

# Utopian Communities in America

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A painting from around 1835 depicts the Shakers, the nickname of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming, a Quaker sect, performing their distinctive, trembling religious dance. Library of Congress

The Amana colonies were one of many utopian colonies established in America during the 18th and 19th centuries. A utopian colony "consists of a group of people who ... establish a new social pattern based upon a vision of the ideal society," writes Robert Hine, author of *California's Utopian Colonies*. People in utopian colonies withdraw themselves from their broader communities to test a new way of life.

While each utopian community in America had differences, they all shared a common vision of living together. Some colonies were composed of religious members, while others were composed of non-religious, or secular, members. Religious communities were organized around faith, while secular communities were organized around the idea of human happiness as the guiding principle of life.

There were hundreds of utopian experiments in the early United States. The Shaker, Rappite and Amana experiments, as well as the Oneida community and Brook Farm, will be explored in this essay.

## **Origins of the utopian idea**

The western idea of utopia originates in the ancient world, with the human desire to build an ideal society. The Greek philosopher Plato proposed a utopian society in his book "The Republic," where he imagined the ideal Greek city-state. The term "utopia" in English means any place, state or situation of ideal perfection.

The 19th-century utopian communities trace their roots back to the Protestant Reformation, a movement in the 16th century where many people broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformation gave rise to new ideas about the nature of religion and work. Protestants emphasized the spiritual dignity of labor, an idea that would play a role in later utopian communities.

It was not until the first half of the 19th century that a great expansion of utopian experiments took place on American soil. Inexpensive and expansive land created a fertile ground for the establishment of utopian societies. Europe, in the early 19th century, was emerging from a long history of religious and dynastic wars, and America, in contrast, became a location where people could start over and build a new life.

While many utopian experiments dotted the American landscape, the Shakers, the Rappites, the Oneida Community, Brook Farm and the Amana Colonies were among the most famous. Some exploration of their beliefs and history presents an example of how these utopian colonies functioned.

### **The Shakers**

The Shakers were a religious community that believed in productive labor, the equality of men and women, and pacifism, or non-violence. They were also associated with abolitionism, the movement to end slavery. Their name came from a ritual that involved dancing and shaking.

Shakerism was founded in England in 1758 by Ann Lee, who brought it to America in 1774. Containing 6,000 members before the Civil War, Shaker colonies maintained economic freedom while making items for outside sale. Their work was eventually redirected from agricultural production to handcrafts, including the making of chairs and furniture.

Today, Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in Maine is the only surviving Shaker community.

### **Brook Farm**

The Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education, located in Massachusetts, was an experiment founded in the 1840s that was focused on Transcendentalism, the idea that truth exists beyond what people can perceive using their senses. Transcendentalists believed that every person had the power inside themselves to be in touch with God. Brook Farm became better known than many other utopian experiments.

### **The Rappites**

The Harmony Society, also called the Rappites, came from Germany to the United States in 1803 seeking religious freedom. Establishing a colony in Butler County, Pennsylvania, called Harmony, the Rappites believed the Bible was humanity's sole authority. Like the Shakers, they lead a communal life without individual possessions. Over time, the economy of Harmony grew from one

of basic agriculture to complex manufacturing. By 1814, the Society boasted 700 members, a town of about 130 houses, and numerous factories and processing plants. Their manufactured products, particularly textiles and woolens, gained a widespread reputation for excellence, as did their wines and whisky.

### **The Oneida community**

John Noyes, the founder of the Oneida Community, believed he could attain perfection in his life, and one way to do it was through "complex marriage." Perfectionists practicing "complex marriage" considered themselves married to the group, not a single partner.

At Oneida, in Madison County, New York, Noyes' followers shared property, meals and arrangements for the raising and education of children. They practiced "Bible Communism," renouncing all ownership over things and people. The skills of the community's artisan members were channeled into broom manufacturing, shoe manufacturing, flour processing, lumber milling and trap manufacturing.

### **The Amana colonies**

Among all the utopian groups founded in the 19th century, only the Amana Inspirationists developed and built a network of seven villages set in an agricultural region. They survived by modifying their system into two distinct organizations, one secular and one spiritual. Both men and women worked, although in Amana, women's work did not include trades and the ministry as it did in the Shaker communities. Amana Inspirationists saw labor as productive and good, part of God's plan for contributing to the community.

### **The demise of the utopian colony**

Because of industrial, economic and scientific progress in the larger society, the 20th century saw the breakdown, or demise, of utopian communities. General causes have to be explained individually, as each utopian community faced different circumstances. Overall, the conflict that many of these communities faced in an increasingly industrialized world may have contributed to their demise. External hostility, often seen in newspaper articles attacking the utopian experiments, also played a role. Generally, most analysts of utopian experiments have found that religious utopian colonies survived longer than secular ones.

## Quiz

1 Which answer choice expresses two ideas that would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) While each utopian community in America had differences, they all shared a common vision of living together. Overall, the conflict that many of these communities faced in an increasingly industrialized world may have contributed to their demise.
- (B) Some colonies were composed of religious members, while others were composed of non-religious, or secular, members. The Greek philosopher Plato proposed a utopian society in his book *The Republic*, where he imagined the ideal Greek city-state.
- (C) Religious communities were organized around faith, while secular communities were organized around the idea of human happiness as the guiding principle of life. Transcendentalists believed that every person had the power inside themselves to be in touch with God.
- (D) The western idea of utopia originates in the ancient world, with the human desire to build an ideal society. Among all the utopian groups founded in the 19th century, only the Amana Inspirationists developed and built a network of seven villages set in an agricultural region.

2 Which statement would be BEST to include in an accurate and objective summary of the article?

- (A) The Shakers demonstrated their superiority to other utopian communities by taking part in the abolitionist movement.
- (B) The different beliefs and functions of utopian societies influenced whether or not they survived industrialization.
- (C) The religious and dynastic wars in Europe tragically limited people's ability to live the utopian lives they wanted.
- (D) The Amana colony most likely failed because it split itself into one secular and one spiritual organization.

3 Read the following paragraph.

*It was not until the first half of the 19th century that a great expansion of utopian experiments took place on American soil. Inexpensive and expansive land created a fertile ground for the establishment of utopian societies. Europe, in the early 19th century, was emerging from a long history of religious and dynastic wars, and America, in contrast, became a location where people could start over and build a new life.*

How does this paragraph contribute to the development of the article's MAIN idea?

- (A) It compares 19th century utopian experiments to prior utopian colonies.
- (B) It contrasts the utopian communities that emerged in America and Europe.
- (C) It offers a description of the earliest religious utopian communities.
- (D) It outlines what caused the formation of utopian societies in America.

Read the following paragraphs from the article. Which one represents a major shift or transition in the article's development?

- (A) While each utopian community in America had differences, they all shared a common vision of living together. Some colonies were composed of religious members, while others were composed of non-religious, or secular, members. Religious communities were organized around faith, while secular communities were organized around the idea of human happiness as the guiding principle of life.
- (B) The western idea of utopia originates in the ancient world, with the human desire to build an ideal society. The Greek philosopher Plato proposed a utopian society in his book *The Republic*, where he imagined the ideal Greek city-state. The term "utopia" in English means any place, state or situation of ideal perfection.
- (C) It was not until the first half of the 19th century that a great expansion of utopian experiments took place on American soil. Inexpensive and expansive land created a fertile ground for the establishment of utopian societies. Europe, in the early 19th century, was emerging from a long history of religious and dynastic wars, and America, in contrast, became a location where people could start over and build a new life.
- (D) The Shakers were a religious community that believed in productive labor, the equality of men and women and pacifism, or non-violence. They were also associated with abolitionism, the movement to end slavery. Their name came from a ritual that involved dancing and shaking.