

Utopia lost: new harmony



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New Harmony is one of those towns in southern Indiana that many are familiar with, even if they've never been there. Word of mouth provides the picture perfect scene: a darling little town with quaint antique shops, delicious restaurants and meaty history to boot. New Harmony is the perfect place for a romantic weekend getaway or destination for a family-friendly road trip.

New Harmony attracts folks year round, especially during the good weather seasons. The elder generations flock to landmark institutions like the Main Cafe and Firehouse Antiques while the younger crowd gravitate toward those trendy (yet timeless) photo-worthy stops like the Cathedral Labyrinth and the Roofless Church. It's a place that feels like home. The village is remarkable, which also makes it one of the top wedding destinations in the state. But, as those brides stroll down those tree-lined streets, it seems that the newlyweds and their parties know little of the bizarre history that molded the village of New Harmony all those years ago. The place is a goldmine on intrigue.

One of the most wonderous facts about New Harmony is that it is the site of not only one, but two failed utopian communities. New Harmony was created by the very definition of utopian — as a visionary system of political and social perfection. The first community being the Harmonists, created by German minister Johann Georg Rapp, and the second being the Owenites, manifested by Robert Owen, the philanthropic social reformer.

The village was originally settled in 1814 by the Pennsylvania Harmonists — also known as Rappites — who were an ultra-religious (and celibate!), communal German congregation. They called the settlement “ Harmonie.” Led by Johann Georg Rapp, the Harmonists achieved unheard of economic success within a utopian community and became recognized as a wonder of the west.

When trade began to decline and residents started to die off by the dozens (they weren't exactly prepared to live in the rugged new frontier) Rapp sold the entire town and surrounding lands to a Welsh-born industrialist and philosopher Robert Owen for \$130, 000 in 1824. Owen wanted Harmonie for his socialist community experiment. Owen, a man who was obsessed with utopian ideals, changed the town's name to “ New” Harmony. Owen's sidekick was William Maclure, a well-known geologist. Maclure's social breadth seduced famous movers and shakers to the New Harmony, including American naturalist Thomas Say; French naturalist Charles-Alexandre Lesueur; educators Joseph Neef, Phiquepal d'Arusmont, and Madame Marie Duclos Fretageot; Dutch geologist Gerard Troost; and Frances Wright, a Scottish early feminist.

With these people Owen based his communal concept on education for the masses. His ultimate ambition was to create a perfect society through free education and to abolish social classes and personal wealth.

At first this “ New” Harmony was wildly successful. They opened our nation's first free library in 1824, nine years before the Peterborough, New Hampshire

library opened. But, as utopian societies go, all good things must come to an end.

Owen was a great thinker but like many young, rich men of the time, he was a horrid planner. Almost immediately after setting up the community, Owen took leave of New Harmony to support his other business ventures out east. He had plans to return within a year, but the folks he felt in charge, including his son Robert Dale, weren't of the survivalist type. As it turns out the academics and philosophers had little idea of how to survive outside of urban civilization.

When Owen did return, something like two years later, the colony was in shambles and wrought with economic ruin. The small community was on the brink of starvation and mutiny. In 1827 the community disbanded and the lands, because of the incurred debts, were returned to the public domain. Some folks stayed behind, keeping the settlement going bit by bit for the next pioneers.

Thrall's Opera House (1824)

612 Church Street

This building was built by the Harmonists as living quarters shortly before their departure in 1824. The space didn't go to waste when the Owenites moved into New Harmony — they used the building for many purposes. It wasn't until 1859 that the building was repurposed into a theater. It eventually came to be named Thrall's Opera House after a famous acting company that called it home. The building has had its ups and downs over

the years (it was even turned into a gas station) but is now safely in the hands of the state of Indiana which maintains the site.

Scholle House (1820)

604 Tavern Street

A beautiful home in the Harmonist style that now operates as an exhibition gallery. The house was built in 1820 and was the home of a Harmonist shoemaker named Mathias Scholle. The Scholle family were early members of the Rappite following. This home is an anomaly as it's one of the most intact examples of Harmonist architecture. If you're visiting the Scholle houses, be sure to take a look around outside. The home sits on a block where three of the corners are home to original Harmonists buildings.

John Beal House (1829)

613 Church Street

John Beal built this house for his wife and child when they arrived from the east with the mass of Owenites that later were called the " Boatload of Knowledge." Beal was a carpenter that worked on many of the building in the town and repurposed many materials left over from the Harmonists.

Community House (1822)

410 Main Street

This is a building comes with compelling history. The building was built by the Harmonists in 1822 to use as housing for members that didn't have

family homes. Later in history the building was used as many other things including a cigar factory, a rooming house and a cafe. It was purchased by the state of Indiana in 1940.

The Owen House (1830)

421 North Street

The name of this house implies that an Owen, maybe even the Robert Owen, lived under its roof. Names can certainly be deceiving. The home was built in 1830 by Robert Owen's sons Robert Dale and David Dale — and they never lived there. Instead they rented the home out until 1838. Robert Dale became a well known abolitionist while David Dale was a renowned geologist. He served as Indiana, Kentucky and Arkansas' first state geologist.

The Labyrinth (1815)

301 North Street

The Labyrinth is one of the most well-known landmarks in New Harmony. It was designed by the Rappites upon their arrival in Harmony. In fact, the Rappites built a similar labyrinth in each of the three towns that they created in the 19th century. If you look into Rappite theology, you'll find that they used labyrinths as a symbolic challenge that represented overcoming issues in their lives. Because the original labyrinth wasn't maintained after Owen purchased the town, it disintegrated back into the Earth. Luckily the Harmonists left behind architectural drawings that allowed conservationists to recreate the maze in 2008. The creation is a true labyrinth as there is only

one true course to the center, where a recreation of a Rappite stone grotto stands.

The Rappite Burial Ground

Main Street

This place became the resting place for over 200 members of the Harmonist community. While George Rapp lead them to southern Indiana, he did not prepare his members for the hostile living environment of the new frontier. There are no gravestones as the society believe in equality in life and in death. Oddly enough there are also several Native American burial mounds at the site. Documents show that both the Harmonists and Owenites performed their own excavations and explorations of the burial mounds.