this time his former wife and children remained peacefully at Oneida.

When Mills returned to Oneida on November 18, 1859, he protested to the community to be allowed back in through a series of letters in which he admitted he was wrong and fully disclosed his troubles out west. But Noyes and community leaders were hesitant to allow Mills back in. One of the main reasons for the community’s resistance had nothing to do with the money, but was more

⁵⁵ While Mills’s name is used in some records, the Circular often refers to him as a “parasite.” In 1864 an entire series of articles devoted to the Mills battle was titled “The Parasite” and even into the 1870s, references to “the parasite” can be found in the Circular.

⁵⁶ It was Community practice upon entering to turn over all money and material objects to the Community.

⁵⁷ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Dec. 5, 1864.

about Mill's behavior with the women, and young girls, during his stay. Mills would make advances on nearly every woman, and after being rejected time and again he would plead to the community as a whole to force the women to engage in sexual activity with him. The community allowed him to live with them, but "on probation" and not as a member of the family, which came with several restrictions, the most important being that Mills could not participate in sexual activity.⁵⁸

At this point in the story of the Mills's affair, it's necessary to stop and consider the significance of this distinction. Mills was never admitted to the community again, and therefore could not engage in relations with the women. Sexual activity was exclusive to "family," and Mills being a long-term guest at Oneida was not family.⁵⁹ Even by the 1860s, the Oneida Community was still centering its conception of family around sexual activity between adults. While Noyes's writings often mentioned that the sexual freedom of Complex Marriage did not extend to other people outside the community, the restrictions placed on Mills show the levels of boundaries and borders the community was beginning to build around its members and practices. Mills was allowed to live in the Mansion House and worked various jobs around the community. The ability to segregate Mills from the rest of the community was only possible because of the design of the Mansion House. The openness of the Old Mansion House, with its

⁵⁸ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Nov. 14, 1864.

⁵⁹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Nov. 14, 1864.

Tent Room and dormitories, would have made it nearly impossible for women to avoid Mills and for the community to feel safe. But with the new single-occupancy rooms of the new Mansion House, the community was not only able to close Mills off from others, but the women of the community were able to feel more comfortable knowing that they had a place to go where they could shut Mills out.

This all might seem extreme, but by the records left from the Oneida Community, Mills was a sexual predator and while women had much to fear from him, the greatest threat he posed to community was to the older girls of the Children's House. During his first stay at Oneida, Mills made unwanted advances on women, and according to Noyes, Mills wasn't just angry that a woman would refuse to sleep with him but also "because he could not make the community compel her to do so."⁶⁰ Mills was a predator who wanted to use the community, in particular its unique sexual practices, to force himself on women. As Complex Marriage became more systematic and routine, the women of the community gained a lot of power over their bodies. One of the guidelines of Complex Marriage was that women had final say in sexual activity, and if a woman said no that decision was final.

Over the five years between his return and second exile, Mills often threatened to sue the community if they would not give him complete access to

⁶⁰ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Nov. 14, 1864.

women. Between 1864 and 1865, the community *Circular* was filled with large and small accounts of the ongoing battle between the community and William Mills. Much of these were about the numerous lawsuits threatened by Mills against Noyes and the community, but as the battle went on, a darker picture emerged, one of a man who tried to use the understanding that the young women would eventually move into the place of the community to his advantage. Mills saw the Oneida Mansion House as a place where he was free to have sex with any woman he wanted, with no rules or restrictions. Noyes and the leadership made it clear that the community, and the Mansion House, was not such a place. When Mills could not fulfill his needs with the women of the community, he decided to look elsewhere, specifically to the Children's House.

In 1865, John Humphrey Noyes wrote a lengthy article for the *Circular* detailing Mills's "special dealings with young girls."⁶¹ Noyes reminds the community of Mills's constant advances on women and recounts the few instances when Mills became so frustrated with the Oneida Community that he would go so far as to accuse the community of abusing children. But Noyes reminds his readers that Mills "himself has had more personal familiarity with the class of girls in the community that are just now passing the period of puberty, than any other man." Mills's "'holy horror' at the dealings of the community with the young," as Noyes puts it, is most likely in reference to the

⁶¹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

Oneida Community's practice of Ascending Fellowship, which at times did include sexually initiating adolescents into the community.⁶² Noyes's language throughout this article is interesting. Noyes's accusations against Mills doesn't cast Mills as the only man to have shown interest in the younger females of the community. Mills "has had *more* personal familiarity [. . .] *than* any other man."⁶³ The implication in Noyes's words is that Mills isn't the *only* man to have personal familiarity with young women, he's just had *more* than any other man in the community.

By the 1860s, the Oneida Community was facing the challenge of figuring out what to do with younger community members who had reached sexual maturity. No longer children, these young men and women needed to be brought over into the adult spaces of the house, into the community proper. Children who were once out-of-place in the Mansion House now needed be put in their new place. This challenge was more than just moving someone from one room to another; this wasn't an issue of space. This was an issue of meaning and belonging. If Mills's probation illustrates anything it's that belonging in the Oneida Community means engaging in Complex Marriage, means having multiple sexual partners. Ascending Fellowship, which becomes a larger issue in the final years of the community, involves young men and women engaging in sexual intercourse with community adults chosen by the Oneida leadership. The

⁶² *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

⁶³ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865. Emphasis added.

idea was that sexually mature adults would be able to guide the young into Complex Marriage. There is evidence that some members were already engaging in the practice and even in this article Noyes admits that “*most* of these girls were in untouched maidenhood.”⁶⁴ Not all, but “most.”

The concern over Mills’s actions aren’t about what he did, but the degree and manner in which he did it. Unsurprisingly, sex was not a taboo topic at Oneida, and children were taught about the pleasures of sex through the teachings of Bible Communism. Mills wasn’t concerned with Bible Communism or the philosophical and theological teachings of the community. When he used his job in the dishwashing room to “‘pop the question’ or make love to a girl who served with him” he wasn’t following the community protocol about sexual activity.⁶⁵ Adults knew that there were rules to establishing and maintaining a sexual relationship at Oneida, and Mills had for years found himself unable to get around them. The young women still living in the Children’s House were unaware of these rules and protocols. Being out-of-place means that one is also ignorant of the norms and culture of the place one doesn’t belong. Mills used this ignorance to proposition the young women of the community.

But Mills’s activities in the dishwashing room weren’t the worst. Grace, Mills’s youngest daughter, was fourteen years old, and according to Noyes “[Mills] assumed control of her and required her to frequent his room,” which

⁶⁴ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁵ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

was located in a “rather secluded wing of an unimportant building [that] favored privacy.”⁶⁶ Grace would later state that she did not like her father, and childhood friends would recall that she always seemed uncomfortable around her father and avoided being alone with him. Because of this, Grace often brought friends with her when she visited her father’s room. Over several months in the summer of 1863, “Mills had daily meetings with ten or twelve girls, of ages varying from 11 to 14, *with locked doors*.”⁶⁷ The Community obviously placed Mills far away from the adults in order to discourage him from interacting with the women of the community. But the location of his room provided more privacy than usual. Also clear in Noyes’s remarks is that community members were not in the habit of locking the doors to their private dorm rooms. Mills’s meetings with the young girls are scandalous, but so is the way he violated the spaces of the Oneida Community. His secluded room was meant to keep him away from the women, but he used it to carry on secret meetings, something the community frowned upon regardless of age. And while all community members were afforded a certain level of privacy with their individual rooms, locking a door meant that something was being hidden from the community.

In summarizing the testimonies of the girls, community member Harriet Skinner writes, “They first began to go there because Grace wanted they should

⁶⁶ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

⁶⁷ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865. Emphasis in original.

go with here [. . .] they despised Mr. Mills but at the same time there was a fascination about his room.”⁶⁸ Mills kept all kinds of fruits and confections in his room. The girls were always treated to something be it apples, pears, sugar-plums, or candies. And the girls were also given Mills’s homemade wine, which one girl described as “not [seeming] clean.”⁶⁹ Along with sweets and wine, the girls were often given gifts of cologne and beads. Skinner continues:

“Whenever two or three were there he would always *lock the door*. Many times he *pushed them onto the bed*, and then they would have to scramble *over him* to get off. He would tease them to kiss him and promise them candy if they would. He asked them to kiss him at other times and in other places besides his room—several of the girls said he had teased them to kiss him “*lots of times*.”⁷⁰

Another one of Mills’s favorite “games” was to list through all the women of the community he loved and ask the girls what information they knew about these women. He would also ask the girls detailed questions about their potential relationships with other men in Oneida. Mills was in the habit of telling the girls how neat he was, that he changed his shirt six times a week, and that his bed was clean.⁷¹

There is a lot of comparisons between the Mills affair and the Hyde Case from 1850. Reflecting on these incidents, Noyes would write, “Though he did not accomplish his purpose of literally seducing them, he filled the girls with his

⁶⁸ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

⁷⁰ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865. Emphasis in original.

⁷¹ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

own spirit, and stamped them with his image, and sent them abroad in the community as missionaries of the same anarchy that rent (sic) and ruined his own family.”⁷² Both involved men who inappropriately stepped over into the children’s place. While adults were welcome into the Wooden Children’s House, there were clearly expectations for appropriate behavior, and Hyde and Mills’s behavior was decidedly out-of-place and did not belong around the children. Unlike Hyde, Mills took this further and brought the children over into the Mansion House and into his private room. Ascending Fellowship, which was meant to encourage adults to help guide children into the religious and social practices of the community was twisted by Mills. Noyes would write, “We see in view of the preceding disclosures that the devil and his agents are wide awake from getting possession of the young.”⁷³ Like with the Hyde case, the underlying issue with Mills was that his out-of-place behavior would move through the community of children through peer interaction. “The earliest puberty,” Noyes continues, “is undoubtedly [the devil and his agents] favorite seed-time, and amative manipulations the means by which they baptize their victims into the spirit of universal depravity.”⁷⁴ If Mills is the devil, then the young girls he brought over into the Mansion House could be read as his agents. Noyes shows a lot of sympathy for the young girls – they were clearly taken

⁷² *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

⁷³ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

⁷⁴ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

advantage of – but at the same time he also views them as potential threats to the community. The implication here could be that while in Mills’s room, the girls gained knowledge the community did not yet want them to know, and when they returned back to the Wooden Children’s House, they could have potentially spread this knowledge to other children.

For most of its first twenty years, the Oneida Community tried to influence children through schooling. The built environments which children moved through were designed to not only teach them about the practices of Oneida, but also to keep them sheltered from certain realities of Mansion House. The response to the Hyde incident was to establish Ascending Fellowship as a way to keep children from becoming too peer-oriented, and this led to innovative initiatives in schooling that would serve the whole of the community and expand the physical world of children. So what to do after the damage of William Mills? No major changes in the physical world of Oneida occurred right after the Mills affair – the community was too deep into school and factory building – but Noyes did reconsider the purpose of Ascending Fellowship, a move that would make many members uncomfortable, especially when Oneida began their involved and systematic experiment to breed spiritually perfect children in 1869. This change is best understood in Noyes’s own words:

“We have no doubt that the final law for the social education of the young of both sexes will be discovered to be, *to give them the means*

*of wholesome and improving sexual experience AS EARLY as they are capable of and liable to perverting and licentious excitements."*⁷⁵

What Noyes learned from the Mills's incident was that the longer you keep children and youth out of the community, the more susceptible to abuse they become. The young girls that Mills lured to his room were reaching an age where they would need to leave behind the Wooden Children's House and enter the Mansion House. At the time Mills was a member, the community hadn't thought through how this transition would happen. The Oneida Mansion House was an adult space, a place where Complex Marriage and Male Continence were practiced freely and openly. Noyes's solution wasn't to discourage sexual activity between the adults in the Mansion House and the adolescence in the Wooden Children's House. In Noyes's mind, the community could better protect their children by extending Ascending Fellowship practices to include sexual initiation.

⁷⁵ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). Jan. 23, 1865.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHILDREN AT THE CENTER: Stirpiculture and the Collapse of Oneida

Throughout the 1870s, Noyes and his followers undertook a decade long experiment to see if it was possible to produce spiritually perfect children. Noyes proposed a plan to the community: the ban on procreation would be lifted for certain couples who were deemed physically and spiritually healthy enough to produce a child worthy of the Oneida Community. Noyes would term this experiment "Stirpiculture." Decisions as to who could participate in the experiment were left to an informal committee of "central members."¹ Those interested in participating applied to the committee, who then made their decisions based on a set of unknown criteria. Over ten years, 81 men and women produced 58 children, only two of whom died in infancy. The experiment was a major undertaking, and from the very beginning marked a significant shift in children's place within Oneida. Whereas children were always kept at a distance from adults, at first completely out-of-place then as a kind of member in waiting, the Stirpiculture experiment placed children at the center of the Oneida story during its final decade.

¹ Hilda Noyes. "The Oneida Community Experiment in Stirpiculture." *Biodemography and Social Biology* 14, no.4 (1967), 285.

By 1868, the Oneida Community found themselves in a unique position: after over twenty years of struggling, the community was relatively stable. Complex Marriage was working smoothly and successfully, and by all records from this time period, members enjoyed the system and found it liberating. Male Continence was also a success and the community averaged one birth a year, an accomplishment considering the membership at Oneida had grown to over 250 adults by the late 1860s. This growth in membership is also important. The community was no longer relying on a small group of couples to work in the house and Oneida's growing businesses; now with so many members, the community was able to distribute the workload. This left Noyes and his small cabinet, a group comprised of those first few families that joined Noyes in Putney and later followed him to New York, free to think about new and innovative directions to take Oneida. Community members not in Noyes's intimate circle trusted their leadership and had confidence in Noyes and faith in Noyes's decision-making, and leadership was at an all-time high. For the most part, Noyes and the Oneida Community had worked out the problems in their social system, they had established order and procedure not just in the day-to-day, but in the larger theological issues.² In terms of dealing with children, Ascending Fellowship was proving to work with young members easily being initiated into the place of the adult world.

² See Noyes, H. "The Oneida Community Experiment in Stirpiculture."

Such stability would leave Noyes to think about the future of the community, specifically about how to grow in numbers without constantly being at the whim of outsiders coming into Oneida. If there was anything to learn from the past twenty years, it was that the Oneida Community was a place that could attract unsavory characters, and its social system, no matter how strong it appeared, was fragile given the right conditions. Noyes had been thinking about population for several decades, and by the late 1840s was beginning to entertain the idea of breeding humans with certain attributes. “The time will come,” wrote John Humphrey Noyes in 1848, “when scientific combination will be applied to human generation as freely and successfully as it is to that of other animals.”³

This chapter looks at how the Stirpiculture experiment shaped the Oneida Community, arguing that the experiment placed children at the center of the community, a place that would create tensions within the community and eventually lead to the breakup in 1880. This drastic shift in the place of children would ultimately disrupt the community. The rigid restrictions and policies of the community would take away a lot of the freedom women had in Oneida and force some adults to rethink Complex Marriage. The increase in children would also result in a massive expansion of the Mansion House, which would put children closer to the adults, further creating tensions and turmoil. Ultimately, the experiment would lead to a sharp divide between the generations living at

³ Noyes, J. H.. *Bible Communism*. 52.

Oneida. Children raised in the second generation, those who grew up in the Wooden Mansion House, would become the adults participating in Stirpiculture. These generational tensions would eventually lead to the collapse of Oneida.

Disrupting the Relations Between the Sexes: Stirpiculture and Children at the Center of Oneida

The Stirpiculture experiment was, to some degree, a way to control a growing desire for motherhood in the community by reclaiming control over the women who wanted children. By 1859, some women confessed a “keen appetite for having children.”⁴ Between 1859 and 1865 eleven children had been born in the community. In some cases, the pregnancy was a mistake, but in others community women admitted to intentionally getting pregnant.⁵ Motherhood, the community believed, was not the chief end of a women’s life since women were not made solely to bear children. Women, like men, were made for herself and for God. This had always been a part of Complex Marriage, with women assuming control over sexual activity, but it would not continue with the Stirpiculture experiment.

The main difference between Stirpiculture and Male Continence, which Lawrence Foster has argued, is Noyes controlling men’s bodies, is that when

⁴ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). 26 May, 1859.

⁵ Robertson, Constant Noyes. *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851-1876*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse U Press, 1970). 336.

men first entered Oneida they understood Male Continence and had agreed to it. Women and men entered the community knowing about Complex Marriage and Male Continence. If they had children, they also agreed to have them live separately and raised by the community. Stirpiculture asked them to adjust this agreement by putting more control of their bodies in the hands of Noyes and the central leadership of Oneida. During the first few years of the program, the decision as to who could have children was made entirely by Noyes himself, occasionally in consultation with his informal cabinet of community leaders, most of whom were men. By 1875 a Stirpiculture committee had been formed, consisting of six men and six women, but after six months Noyes assumed control of the process believing the committee too political to make such important decisions.⁶ No records exist that tell us why this committee didn't last, but it does show not only how important Stirpiculture had become to the community, but also the tension it was beginning to cause. Noyes, who at this point was obsessed with the experiment and the children born from it, couldn't trust any members to decide who should and should not have children.

The procedure for the Stirpiculture experiment didn't reflect the breakdown of the wall between the sexes that was so important to Noyes and the community. Stirpiculture came with a new rigid system of social control for the adults of the community. The procedure required that men and women apply to

⁶ Anita Newcomb McGee. "An Experiment in Human Stirpiculture." *American Anthropology* 4, no. (1891).

Noyes for permission to have a baby, though Anita Newcomb McGee has shown that in at least a quarter of the cases, members were “nominated” by community leadership.⁷ Once approved, the couple would have sexual relations only with each other until the woman become pregnant or the couple agreed, with approval from Noyes, to stop trying. Men often had multiple partners during the experiment; whereas women were not allowed to sleep with anyone other than their assigned partner. Whereas the social system before Stirpiculture opened up new possibilities for women but restricted men, Noyes’s strong desire to make children the center of Oneida allowed men more freedom with their bodies while greatly restricting options and choices for the women.

Stirpiculture allowed those women who wanted to have children the opportunity to do so, but it also required them to publicly give up control. Fifty-three women signed the initial Stirpiculture statement that declared “we do not belong to ourselves in any respect, but [. . .] belong first to God, and second to Mr. Noyes as God’s true representative.”⁸ Women would need to “put aside all envy, childishness, and self-seeking” and become “martyrs to science and cheerfully renounce all desire to become mothers, if for any reason Mr. Noyes deem it unfit.”⁹ This statement, which was signed by any woman interested in participating in the experiment, shows the early consequences and changes that

⁷ McGee, “An Experiment in Human Stirpiculture.”

⁸ Qtd. In Klaw, *Without Sin: Life and Death of the Oneida Community*, 204

⁹ Qtd. In Klaw, *Without Sin: Life and Death of the Oneida Community*, 204

occurred when the Community shifted the place of children from outside to the community to its center. As children become more important and assumed a central place in the community, women lost their autonomy.

Some early Oneida scholars, such as Victor Calverton and Mulford Sibley, have argued that Noyes was an early feminist and Oneida was a utopia for women while others have called Noyes a chauvinist who used women.¹⁰ As Lawrence Foster has pointed out, “both the interpretations of Noyes as liberator and as chauvinist fail because they take into account only a fragment of the evidence [. . .] and judge [him] from external perspectives that do not fully apply to his experiment.”¹¹ I would argue that Noyes began with some feminist ideas about the relation between the sexes, but once he became focused on children and placing children at the center of the community, the feminist ideas collapsed and women became underappreciated carriers for Noyes’s spiritually perfect children. One of the reasons scholars of Oneida have missed this shift is in part due to the lack of focus on children in the community in scholarship.

Stirpiculture not only affected the women in the community, but also encouraged deep, emotional attachments between two adults. Always one for theatrics, Noyes announced the chosen couples in a ceremony that ironically resembled a wedding. Charlotte Leonard, writing to her mother in 1873, described an announcement ceremony which was held in the big hall of the

¹⁰ See Foster. *Women, Family, and Utopia*.

¹¹ Foster. *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 93.

Mansion House. "The stage was cleared," Leonard wrote, "Edward Islee and Tirzah [Miller] walked to the front of the stage & kneeled together, their heads bowed, & having hold of hands."¹² Here the couple would pledge themselves to the Stirpiculture experiment, ask God to grant them a perfect child, and sing a hymn specially written for the occasion. The ceremony ended with Noyes's announcing that the child born to this couple would be a child of the community, then community members would line up to congratulate the couple and wish them luck as music played. All this was followed by a large feast for the entire community. This was new for the Oneida Community, which disapproved of anything that resembled a traditional marriage between a man and a woman, much less a wedding that would bond two people together. The ceremony bonded the couple together under the Stirpiculture experiment.

This bonding would also create unease in some adults who saw the Stirpiculture experiment as a way to justify growing attractions and attachments. For those Oneida adults who had fallen in love with another member, the Stirpiculture experiment provided them with an opportunity to be publicly bonded to one another. Community member Mary Jones wanted to have a child with Victor Hawley, a man she had secretly fallen in love with. The two applied together, which was allowed, but were denied. At the committee's insistence, Mary was taken to the Wallingford, Connecticut branch where she was officially

¹² 1873 May 12 to Fanny N. Leonard. Letter, Box 63, Folder: Leonard, Charlotte M. 1867-1888, undated, OCC.

paired with Theodore Noyes, John Humphrey Noyes's son. Returning to Oneida pregnant, Mary was cared for by Victor who expressed his unhappiness in his diary. "My God, My God," he wrote, "what has she been through as well as I? Will they tear the hearts out of both of us? When shall we ever be happy together again?"¹³ Despite receiving regular Mutual Criticism from the community over his attachment to Mary, Victor remained by her side throughout her pregnancy. When the baby was stillborn, the couple left the community and never returned. Their story illustrates the importance of children in the lives of the adults. For Mary and Victor, a child would have been a product of their affection for one another. The Stirpiculture experiment not only gave them the possible means to realize this affection publicly, but also made them closer than they had been.

For the Oneida Community, the introduction of Stirpiculture, and the resulting children, disrupted the social order of the community. In one of the first analytical studies of Oneida, Louis Kern argues that the collapse of Complex Marriage was inevitable from the beginning and women were always dissatisfied with their role in the community. "Many women," Kern argues, "especially younger women, were dissatisfied with the practice of Complex Marriage and Male Continence [and] clearly considered the sexual ideology of Oneida male oriented and male dominated."¹⁴ While this may be true, though

¹³ Diary of Victor Hawley, 1876-1877. Typescript, Box 47, OCC.

¹⁴ Kern, Louis, *An Ordered Love*, 269.

Kern's analysis doesn't include many personal records that show a surprising level of satisfaction among women in the first two decades, the 1870s saw more tensions than any other time in Oneida history. Just before the community's breakup in 1879, Frank Wayland Smith, one of John Humphrey Noyes's trusted advisors, reported to Noyes that "there is among the young women a powerful sentiment in favor of marriage pure and simple [. . .] a number of young women [. . .] do not hesitate to say that they will have no children except by a husband to whom they have been legally married."¹⁵ Smith's statement doesn't just show a general unhappiness with Complex Marriage, but also a desire to have children. Stirpiculture made children central to Oneida, and to the lives of community members. The women in Smith's letter are embracing the new child-centeredness of Oneida. They want to fulfill Noyes's vision, but the restrictions of Stirpiculture prevented many of them from doing so. All of this would eventually contribute to Oneida's collapse along with recreating the built environment for the children connecting it to the New Mansion House, which made children more a part of the main household than ever before.

Making More Rooms for Children: The New Children's House

The Stirpiculture experiment, and with it the growth of the child population at Oneida, not only disrupted the relationships between the adults,

¹⁵ Robertson, *Oneida Community: The Breakup*, 128-33.

but it also required rethinking the spaces of the community. With children now at the center of the community, a new living space was needed and in 1869, the community began work on a brand-new space for children. But instead of tearing down the old wooden house and rebuilding a newer one in its place, the community decided to connect the children's house to the main section of the new Mansion House. Essentially a wing of the main house, the new children's house was much larger and more elaborate than the previous one. While connected to the main structure of the Mansion House, the new children's house was conceived to be distinctive and look visually different from the main section of the Mansion House, with a separate entrance and a narrower, taller tower than the one found on the opposite side of the house.

Looking at the front of the main house from the east, the children's house clearly stands out from the rest of the building (Figure 8). Whereas the North wing of the Mansion House extends out from the main house and ends with a large, wide tower, the new children's house consists of the three sections: a connecting hallway, a main structure (that looks like a house itself) and a taller, narrower tower that doesn't sit towards the front of the building like its northern twin. From this perspective, the entire symmetry of the Mansion House is thrown off. Like the Stirpiculture excitement that necessitated a new house for children, the children's house upsets the simplicity and balance of the Mansion House.

As a visual symbol of the new community ideals about children, the children's house perfectly reflected the changing attitude towards children. Compared to the rest of the Mansion House, this children's house stands apart, and even draws attention to itself by not matching the rest of the structure. Even though the community had fully embraced the presence of children, even going so far as to connect their space to the main house, they still saw something distinct about the children of the community. Like the Stirpicults, the name given to the children born from the experiment, who would inhabit it, the new children's house was a part of the larger community, yet strangely separate, but not in the exact same way as with the Wooden Children's House. The ornateness of the children's house can be seen as a reflection of just how important children had become to the Oneida Community. The Mansion House is boxy and simple, a design that reflected function over form. The children's house is more playful and the interiors more complicated with more hallways and rooms.

The view from the south lawn reveals a completely different looking structure. Visually divorced from the main house, the children's house looks even more distinctive (Figure 7). Now the tower stands at the center of the house, and at the base of the tower is a large entrance. A long porch extends out from the house, presumably leading to the separate kitchen and dining buildings that sat behind the Mansion House. This looks like a separate house, unattached from the main center of the Mansion House. More than a house, though, the structure resembles a schoolhouse or academy. Nearly everything about the new

children's house is askew. It's connected, but doesn't match the main house, and as a separate structure, it stands somewhere between a sideways schoolhouse and a miniature Mansion House.

It was decided that a mansard-style roof would be used because it was more efficient and would allow the addition of third floor under the roof of the children's house. Also, a second floor was added to the smaller building located to the west of the house. As architectural historian Janet White points out, the "separately expressed mass of each of these pieces and the awkwardness of their connections in plan and elevation give the impression that the two or three story blocks were added at a later date."¹⁶ But this impression is wrong given an 1869 survey of the property that shows the footprint of the structure "already including these three sections."¹⁷

By the time the new wing was completed, only a third of the structure (eight large rooms, and sanitary facilities) were actually assigned to the children's department.¹⁸ White argues that because so little space is given to the children's department that the "so-called children's wing should therefore be considered as the third phase of construction of the adult residential

¹⁶ Janet White. "Designed for Perfection: Intersections between Architecture and Social Program at the Oneida Community." *Utopian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1996), 123.

¹⁷ White, "Designed for Perfection," 123. Original plans can be found in J. J. Skinner, *Buildings and Southern Grounds of the Oneida Community*. Survey Map, 1869, Map-Case 73, OCC

¹⁸ White, "Designed for Perfection," 124.

environment.”¹⁹ What White ignores though, is that by the time the new children’s wing was finished and dedicated on September 25, 1870 only a few children had been born under the Stirpiculture experiment.²⁰ At that point, the entire house was not needed, and so any unused space was given to other endeavors. Few records exist as to what rooms were used for what purposes in the children’s wing, but it is safe to assume that as the Stirpiculture experiment expanded (fifty-eight children by 1879), more space was needed for the children. To argue that the structure only served as a continuation of the adult space, ignores a major shift in community philosophy. As community records indicate, “the advent of Stirpiculture made this children’s wing very important.”²¹

Instead, I would argue that the children’s house/wing should be read as children’s space, particularly space that communicated to the Oneida children that they were important and central to the community. Doing so highlights a drastic shift in community philosophy and practices – a shift from a community that defined itself by its marriage structure to one that defined itself by its relationship to children. With the Stirpiculture experiment, the Oneida Community was no longer focused on the relationship between the sexes as much as the creation and care of children. This intense focus on children, however, would trap the Stirpicults, the Oneida children born out of the

¹⁹ White, “Designed for Perfection,” 124.

²⁰ Story of Mansion House, p. 4, Box 17, OCC.

²¹ Story of Mansion House, p. 4, Box 17, OCC.

experiment. Pierrepont Noyes would remember that the entirety of his childhood was spent within the walls of the children's house. "When we were very young," he wrote, "we knew little about the interior of our home beyond the children's wing."²² As he grew older Pierrepont was able to move throughout the house and even go beyond the children's wing.

Being a Stirpicult

So what was life like for the children born under the Stirpiculture experiment and raised in the children's house? Significantly, these children were even separated out from the other children in the community and given a distinct name and classification--Stirpicults. Again, very few records have survived from the children of the Oneida Community so it's difficult to understand exactly what life was like in the children's house. The Stirpiculture experiment did mean that adults needed to prepare themselves for more children, which meant that their childrearing practices needed to be clearly outlined. According to Noyes, children belonged to the entire community and women, in particular, were expected to understand that children were not produced for their own love and affection. At the onset of the experiment, the community emphasized the need to "communize the children [. . .] as completely as we have all other possessions."²³ Like money and material objects, children

²² Noyes, P., *My Father's House*, 38.

²³ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). 5 June, 1868.

were possessions that belonged to the community and to do this Noyes wanted to ensure that the childrearing practices and socialization process would be as standardized as possible.

Separating children from their parents didn't happen immediately, it worked in several stages. During the first year of life, children were primarily cared for by their mothers. At first mother and child would reside together in the mother's private room in the Mansion House, but after a few months the infant would be moved to the nursery part of the children's house with the mother allowed to see her child freely in order to nurse. Infants needed to nurse and mothers needed to be near their children for feeding. This process was done not just to wean the children from being dependent on their mothers, but also to discourage mothers from becoming too attached to their children. At the age of three, children were moved from the nursery into the communal sleeping quarters of the children's house, a move which marked the end to children and mothers being allowed time alone together. All of this was to avoid what Noyes called "philoprogenitiveness," the special love one has for one's own offspring.²⁴ Community member Alice Ackley, who participated in the Stirpiculture experiment, endorsed Noyes's vision of communal child-rearing when she wrote,

I now realize [. . .] that the old way of each mother caring for her own child, begets selfishness and idolatry [. . .] I appreciate the opportunity (community responsibility for child-rearing) affords

²⁴ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). October 5, 1868.

me of not only joining in public work, but of self improvement and 'going home' to god every day.²⁵

But recollections from the Stirpicults conflict with this happy image of a community fully embracing such radical childrearing practices. Pierrepont Noyes, son of John Humphrey Noyes and Harriet Worden, described weekly meetings with his mother, itself a sign that the community couldn't completely keep mother and child away from each other. These meetings made Pierrepont uncomfortable because they mainly involved his mother lavishing him with gifts and repeatedly asking, "Darling, do you love me?"²⁶ Their visits would end with Harriet acting aloof and dismissing Pierrepont harshly. Worden, who once wrote about the benefits of keeping the children away from the adults, was conflicted over having her son separated from her. For young Pierrepont, this was confusing. "I recognized," he recalled in his memoir, "that in my mother's heart were spiritual consecrations which often struggled with her love of me."²⁷ Pierrepont's memories show that life wasn't completely happy in the children's house and that the children were aware of the tensions and emotional turmoil their presence caused the adults.

Corinna Ackley Noyes, daughter of Victor Cragin and Alice Ackley, remembered a chance encounter with her mother during a two-week period of

²⁵ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). 23 June, 1873.

²⁶ Noyes, P., *My Father's House*, 65-67.

²⁷ Noyes, P., *My Father's House*, 67.

forced separation (common practice when it was believed mothers were becoming too attached to their children).

I caught a glimpse of her passing through a hallway near the Children's House and rushed after her, screaming. She knew--what I was too young to know--that if she stopped to talk with me another week might be added to our sentence. There was no time to explain. Hoping, I suppose, to escape, she stepped quickly into a nearby room. But I was as quick as she. I rushed after her, flung myself upon her, clutching her around the knees, crying and begging her not to leave me, until some Children's House mother, hearing the commotion, came and carried me away.²⁸

This “painful and lasting memory” is important for two reasons.²⁹ First, the conflict over one’s duty to the community and one’s love for a child is apparent in that Alice Ackley could endorse Noyes’s vision but still feel a special love for her child, a love so strong it caused a fair amount of tension in the community according to Corinna. Second, it showcases the importance of spaces and boundaries in establishing places that adults and children did and did not belong. Alice is walking near the children’s house, not inside it and tried to use a private room to escape from her daughter. By stepping out of the children’s house, Corinna makes a transgression, which causes her to be pulled away from her mother and back into her proper place. Having the children’s house directly connected to the main household blurs the line between where children do and do not belong, what is their place in the community.

²⁸ Noyes, C. A., *Days of My Youth*, 16.

²⁹ Noyes, C. A., *Days of My Youth*, 16

This closeness did mean that the Stirpicults received a lot of attention from the adults of the community. With the Wooden Mansion House, adults rotated who would be in charge on any given day. With the new children's house, multiple adults were placed throughout the spaces to ensure that children were cared for. In 1871, the Oneida Community's daily newspaper, the *Circular*, reminded community members that "those who keep the Children's House have it for their care to make the children good, to mold their habits, to know where they are, and go in and out with them."³⁰ Stirpiculture not only restricted the women of the community, but it also created a childrearing culture that was more concerned with surveillancing children than nurturing them.

Children's lives were kept to a strict routine.³¹ After waking up at seven-o'clock in the morning, the children would take a bath and eat a breakfast of oats and fruit. If time allowed they could play, but there were expected to work all through the morning until lunch. Work for the children consisted of labor that helped the household such as husking corn or shelling beans, but by 1873, the children were given a space in the "warm and well-lighted basement" to make small chains for the community's thriving trap business.³² The children's labor was so important to the business that the community changed the type of metal used so that the children's little hands could better manipulate the metal. After

³⁰ *Circular* (Oneida, NY). July 3, 1871.

³¹ Details of the routine are found in *Circular* (Oneida, NY) September 11, 1871.

³² *Circular* (Oneida, NY). January 27, 1873.

working all morning, the children would eat lunch and then spend a few hours in lessons before returning to one of the many parlors in the children's house to play before bed.

Play was important to the Oneida Community, and they believed that children should have time in the day to explore and play. The east sitting room of the children's house was filled with toys, books and games for children. In December of 1874, the community "graded the hill south of the dwelling-house into just the right incline for sliding" so that children had a place close to the Mansion House to sled in the winter and roll down in the warmer months.³³ The fall of 1875 saw the completion of a large children's playhouse just outside the front entrance to the children's house (Figure 8). Forty children could fit in the house and its purpose was to give children a place to go when it was raining and the adults needed the noise coming from the children's house to be reduced.

Not all play, however, was considered good for the children. Dolls had always been in issue in the Oneida Community because they taught the children to form attachments and to love one thing more than anything else. Adults were concerned that the girls in the children's house would learn to seek love from one person and in 1874 all dolls were "banished from [the] play-room."³⁴ The doll situation in 1874 is important because it shows just how important the experiences of the second generation were to the Stirpiculture experiment. In the

³³ *Circular* (Oneida, NY), December 21, 1874.

³⁴ *Circular* (Oneida, NY), October 19, 1874.

1850s, the community questioned the use of dolls in their children's play. Young girls at the time were asked to personify their dolls and talk about what dangers they were learning from them. Sarah Burt confessed that her doll "[seduced her] into a heedless spirit" and after being late to a few meals because her doll distracted her, Sarah was forced to throw it in the fireplace and watch her burn.³⁵ Mary Prindle admitted to having a "great deal of trouble with [her] doll" and stopped playing with it because she was tired of the criticism from adults and other children.³⁶ There is a certain level of irony in asking the girls to personify the dolls so that they could understand that forming an attachment was wrong, but the doll situation in the 1850s would be revisited in the middle of the Stirpiculture experiment.

This is an example of the experiences of the one generation influencing the next. Sarah Burt and Mary Prindle were children when they were forced to give up their dolls. As mothers of Stirpicults, these women used their experience to rationalize continuing the ban on dolls because they believed that this "doll-spirit [would seduce them] from a community spirit."³⁷ But the doll issue also showed a growing tension between the second generation and the community. The mothers of the Stirpicults support the overall ideals of the experiment, but even in their recollections of losing their own dolls, they appear to look at the

³⁵ *Circular* (Oneida, NY), October 19, 1874.

³⁶ *Circular* (Oneida, NY), October 19, 1874.

³⁷ *Circular* (Oneida, NY), October 19, 1874.

experience with sadness. Harriet Worden remembers the day the community adults gathered the children together to burn all the dolls:

we all formed a circle round the large stove, each girl carrying on her arm her long-cherished favorite [doll], and marched in time to a song; as we came opposite the stove-door, we threw our dolls into the angry-looking flames, and saw them perish before our eyes.³⁸

Later, Worden explained that not having dolls around was good for the community. But that qualification is written in the 1870s, once Worden had assumed a pivotal role in Stirpiculture. Watching her doll burn in a fire was clearly painful for Worden, just as only seeing her son Pierrepont for a few hours once a week was. This kind of pain couldn't fester for too long, and by the end of the 1870s, the second generation of Oneida was begging to express concerns.

The Oneida Breakup: Generational Divides, Sexuality, and Reclaiming Family

A funny thing happened during the Stirpiculture experiment that would lead to the community's collapse: that second generation of Oneida children, the ones raised in the Wooden Mansion House would turn on the first generation and reject the central practices and beliefs of John Humphrey Noyes. This was not a sudden revolt, but a slow one that simmered for years, beginning with the introduction of Stirpiculture. Harriet Worden and Alice Ackley, the mothers mentioned earlier, were a part of this generation. They had been raised by the

³⁸ Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 80.

community and taught how to take their place in the community. When they reached the appropriate age, they were sexually initiated into the community and their age and loyalty made them desirable for Stirpiculture. Of the sixty-two successful pairings during the experiment, eight-one percent of the women were second generation, which is not surprising since many of these women would have been the right age to bear children. Of the men, however, sixty-seven percent were first generation, and while most of these men were permitted to have multiple children many of the second generation men that participated were only allowed to father one child.³⁹

This disproportionate breakdown of who participated in Stirpiculture led to tensions within the community, especially between the first and second generation. Theodore Noyes, John Humphrey Noyes's son, noted that by the 1870s, the height of Stirpiculture, the second generation had become united in the "enlargement of the rights of young folks."⁴⁰ Theodore grew to despise his father and the principles of the community and remarked that he "was nothing but brick and mortar in his father's scheme."⁴¹ For Theodore, he was no more than a part of his father's house, he was material with which John Humphrey Noyes could build his vision of Perfectionism. In 1879, Orrin Wright, a second

³⁹ Krishner, "A Dance of Three Generations." 29.

⁴⁰ Robertson, C. N., *Oneida Community: The Break-up*, 257.

⁴¹ Robertson, C. N., *Oneida Community: The Break-up*, 258.

generation member, is quoted as saying, "it's coming; it's bound to come; we are going to have a terrible smash up [. . .] wait and see."⁴²

One of the reasons the second generation of Oneida was able to voice their issues and concerns towards the end had to do with John Humphrey Noyes growing older. By the late 1870s, Noyes was in his late sixties, hard of hearing, and had trouble leading his nightly meetings due to a throat ailment that was setting worse. Add this to some outside pressures from locals and Noyes wasn't as strong of a leader as he had been in the past. Community members James Towner and William Hinds were the first to vocalize their displeasure with Noyes. Their main target was Ascending Fellowship, especially the sexual initiation of young women into the community. Under Noyes's leadership, only a few older men from the first generation were allowed to participate. Towner not only objected to this but advocated that the girl's parents should have a say in regards to her sexual encounters. This would have gone against everything the community was working towards, and encouraged parents to feel overly attached to their children. In a June 14, 1879 letter to his niece Tirzah Miller, a participant in Stirpiculture, Noyes complained that Towner and Hinds had "steadily sought to break down respect for Ascending Fellowship" and that "the social [sexual] condition of the community is very much a grab game."⁴³

⁴² Qtd. in Rich, *A Lasting Spring*, 50.

⁴³ Qtd in Fogarty, *Desire and Duty at Oneida*, 173.

One theory as to why members like Theodore Noyes and Wayland-Smith became so vocal about their dissatisfaction with the community is that these young men were college educated, sent out of the community only to return with new ideas that challenged everything inside the walls of the Mansion House. Jessie Kinsley, one of the very first Stirpicults wrote, "I do not know when the religious doubt came to these young thinkers [. . .] It must have been when the Darwin Theory of 1850 to '54 had much later penetrated – partially through college life – into our little circle."⁴⁴ Kingsley's memories points to more than just education, it also highlights the significance of what leaving and coming back meant to the community. These young men, as she told it, left to go to college and returned, bringing with them new ideas. The community had become so successful at building walls and enclosing themselves in that anything outside the Mansion House was suspect. John Humphrey Noyes tried to alleviate this by introducing spiritualism to the community in 1877, but by this point his son's religious doubts had moved through the community and John Humphrey Noyes gave leadership of Oneida over to his son in late 1877. Theodore, however, couldn't handle the pressure of leading hundreds of people and stepped down after eight months.

In 1879, Frank Wayland-Smith wished "he could make a complete pen-picture of the state of the O.C. at the present time" to capture the strangeness in

⁴⁴ Rich, *A Lasting Spring*, 42.

the community.⁴⁵ Wayland-Smith observed that “the young are fast breaking away from all sense of moral accountability [. . .] they are independent, scorning advice, and some are really impertinent in their self assertion.”⁴⁶ With children of their own and experiences outside the community walls, the second generation at Oneida were letting go of the foundational practices and beliefs of the Oneida Community. Even Jessie Kinsley, who held no bitterness about her time at Oneida admitted that she fell in love with Charles Cragin, a young man in the Community. In the eyes of Noyes, this strong attachment was forbidden, but Kinsley and Cragin forged ahead with their relationship even under the disapproving gaze of Noyes and older community members. Angered over this, Noyes banished Cragin from the community, and when Cragin died a few months later, Kinsley admitted that the experience left her feeling uneasy about Oneida.⁴⁷

In June of 1879, John Humphrey Noyes fled from Oneida to Niagara Falls. This would be the beginning of the end for his social experiment at Oneida. Managing a group of hundreds of people was impossible from so far away, and Noyes quickly lost control. Noyes expressed his frustrations to Frank Wayland-Smith. “I cannot stand it any longer,” he wrote, “do you know that there is a large party in the community who favor monogamic [sic] marriage?”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ What held the O.C. together’ 1877-1902 Diary, Copy, Box 76, OCC.

⁴⁶ What held the O.C. together’ 1877-1902 Diary, Copy, Box 76, OCC.

⁴⁷ See Rich, *A Lasting Spring*.

⁴⁸ Anita Newcomb McGee Papers, Box 14, OCC.

Wayland-Smith was aware because he was quickly beginning to agree with his peers. Tirzah Miller would later explain that the desire for marriage was a direct result of the Stirpiculture experiment. She wrote, “parentage drew people together and caused repulsion toward others.”⁴⁹

With the growing desire to enter into marriages and Noyes’s absence, the entire infrastructure of the Oneida Community collapsed quickly. Complex Marriage was eradicated on August 20, 1879 and with it fell Ascending Fellowship and Male Continence. Many of the second generation paired off and married. Those who had children through Stirpiculture reclaimed them as their own. Some couples moved out of the Mansion House, but many remained. The greatest irony of the Oneida story is that John Humphrey Noyes succeeded in building the kinds of bonds and marriages he set out to destroy. Stirpiculture may have been scientific in Noyes’s mind, but it also reified children. Perhaps more than any other group in nineteenth century American, the Oneida Community placed children at the center of their lives. Everything revolved around ensuring only the best children were produced and these precious products were cared for under strict guidelines. Adults were conditioned to think of these children as the most important part of the community. Put these kinds of pressures in an enclosed space like the Mansion House, a space that is broken down into segregated places, and tensions are inevitable. The collapse of

⁴⁹ Anita Newcomb McGee Papers, Box 14, OCC.

the Oneida Community had many factors, but the most significant involved the quick shift in the place of children. Keeping children out of the community worked in the early years. Moving them into the community and reifying them only exacerbated underlying discomforts. In that regard, children were a disrupting force on the community.

You Can't Erase the Past

There is a sketch of the Oneida Community buildings in the Syracuse University Special Collections (Figure 9).⁵⁰ The drawing is the outline of both the Old Mansion House, the Wooden Children's House and the New Mansion House. What is shown in the sketch is the placement of the children's house/wing compared to the Wooden Mansion House. The simple rectangular Wooden Children's House is drawn with a dotted line and the walls of the new children's house/wing stretches across the page, covering the space once occupied by the Wooden Children's House. While not a significant document in the building history of Oneida, the drawing is a stark reminder that of all the buildings the Oneida Perfectionists built, the ones meant for the children have all occupied the same space. It also shows the incredible difference between the two buildings. The Wooden Mansion House is clearly not directly connected to the

⁵⁰ Buildings of the Community, Box 17, Folder: Buildings, OCC. No complete name is given to the sketch, but "Cragin," the name of a prominent family in Oneida, is written at the top.

Old Mansion House. The tunnel is depicted, but like the children's house it is dotted. In contrast, the walls of the children's house/wing blend into the walls of the New Mansion House to the point where it's difficult to see where one begins and other ends.

Despite its integration into the main Mansion House, the children's house/wing is always haunted by the children's house that once stood on the same site. This became clear shortly before the official breakup of the community. By 1880, the community was divided over several issues including the recent abandonment by John Humphrey Noyes and the growing disdain over Complex Marriage as a requirement for communal living. But for many members, one struggle was the final nail on the coffin: the issue of what to do with the community children. Some mothers began to think that those in charge of the children's house were far too strict and quickly removed their children. The community soon segregated the children and forbade those who lived the community's children's house from playing with those who lived with their parents.⁵¹ The children's house had become the final battleground for the remaining members of the community.

The difference between a child living inside the children's house/wing and a child on the outside came to represent larger factions among adult members. Those opposed to the communal raising of children weren't just angry

⁵¹ Details of the Oneida breakup, including a brief mention of the struggle over children is found in Robertson, C. N., *Oneida Community: The Breakup, 1878-1881*.

over their children. The issue of the children's house served as a means through which to vent frustrations over communal property versus personal belonging, Complex Marriage versus coupling, and communal living versus the nuclear family. Despite all the issues that arose over the course of the Oneida breakup, it is telling that so many adults chose to use the children's house/wing as a way to express themselves. What it does reveal is that by the end of its time, the Oneida Community had moved from being a group of adults concerned over breaking from traditional marriage to a group of parents concerned over where their children would sleep. The community thrived with children placed on the outside of the main household. Once children were made the center of the community, however, the adult world of Oneida broke down.

CONCLUSION

Even after the breakup, children affected the lives of ex-member. Records are scarce, but we do know what happened with a few members. Cornelia Worden, a loyal member, married Francis Wayland-Smith, the father of her child born out of Stirpiculture. Wayland-Smith was a central member in the Community leadership and with the transition into a corporation, Wayland-Smith became the superintendent of the Hardware Department and oversaw the production and sales of animal traps. With his wealth, he was able to purchase land and a large house for his wife and child. Cornelia lived out the rest of life never worrying about money. Her sister, Harriet Worden, however was less fortunate. With three children by three different men, Harriet was left without a husband and was forced to survive only on her earnings from working in the trap factory and from selling books door to door. Harriet knew her future was doomed shortly after the breakup. In her diary she wrote, “The New Year has begun and we now bid adieu to communism . . . and we enter ‘O.C. Limited’ with all its terrors [...] I have no pleasure in contemplative change – instead, my outlook is not especially cheering (sic).”¹

¹ Robertson, *Oneida Community: The Breakup*, 312.

Women who were not involved in the Stirpiculture experiment sometimes struggled more than those left with children and no husbands. Whereas Oneida Limited agreed to provide some measly financial support for the Stirpicults and offered their parents work in the factories, childless, unmarried women struggled to find their place. After watching the man she loved marry her sister, Ann Hatch felt she had didn't belong at Oneida and left to join her other sister Mary Hatch—also left without a husband--in Niagara Falls, New York. Years later, when Oneida Limited expanded manufacturing to Niagara Falls, Ann and Mary were able to secure work in the spoon factory, but they barely made enough to survive and died penniless and without any family but each other.²

The absence or presence of children shaped the lives of Oneida women in the years after the breakup, but the Oneida children also affected John Humphrey Noyes. Shortly before he died in 1886, Noyes declared that he was under a new control and a new spirit was guiding him. Whereas Noyes was guided by Paul in his youth, this new spirit was more feminine. He posited that it might be the spirit of Queen Victoria or Princess Louise or perhaps it was Mary Magdalene or the Virgin Mary or “some higher and unknown seraph representing all of these.”³ Noyes believed that his essence was passing “from the cold, harsh, masculine control of the Yankee Principality to a vast Motherly Empire ruled by a loving woman, whose social nimbus carries a feeling of family

² Hatch to Hendee, December 28, 1879, Box 47, OCC.

³ 1881-1885 Niagara Journal and Stone Cottage Talks, Box 69, OCC.

and home along with her morning drumbeat around the world.”⁴ In his final years, Noyes didn’t see himself as a patriarch, as a leader of a community. He didn’t even see himself as a religious man. Instead, he died as a mother and all of Oneida as his children.

At the turn of the century, interest in the Oneida Community wasn’t focused on Complex Marriage. Fascination with Oneida centered on the Stirpiculture experiment and the children it produced. H.G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, and Charles Davenport--the father of American Eugenics--made visits to Oneida at different times to learn about John Humphrey Noyes’s experiment in breeding spiritually perfect children. Shaw’s visit influenced the character of John Tanner in his play *Man and Superman*. In the play, Turner writes “The Revolutionist’s Handbook,” that argues eugenics requires social equality between the sexes and questions traditional marriage. In his 1906 book, *The Future of America*, Wells wrote about his visit to Kennwood, New York and Oneida. He was escorted around by a very young Pierrepont Noyes, who delighted in showing one of his favorite authors pictures of the family trap business. Wells tried to engage the boy in talks of politics, but “all [Noyes’s] constructive instincts, all his devotion, were for Oneida and its enterprises. American was just an impartial space, the

⁴ 1881-1885 Niagara Journal and Stone Cottage Talks, Box 69, OCC.

large liberty, in which Oneida grew.”⁵ Like his father, Pierrepont Noyes appeared to have little interest in anything other than himself and Oneida.

Charles Davenport, whose 1911 *Heredity and Eugenics*, argued that the new field of heredity could help America with immigration and population control spoke to descendants of Oneida in 1912. Tirzah Miller’s daughter, Dr. Hilda Herrick Noyes, wrote about the visit, and Davenport’s argument that the history of the eugenics movement, which Oneida was a part of, was of national interest since one-fifth of national funds were required to support an “increasing army of defectives.”⁶ Davenport’s message had resonated with members of the former Oneida Community for a few years. Stephen Leonard, child of the Community and editor of the local paper, published a scathing critique of socialism, arguing that America shouldn’t pay for the poor, instead it should be encouraging birth control, demanding that citizens don’t reproduce and burden society with children who lacked “the best inheritance.”⁷ It appears that ex-members did not abandon John Humphrey Noyes’s idea that children conceived unintentionally would be unruly.

Some ex-members and descendants of the Oneida Community attempted to write the history of Oneida as one of science and experimentation, and

⁵ Wells, H. G. *The Future of America: A Search After Realities*. (New York, NY: Harper, 1906), 166.

⁶ Hilda Herrick Noyes. “The Women’s Club: Report on Eugenics.” *Quadrangle* 5, no. 12 (1912).

⁷ Stephen Leonard. “Strange Reasoning Again.” *Quadrangle*. Vol 2, No 4 (1909).

embraced the growing eugenics movement in the United States. In 1921 George Wallingford Noyes and Dr. Hilda Herrick Noyes gave a joint paper at Charles Davenport's Second International Conference in New York City. They presented a lecture entitled "The Oneida Community Experiment in Stirpiculture," about John Humphrey Noyes and the Stirpiculture experiment. The paper was meant to detail the experiment, but it also argued that the Stirpicults were healthier and better-off than the average American child, thus proving that spirituality and spiritual perfection were hereditary. They reported that "no deaf and dumb, blind, or crippled or idiotic children were ever born into the community."⁸ Of the fifty-two surviving "products" of Stirpiculture, there were only two cases of "sub-normal development."⁹ One man showed a lack of muscular coordination due to a cerebral hemorrhage during birth, but was "normal" and "always been able to support himself."¹⁰ The other man suffered a head injury as a child and was "slightly subnormal mentally" but physically "well-developed."¹¹ Attendees were unimpressed and the Oneida Community's place in the eugenics movement is mostly a footnote.

Not all descendants of the Community saw science as playing a role in their success at the turn of the century, but most did still believe in keeping the

⁸ *Eugenics, Genetics, and the Family: Second International Congress of Eugenics, 1921. Volumes 1 and 2.* (New York, NY: Garland Press, 1985), 64.

⁹ *Eugenics, Genetics, and the Family*, 70.

¹⁰ *Eugenics, Genetics, and the Family*, 72.

¹¹ *Eugenics, Genetics, and the Family*, 74.

community (now less an organized group and more an expansive neighborhood of loosely related people) insular. They were not interested in going out into the world and showing how great of an experiment the Oneida Community was. Instead, they focused inward and Theodore Skinner cautioned against selecting new “scions for grafting” and encouraged descendants to “only graft with scions of like characteristics, capable of absorbing and assimilating our sap.”¹² Skinner’s notion of “like characteristics,” it’s important to note, has nothing to do with biology or genetics. He’s referring to moral principles and selflessness. He sees the success of the Oneida family depending on breeding with outsiders who have the same values as them.

Such public statements left non-descendants concerned that the Oneida manufacturing factories were being run by a large family of inbreeders or by a secret society. On more than one occasion, Pierrepont Noyes had to deny rumors that descendants of the Oneida Community operated as a secret group, making decisions on their own and for their own self-interests. It didn’t help that the Stirpicults who remained at Oneida shared only a few last names since the experiment used less men than women. Locals referred to marriages between Stirpicults as “inner-inner” marriages and marriages between Stirpicults and outsiders as “inner-outer” marriages. As the families of Stirpicults grew so did the presence and number of a handful of family names. Even today, Skinner,

¹² Theodore Skinner. “Speech at the 1912 Annual Agents Banquet.” *Quadrangle* 2, no. 11 (1912).

Noyes, Miller, Cragin, Woorden, Wayland-Smith, and Kinsley are pervasive names in the towns surrounding the Oneida Community Mansion House.

The Oneida Community Mansion House still stands today as a historic site, a reminder of one of the most radical social utopian experiments of the nineteenth century. The Oneida Community Mansion House Historical Committee hosts events and lectures throughout the year to highlight the house's rich history and to retell the story of the Oneida Community. The Oneida Community Mansion House has been renovated – the dorms broken apart and shaped into family apartments, the children's wing gutted and reconfigured into a small assisted living facility for elderly descendants of the Oneida Community. Every year, dozens of couples get married in the main auditorium or in the gardens, families rent the Tortaine for reunions and celebrations, and in one far-off wing of the house descendants of the original community still live in renovated apartments.¹³ The House has never been abandoned. In 1962, it was designated a National Historic Landmark.¹⁴ People have always walked the hallways, slept in the private rooms and gathered in the communal spaces.

Taking a tour of the Mansion House today is a reminder of how far away the nineteenth century is, but how close the spirit of the Community still

¹³ Oneida Community Mansion House. Oneida Community Historical Committee, 2018 <http://www.oneidacommunity.org/>

¹⁴ Oneida Community House. National Registry of Historic Places, National Park Services, 2019. <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/66000527>

remains. If you were to visit the mansion, you would enter through the main door. Ahead of you would be a long hallway--a dusty pistachio-colored carpet covers the old wood floors and protects them from dirt and damage. Despite the welcome sign out front, the caretakers of the Mansion House are careful to protect it from outsiders. On either side of you are two large rooms, what used to be the Community's public parlors where members would greet guests. These rooms are still meant for guests -- the one to the left is a gift shop and the one to the right is a small museum, an introduction to the Oneida Community and its story. Further down the hall, you can choose to take a right into Tortaine (now a hotel) or a left into the original library. At the very end, the hallway divides into a narrow passage that takes visitors into the Children's House of a staircase that leads to the Community auditorium. Most of the Children's House is off limits to tourists. It's now an assisted-living facility for the elderly with some private apartments. The space that used to house the youngest members of Oneida now houses the oldest members of society.

At the very end of the narrow back hallway is a sunroom and a smaller staircase. This would have been a practical entrance for members coming in from working or the snow. Tucked away in this corner is a large quilt, affectionately known as the Community Best Quilt (Figure 10). It's framed and behind glass, but it isn't a significant part of the Oneida Community Mansion House tour. It's an afterthought, just another artifact from the Community that had to go somewhere. Every once and awhile, the Committee takes it out and

displays it in the museum, but for the most part the quilt takes up an entire wall alone a narrow hallway in the back of the house. The Oneida Community Best Quilt, however, is one of the most striking reminders of what Oneida aspired to be known for: community, collaboration, ingenuity, and a deep love for children.

The quilt was proposed by Harriet Noyes in the early 1870s as a project the whole Community could participate in. It was always meant to be an album quilt, a collection of ten-and-one-half inch squares, each one depicting something important to the Community. Both men and women worked on the quilt over a few months, and it was completed and assembled in 1873 at the Wallingford Community branch. When the Community collapsed, the quilt was delivered to Harriet Noyes in Niagara Falls. It remained with Harriet until her death. In the early twentieth century the Best Quilt was donated to the Mansion House, where it still hangs on display in the back hallway of the oldest, central part of the home.¹⁵

There aren't many records that tell us about the quilt. All we know is that it was a passion project for Harriet Noyes and the Community came together to construct blocks. The quilt itself, though, tells us a lot about what the Community valued and what they – literally – thought was the center of their life.

¹⁵ There is no official record of the quilt. The details here are taken from what tour guides tell visitors and from the small plaque on the wall next to the quilt.

In the middle of the square quilt is a simple basket of flowers. The Oneida Community loved their gardens and prided themselves on keeping a tidy yard. But the flowers are also a symbol of how they saw themselves: beautiful, natural, and reborn. Members of Oneida took pride in their community and the experiments they undertook. They saw themselves as resetting the natural order of things, particularly the relationship between men and women. Under the leadership of John Humphrey Noyes, the Community believed they were restoring the Primitive Church, and their ideas and life were born out of something that was long lost or misunderstood. All of this preciousness, all of the beauty and fragility they saw in what they were trying to do needed to be protected, contained and kept separate. For flowers, a basket does just that; for people and families, so does a house.

Circling the flowers are eight squared depicting people and objects important to the Community. There is a bunch of strawberries, a reminder of the strawberry field the Community kept nearby and the yearly Strawberry festival Oneida held for visitors and locals. Spools of thread remind us of their successful foray into the silk thread business and a desk stands in for a printing business that published a weekly newspaper and numerous books and leaflets on the Community and their beliefs. Three of the squares depict children's life at Oneida: children playing with a toy horse, children exercising, and a nursery. The Best Quilt was constructed during Oneida's Stirpiculture experiment, and the members who came together to design the quilt thought that children were

important enough to not only occupy a large portion of the center of the quilt, but also to be half the people pictured on the quilt. The squares also tell us what about Oneida childhood the adult Community valued. Their play and leisure, their health, and their growth and protection.

The children depicted in this quilt carried with them a strong sense of community and deep love of Oneida, its history, its people and its radical ideas. Their built a world for them that reflect their communal aspirations and the presence of the children shaped the lives of their parents even after the community fell apart and converted in company. The Oneida Community loved their children, even if they were anxious about what to do with them. As the Stirpicults grew, they embraced many of the ideas and visions instilled in them by their parents and John Humphrey Noyes. They continued to look inward as Noyes did. They continued to believe the Stirpiculture experiment was successful, as their parents did. They continued to build, shaping the miles surrounding the Mansion House with factories, houses for workers, and schools for future generations. The quilt shows us where Oneida adults thought children belonged in the Oneida story: at its center.

APPENDIX: FIGURES

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