

Utopian societies in the shakers and oneidans



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As America entered the 1800s, the drive for expanding their horizons and the search for distinctive cultural traits to call their own had never been higher. (Int, <https://www.ushistory.org>) The push for self-improvement had communities coming together and creating exclusive clubs, societies and associations. (Engels, 4) This allowed them to share their controversial and maybe even taboo ideas.

They thought by completely reorganizing a society it would morph into a Utopia. (Jennings, 3) Utopia derives from Greek meaning an imaginary place where everyone and everything is perfect. (Int, www.merriam-webster.com) Most of the original utopias were created for religious purposes, like the Shakers and the Oneidans. (Holloway, 17) These communities strived to become free of sin and to communicate with higher beings through religious conversion and will power. (Engels, 6) These communities were like snowflakes, each being unique in their own way, yet still only a tiny piece of ice. Though their traditions may seem unorthodox, they are just expressing their religious beliefs as a community.

Both the Shakers and Oneidans practiced communal living, where all property was shared. (Int, www.history.com) Oneidan Community member Harriet Worden recalled, “ the building of a home was the first enterprise that enlisted the whole Community; and it was one in which all were equally interested. All labored; the women no less than the men. (5) This goes to show that within the building of the first Oneida community mansion, men and women were treated equal. At this point in time, this was a big step toward gender equality for women. Since communal living was so important

to the Oneidans, they required all their members to eat with each other at the common table for every meal. (Holloway, 188)

Not long after its construction, the first Mansion House became overcrowded. In addition, the Community's population had reached one hundred and seventy members. (Klaw, 48) The Oneidans decided it was time to upgrade and expand the Mansion House. The ideas for the second house were discussed during evening meetings, with them eventually settling on a plan for an Italianate Villa-style Mansion. (Worden, 40) In 1861 the Community began construction of a larger, brick-based Mansion under the guidance of Community member and architect, Erastus Hamilton. (Worden, 42)

The second Mansion House was forty-five by sixty feet and three stories high. (White, 26) The first floor housed an office, reception room for visitors, library, and guest bedrooms. (White, 29) Individual sleeping rooms for community members were arranged around multiple communal sitting rooms on the first, second and third floors. In fact, sleeping room assignments were rotated periodically to preempt member attachment to a specific room. (Worden, 58) A five-story Italianate-style tower was added and located at the northeast corner of the House, overlooking the land. (White, 33) Many additions were made to compensate the growing community, like a south wing was added in 1869, and in 1877 the last addition was added and designed by Lewis W. Leeds, by this point the community was close to 300 people. (White, 26) Communal space was important to the Community, and thus the most defining interior feature of the second House was a two-story Family Hall with a capacity of about seven-hundred people, which also served as the daily gathering place of the whole Community. (Engals, 22)

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