

Material in the Immaterial World: Material Culture and the Realization of Utopia in
Communities of Shakers, Mormons, and Oneida Perfectionists

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Dan, who willingly spent our first three years of marriage sharing me with this Master's program. His unwavering support in every way made this possible. Thank you, love, for giving me "wings to fly."

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ABSTRACT

MATERIAL IN THE IMMATERIAL WORLD: MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE REALIZATION OF UTOPIA IN COMMUNITIES OF SHAKERS, MORMONS, AND ONEIDA PERFECTIONISTS

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This thesis delves into the material culture of three American religions—Shakers, Oneida Perfectionists, and Latter-day Saints (Mormons)—in the nineteenth century. Looking at the religions' Utopian ideals, the author discusses how the philosophies of materiality and the actual goods extant in these communities coincided, and what the emerging successes and tensions reveal about the intersection of material ideas with spiritual goals. This thesis thus constitutes a cursory analysis of each community in turn, followed by an examination of the artifacts from these groups, ultimately grappling with the question of how they each realized immaterial ideas in everyday life.

INTRODUCTION

In a letter to Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson quipped about nineteenth-century America “We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform...Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.”¹ Emerson, himself a Transcendentalist, exaggerates a nevertheless pervasive interest in Utopian movements during his time. Fueled by reactionary impulse and the resurgent religiosity of the Second Great Awakening, practitioners in these movements unleashed unparalleled social creativity to resolve the concerns of their day: industrialism, gender inequity, and family disintegration, among others. As the tantalizing promise of a perfect society tempted Americans from standard social norms they dotted the landscape with new communities, religious and nonreligious, where they chased this elusive goal.

Two factors spurred the religious side of Utopian movements in the United States: rising industrialization and the growth of millennialism. Whereas the former threatened to undermine traditional mores, the latter promised a return to simplicity and righteousness. Nineteenth-century industrialism triggered economic repercussions: “the decline of self-sufficient farming, the virtual disappearance of household manufacturing of goods...and the growing obsolescence of independent artisans and the apprenticeship

¹ Qtd in Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), 9.

system,” but it also sparked widespread social change.² For some individuals, the creation of cities, the relocation of male work outside the home, the changing employment of women—all of these challenged higher modes of morality. In their view, social turmoil in the antebellum period—characterized by agitation surrounding women’s rights, children’s rights, abolition, educational reform, and wealth inequality—only proceeded from these upheavals, marginalizing “old-fashioned” values.³ Communitarian societies emerged from the unrest; practitioners banded together since “alternative strategies of individual dissent, revolution, or gradualist reform seemed ineffectual.”⁴ Leaders of these communities offered tranquility through the establishment of entirely separate societies, within which Americans could reexamine and live a set of ideals. Rather than attempting to improve society from the inside, they built new societies to force change from the outside. Millennialism—which expounded the doctrine of a perfectible world that accompanied Jesus Christ’s second coming—inspired the religious adherents who clung to a mystical Utopia as people’s best hope. Millennialists held that the faithful could enact Christ’s reappearance by establishing an earthly heaven in which Christ would feel welcome; said another way, “the barrier between heaven and earth was broken. Perfect holiness was possible in this world and the new kingdom of heaven and earth could be established by a regenerate humanity under divine guidance.”⁵ Religious communes sprung up, each hoping to create that perfect environment for a returned

² Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 231.

³ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ Ira L. Mandelker, *Religion, Society, and Utopia in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 12.

Christ. The faithful hoped to establish a model of order, harmony, and community that would repair the faults of American society and restore the balance of human existence.⁶

Founding members of these communities flocked to the outskirts of settlement, geographically distancing themselves from moral threats to their goals while giving them a chance to implement a new material environment to suit their ideals.⁷ These groups wished to construct their spiritual beliefs within an actual physical landscape. Because of this material interest, their communities provide unique insights into the important role material culture played in creating and structuring utopian belief. Given their opportunity to abandon possessions and reframe possessions along the guidelines of need and complex philosophical intention, each of these communities asked a vital question: What do you bring to a perfect society? In answering that question, they faced the merging of abstract thoughts with physical models, the intersection of environment with spirit. Attempting to bridge the “inviolable borders separating the utopian from the nonutopian world,” these communities necessarily used objects as symbols of the world they wished to inhabit.⁸ They picked and chose what from the outside world belonged, while also crafting new objects which coincided with their superior ambitions. By so doing, community participants lent their possessions a deep purpose as the incarnation of their radical aims.

⁶ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 227.

⁷ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 16.

⁸ Mandelker, *Religion, Society, and Utopia in Nineteenth-Century America*, 9.

This thesis examines three such communities, all thriving in the nineteenth century: Shakers, Oneida Perfectionists, and Latter-day Saints (Mormons).⁹ These three groups represent fundamental differences in lifestyles (community structures and levels of communalism), locations (Northeast/East versus Western frontier), and values (standards of separation and secularism). Each exhibits a well-defined material culture as well as the longevity commensurate to demonstrate evolution in their practice and environments. To elucidate these groups' ideas of what perfection entailed and how to achieve it, I first examine the backgrounds of each community, tracing its origins, expansion, and organization as well as members' central religious and ideological beliefs. I then connect these ideas to their doctrines of materiality—explicit expressions of how physical objects fit into their religious dogmas. Using artifacts from each community as a guide, I compare the groups' artifacts to their doctrinal foundations—illuminated through textual sources, including proselytizing materials, reminiscences of community members and visitors, and sermons—to highlight the challenges of materializing a spiritual idea. By examining selected artifacts concurrently with religious doctrines, an image of the complexity surrounding these communities takes shape. These objects reveal successes and failures, harmonies and tensions, hopes and realities. They evidence dedication as well as temptation. They demonstrate how factors such as isolation, gender, production, and consumption affected the attainability of each group's goals. Ultimately, the material culture of these three communities underscores that similar aims do not manifest similarly materially. Each community, with its own interpretations of heaven and its own

⁹ The Shaker religion originated in the late eighteenth century, but its communities as we know them are almost entirely nineteenth-century inventions.

priorities on the ground, instituted a unique and distinctive approach to the creation of perfection in physicality.

Scholars have devoted immense time to the research of Utopian groups, drawn to them because of their eccentricity and exceptionalism. Comparative histories like Dolores Hayden's *Seven American Utopias* (1976) and *Religion, Society, and Utopia in Nineteenth-Century America* (1984) examined the ideological background of these movements and the histories of various societies. Mormons, Shakers, and Perfectionists have been present in these studies, as well as in comparative social histories of their sexual practices, such as Lawrence Foster's *Religion and Sexuality: the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (1984) and *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (1991).¹⁰ While all of these books provide a cultural background to these communities, their focus is not material.¹¹

¹⁰ Works referenced above: Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976); Ira L. Mandelker, *Religion, Society, and Utopia in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991). See also: Heather M. Van Wormer, "The Ties That Bind: Ideology, Material Culture, and the Utopian Ideal," *Historical Archaeology* 40, no. 1 (2006): 37-56, and Oved Yaacov, *Two Hundred Years of American Communes* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988).

Shaker artifacts have received the most academic attention, though much of the work is limited to the most collectible items and evaluates them primarily as antiques. These sources neglect the cultural thought behind these artifacts in favor of their modern value. Most of the scholars of Shaker material culture explore furniture including the late collectors Edward Deming and Faith Andrews who published two seminal works on this subject, *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of An American Communal Sect* (originally published 1937) and *Masterpieces of Shaker Furniture* (originally published 1966). Some more recent efforts have added depth to the discussion of Shaker furniture, and scholars have investigated Shaker textiles. Supplementing these larger works are countless smaller articles dedicated to Shaker materiality, some of which explore their cultural meaning.¹² Yet, a full analysis of all of these goods, especially one that spans media and places artifact types together, remains necessary.¹³

¹¹ My methodology emulates that of E. McClung Fleming, who identifies five properties for analyzing objects—history, material, construction, design, and function—and then uses four operations—identification, evaluation, cultural analysis, and interpretation—to draw meaning. For a full exploration of this methodology, see E. McClung Fleming, “Artifact Study: A Proposed Model,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 153-173. For an introduction to material culture study, see Jules Prown, “Mind and Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1-19; Kenneth L. Ames, “Meaning in Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1978): 19-46; James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: an archaeology of early American life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996); Thomas J. Schlereth, ed. *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1982).

¹² See Andrew Saunders, “Material Manifestations: Cultural and Material Affects of Shaker Artifacts,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 67, no. 1 (2013): 86-95; Mary Lyn Ray, “A Reappraisal of Shaker Furniture and Society,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 8 (1973): 107-132; Sally M. Promey, “Celestial Visions: Shaker Images and Art Historical Method,” *American Art* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 78-99.

The material history of the Oneida group has been largely neglected in the historiography of American Utopian communities. Scholarship on Oneida Perfectionists generally focuses on the unique practices of these individuals as a community, rather than their material lives. To some degree, this field is limited because relatively few artifacts and structures remain, but those few extant publications demonstrate that enough material exists to deliver valuable insights. Though no analyses of Perfectionist furniture have yet been written, individual authors have explored Oneidan textiles and saleable goods including Oneida's Newhouse animal traps.¹⁴ Narratives on production of Oneidian goods have taken a business history approach, focused less on the internal dealings of the community and more on the external, such as Maren Lockwood Carden's *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (1998).¹⁵

¹³ Works referenced above: Edward Deming and Faith Andrews, *Masterpieces of Shaker Furniture* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994); Edward Deming and Faith Andrews, *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect* (New York: Dover Publications, 1964). Additional works on Shaker material culture include: Jean M. Burks, ed., *Shaker Design: Out of This World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), and Beverly Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1980).

¹⁴ For Oneida material culture studies, see: Gayle V. Fischer, "'Pantalets' and 'Turkish Trowsers': Designing Freedom in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States," *Feminist Studies* 23, no. 1(Spring 1997): 110-140; Janet R. White, "Designed for Perfection: Intersections between Architecture and Social Program at the Oneida Community," *Utopian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1996): 1113-138; Anthony Wonderley, "The Most Utopian Industry: Making Oneida's Animal Traps, 1852-1925," *New York History* 91, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 175-195.

¹⁵ Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969. See also Matthew Cooper, "Relations of Modes of Production in Nineteenth Century America: The Shakers and Oneida," *Ethnology* 26, no. 1 (January 1987): 1-16.

Whilst Mormon historians have undertaken a more thorough approach to their history, material culture is a topic still underexplored. Landscape and architectural histories prevail in this field, such as a recent book by Thomas Carter, *Building Zion: the Material World of Mormon Settlement* (2015). To date, the best overview of all Mormon material exists in *Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah's Mormon Pioneers*, edited by Doris R. Dant and Ronald W. Walker (1999). This book encompasses textiles, regional furniture, and a variety of specialized material. Some more focused studies have emerged, like Marilyn Conover Barker's *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture* (1995) and Kae Covington's microhistory *Utah Quilts and Their Makers* (1997).¹⁶ Academic articles and dissertations have teased out individual strands of material production, including Mormon women and silk production, the furniture of the Brigham City Cooperative, and Mormon women's handicraft.¹⁷ While all of these

¹⁶ Works referenced above: Thomas Carter, *Building Zion: The Material World of Mormon Settlement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Doris R. Dant and Ronald W. Walker, eds., *Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah's Mormon Pioneers* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999); Marilyn Conover Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture: The Mormon Material Culture, Undergirded by Faith, Commitment, and Craftsmanship* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1995). See also: Kae Covington, *Utah Quilts and Their Makers, Settlement to 1950* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997); Russell W. Belk, "Moving Possessions: An Analysis Based on Personal Documents from the 1847-1869 Mormon Migration," *Journal of Consumer Research* 19, no. 3 (December 1992): 339-361.

sources provide a piecemeal glimpse of Mormon culture, they do not fully combine these materials to address the communitarian experiment and realization of a Utopian ideal.

This thesis also contributes to a growing movement in material culture and visual culture studies to examine religious conviction and re-evaluate its primacy in shaping history and its actors. The study of religious material culture necessarily reframes the articulation of belief and the intersection between sensory perception and spiritual feeling, challenging the notion that religion is experienced internally alone. Seminal scholars in this field include David Morgan, Sally Promey, and Colleen McDannell, among others.¹⁸

¹⁷ Examples of these works includes: Chris Rigby Arrington, "The Finest of Fabrics: Mormon Women and the Silk Industry in Early Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (Fall 1978): 376-396; Kate B. Carter, compiler, "Silk Industry in Utah," In *Heart Throbs of the West: "A Unique Volume Treating Definite Subjects of Western History,"* vol. 11 (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1950), 53-92. Kate B. Carter, compiler, "Woolen and Cotton Mills," In *Our Pioneer Heritage*, vol, 15 (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1972), 433-480; Ruth Vickers Clayton, "Clothing and the Temporal Kingdom: Mormon clothing practices, 1847 to 1887," (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1987); Kari Michele Main, "Pursuing 'The Things of This World': Mormon Resistance and Assimilation As Seen in the Furniture of the Brigham City Cooperative (1874-1888)," (Master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1997); Jennifer Reeder, "'To Do Something Extraordinary': Mormon Women and the Creation of a Usable Past," (PhD. diss., George Mason University, 2013).

By examining the material lives of members in these three communities, this thesis teases out the nuanced endeavors of idealism manifested in the objects these communities valued and crafted. As this thesis proceeds with study of each individual group, the hopes and imperfections implicit in meeting the material and immaterial worlds becomes clear. Ultimately, the Shaker, Oneida Perfectionist, and Mormon communities' use of objects illuminates both Utopian purposes and their efforts to materialize their spiritual ambitions, while simultaneously explicating the inherent complexities and contradictions implicit in achieving their celestial aspirations.

¹⁸ A sample of works by these authors includes: David Morgan and Sally Promey, eds. *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); David Morgan, ed. *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2009); David Morgan, *Visual Piety: a history and theory of popular religions images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005); Sally Promey, "Seeing the Self 'in Frame'" Early New England Material Practice and Puritan Piety," *Material Religion*, vol. 1, no. 1 (March 2005), 10-47; Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America: 1840-1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985). See also: Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); Dell Upton, *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Ken Koltun-Fromm, *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 2010).

CHAPTER ONE: SHAKERS

Background

Though considered a distinctly American religion, the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (commonly referred to as Shakers or Believers) actually began in an English community of Quakers. In Manchester, a pious couple named Jane and James Wardley led a small sect of these Quakers. Among the Wardleys' followers was a twenty-three year-old Ann Lee and her parents. Doctrinally Christian, the Wardley sect practiced manifestation of worship with ecstatic convulsions that quickly earned them the name "Shaking Quakers." These convulsions and the Quakers' assertion that they were spiritually born made them the target of persecution, which landed Lee in prison in 1770. While imprisoned, she experienced a marvelous vision which changed her religious direction. As Shaker history describes:

[Ann] saw the Lord Jesus Christ in his glory, who revealed to her the great object of her prayers, and fully satisfied all the desires of her soul. The most astonishing visions and divine manifestations were presented to her view in so clear and striking a manner that the whole spiritual world seemed displayed before her. In these extraordinary manifestations she had a full and clear view of the mystery of iniquity, of the root and foundation of human depravity, and of the very act of transgression committed by the first man and woman in the garden of Eden. Here she saw whence and wherein all mankind were lost from God, and clearly realized the only possible way of recovery.¹⁹

¹⁹ Charles Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States....* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865. Republished under Project Gutenberg, 2005).

This “recovery,” in Ann’s sight, included adherence to a variety of new doctrines, the most well-known of which was abstinence from all sexual gratifications, even between lawful spouses. Ann believed firmly that lustful appetites were “the source of human corruption; and testified, in the most plain and pointed manner, that no soul could follow Christ in the regeneration while living in the works of natural generation.”²⁰

Thus, Ann founded a sect of her own, preaching the virtues of restraint in all areas of life—including sexually—and gathered a following so attached to her teachings that they called her “Mother Ann.” Many of these believers followed Mother Ann to the United States in 1774 after a revelation promised greater religious freedom there. Once in America, the Shaker congregation migrated all over New England before settling in New York, forming numerous small communities through 1784, when “Mother Ann” passed away.²¹ Following Ann’s passing, two devout followers, Joseph Meacham and Lucy Wright, assumed leadership of the religion and oversaw an incredible growth period for the Shakers, beginning with a brand-new communal homestead.²² As one Shaker recorder described:

²⁰ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*. Ann herself had been married to Abraham Stanley in 1761 and had suffered four miscarriages in their attempts to have children. Stanley followed Ann to the United States in 1774 but soon after left her.

²¹ Ibid. Early Shakers greatly benefitted from a Baptist revival that took place near their base community in New Lebanon which, according to the community records, sent religious seekers right into the arms of Mother Ann, who often preached in those areas.

²² Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 36. Another follower, James Whittaker, was the primary leader for the sect for three years, 1784-1787, and oversaw the first building for Shaker communities, but Meacham and Wright overshadow him in terms of longevity and impact in heading the Shaker communities.

The gathering of the society began at New-Lebanon, in the month of September, 1787, and continued to progress as fast as circumstances and the nature of the work would admit. Elders and deacons were appointed to lead and direct in matters of spiritual and temporal concern; suitable buildings were erected for the accommodation of the members; and order and regularity were, by degrees, established in the society.²³

Within fifteen years of Ann's death, Shakers had founded eleven major communities, housing over 1600 cumulative members.²⁴ At their height, Shakers numbered approximately six thousand and occupied eighteen communities that openly accepted blacks and women as equal members, a radical practice.²⁵ By 1830, Shakers successfully ran settlements from Maine to Kentucky, with extensive farming and successful businesses which earned them the respect of the population at large and established their reputation as "the most thoroughly organized [communistic society on the continent], and in some respects the most successful and flourishing."²⁶

Religious Beliefs

Knowledge of the Shakers' firmly held religious beliefs is key to understanding how this Society grew so rapidly and successfully. First among these is a strong belief in duality. The first two tenets enumerated in Shaker texts that codify their beliefs are:

- I. That God is a dual person, male and female; that Adam was a dual person, being created in God's image; and that 'the distinction

²³ *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, Commonly Called Shakers*. 2nd ed. (Albany, NY: C. Van Benthuysen, 1848), 59.

²⁴ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 22 and Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*. Between 1787 and 1792, Shakers founded two societies in New York, four in Massachusetts, two in New Hampshire, two in Maine, and one in Connecticut. These communities grew around farms donated to the cause by converted Believers.

²⁵ *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God*, directed by Ken Burns, et al. (1984; PBS Video; VIVA, the Virtual Library of Virginia; WETA-TV), digital, https://avalon.lib.virginia.edu/media_objects/avalon:926.

²⁶ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

of sex is eternal, inheres in the soul itself; and that no angels or spirits exist who are not male and female.

II. That Christ is a Spirit, and one of the highest, who appeared first in the person of Jesus, representing the male, and later in the person of Ann Lee, representing the female element in God.²⁷

To Shakers, God existed dually in two sexes, as did Christ, who appeared in his female form as Mother Ann herself.²⁸ A second sense of duality existed in the marriage of the earthly, temporal world and a resurrected, spiritual world. Shakers were premillennialists, or believers in the Second Coming of Christ ushering in the Millennium, a period of establishing God's kingdom on Earth. They believed the Second Coming was accomplished in the birth of Ann Lee and thus, they were actively living in the Millennium and establishing God's kingdom themselves. The third and fourth tenets from Shaker texts attest:

III. That the religious history of mankind is divided into four cycles, which are represented also in the spirit world, each having its appropriate heaven and hell....The heaven of the fourth and last dispensation 'is now in process of formation' and is to supersede in time all previous heavens."

IV. They hold themselves to be the "Church of the Last Dispensation," the true Church of this age; and they believe that the day of judgment, or "beginning of Christ's kingdom on earth," dates from the establishment of their Church, and will be completed by its development.²⁹

The Shakers' world existed as temporal and spiritual, in that they persisted in physical labor, but with spiritual implications, creating earthly *and* heavenly kingdoms.³⁰ Such

²⁷ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

²⁸ Sally M. Promey, "Celestial Visions," 93. There is no record that Mother Ann herself ever claimed to be a female reincarnation of Christ. However, Shaker doctrine did attribute that claim to her following her death, and it became a tenet of her followers.

²⁹ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

³⁰ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 67.

work required Godly revelation, achieved by worship, which took physical form in ritualized song and dance, peppered with continued ecstatic convulsions carried over from the Wardley sect.³¹ Shaker dances captured their dualistic beliefs in worship. One writer explains:

Shaker dance...became the organized enactment of the sacred story of community based on the dual sexuality of God. Here male and female members of the community revealed that they were equal members of one body, reflecting the divine community. Similarly, the dance dramatized millennial belief because in it the barriers between this world and the next seemingly dissolved.³²

These dances allowed Shakers to “transcend the temporal,” by communing directly in spirit.³³ However, Shakers heavily weighed the pragmatic side of creating heaven on earth. Abiding by the counsel that “idleness is the sure road to destruction and misery” and “Order...is heaven’s first law, and the protection of souls,”³⁴ Shakers believed wholeheartedly in work as a principle of worship. It was a way of serving God by consecrating their efforts, even in the most menial tasks, to the building up of heaven. As one Shaker man put it, “A man can show his religion as much in measuring onions as he can in shouting, ‘Glory, Hallelujah!’”³⁵ Shakers rose before 5:00am every day and were at work fifteen minutes later, laboring all day (besides mealtimes), and retiring to bed by 9:30pm.³⁶ To keep individuals engaged in their labor, daily assignments rotated

³¹ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

³² Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*. 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 174 and Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 172.

³³ Ray, “A Reappraisal of Shaker Furniture and Society,” 107.

³⁴ *The Youth’s Guide in Zion, and Holy Mother’s Promises* (Canterbury, N.H.: 1842, Reprint 1963), 13.

³⁵ *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God*.

³⁶ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

according to an ordered system.³⁷ Despite the rigor, Shakers worked with a sense of joy and peace. As one community member described: “The inhabitants pass and repass each other as angels, and whether about their manual employ or otherwise, wear a cheerfulness mingled with sobriety that I never before witnessed.”³⁸ A visitor to the community called the penchant for quietly industrious work “eternal Sabbath stillness,” implicit in Shaker life.³⁹

Accusations of Shaker existence having “no charms for the idler or for merely sentimental or romantic people” seem appropriate, but a life bereft of joy did not fit the Believers’ religious mentality.⁴⁰ They allowed some diversions, such as correspondence, singing, and friendly visitations, but each in its appointed time, never interfering with daily labor or worship.⁴¹ By leading such a life, Shakers felt they could avoid the passions which caused the downfall of Adam and Eve and, following, the downfall of humanity.⁴² Their way of life not only repudiated the exploitation of industrialism and economic individualism of the nineteenth-century, but also allowed them to put off the “frivolity, vanity, pleasures and falsehoods of the love of the world---those cesspools for the human mind, which drown in passion those noble conceptions.”⁴³ Instead, they abolished every sense of morality given by the larger world—including the nuclear

³⁷ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 59.

³⁸ Hervey Elkins, *Fifteen years in the senior order of Shakers: a narration of facts, concerning that singular people* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth Press, 1853), 38.

³⁹ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Singing was allowed, but use of instruments varied community to community. Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

⁴² Elkins, *Fifteen years in the senior order of Shakers*, 16.

⁴³ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 39; Elkins, *Fifteen years in the senior order of Shakers*, 12.

family—and established “families” where everyone had an interest in the quality of joint life.⁴⁴ Shakers’ belief in the mixture of heavenly and earthly, as well as their irrevocable bucking of worldly temptations extended readily and steadfastly to their material environment.

Attitudes on Material Goods

The 1848 edition of the Shaker’s *Summary View of the Millennial Church*, their basic manual for living, lists several qualities Shakers valued in themselves:

“Temperance and chastity, plainness and simplicity, neatness, industry and good economy, are among those virtuous principles which actuate the people of the United Society.”⁴⁵ Each of these qualities informed the Shakers’ views on material goods and their roles in a heavenly society. Goods made during the height of Shaker power are famous for simple functionality and clean design. These design principles governed every facet of the Shaker community, from the strict orthogonal ordering of their buildings to the cutting of the bread at mealtime.⁴⁶ Shakers found a use for all good things and shunned that which served as physical and spiritual clutter.

⁴⁴ Shakers also willingly gave of their goods to others. One anecdote tells that, upon learning that thieves were coming to their farms in the night and stealing their grown crops for food, the local community decided it simply needed to plant more—enough for themselves and for the thieves. They also notably took in and raised orphans. Andrew Saunders, “Material Manifestations.”

⁴⁵ *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, Commonly Called Shakers*. 2nd ed. (Albany, NY: C. Van Benthuyssen, 1848), 84.

⁴⁶ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 69. Shakers favored clean, square cuts of bread. Promey, “Celestial Visions,” 91.

Work constituted an important form of worship for Shakers, as evident in the Shaker motto, “hands to work and hearts to God.”⁴⁷ Historian Helen Upton states plainly that “their work...is an expression of them.”⁴⁸ Mother Ann consistently urged her followers to carefully manage their temporal concerns, including being industrious. She warned that “those who were unfaithful in temporal things, could not find the blessing and protection of God in their spiritual travel ; hence a faithful and wise improvement of their time and talents, in the things of time, was essentially necessary in order to inherit true riches.”⁴⁹ Shaker industriousness stemmed from their eternal goals. Because true godliness required withdrawal from the outside world, Shakers extensively provided for their own needs. One account describes that “they make all their own clothing, and formerly made also their own woolen cloths and flannels. They make shoes, do all their own carpentering, and, as far as is convenient, raise the food they consume.”⁵⁰ In addition to covering the “basics,” Shakers also manufactured a long list of other goods, including: whips and whiplashes, pails, tubs, cheese-hops, casks, barrels, brass and pewter buttons, candles, buckles, spinning wheels, baskets of every conceivable size, as well as hoes and ironwares.⁵¹ The flat broom—a foremost Shaker invention—for

⁴⁷ Ray, “A Reappraisal of Shaker Furniture and Society, 109 and Lance Esplund, “The First American Modernists: For the Shakers, ‘Beauty Rests in Utility.’” *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/exhibition-review-the-shakers-from-mount-lebanon-to-the-world-1407361764>.

⁴⁸ *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God*.

⁴⁹ *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, Commonly Called Shakers*, 35.

⁵⁰ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

example, has been described as “a fitting emblem or symbol of Shakerism” because “they have more ways of making it useful than are known to the outside world. They never disgrace it by making it stand behind the door, as if it were responsible for the untidy litter about the house. The Shaker broom is always hung up against the wall when not in use.”⁵² This quotation characterizes Shaker work not just by quality of craftsmanship, but by deep respect for the works of their hands. This respect was profoundly religious.⁵³ Because work constituted a form of worship, Shaker products were symbols of religious performance, both temporal and spiritual.⁵⁴

In addition to participating in honest, worshipful work, turning your heart to God meant abandoning individual possessions, particularly those characteristic of worldliness. Shakers were “a people who had withdrawn themselves from the world...relinquishing all personal claim to what they had accumulated and owned, renouncing all vanities and worldly ambitions,” and they were expected to continue that renouncement within the community.⁵⁵ Counsel from church founders reinforced that idea perpetually. For example, when one wealthy prospective convert approached Mother Ann about what to do with her gold jewelry and precious ornaments, the leader allegedly replied, “You may let the moles and bats have them, that is, the children of this world; for they set their

⁵¹ Edward Deming Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers* (Albany, NY: The University of the State of New York, 1933), 139-140, 164, 168. These goods were both used within the community and typically also sold without, as will be described.

⁵² Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 130.

⁵³ Saunders, “Material Manifestations,” 87. Saunders points out, and I agree, that this is the fault in purely stylistic analyses of Shaker goods—they neglect the deep spiritual meaning inherent in these objects.

⁵⁴ Saunders, “Material Manifestations,” 86.

⁵⁵ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 219.

hearts upon such things; but the people of God do not want them.”⁵⁶ Lucy Wright, the second female to lead the Shakers, reported her concern that “many among Believers...have too strong a feeling to follow the fashions of the world” and urged that “Believers avoid these extremes and keep a proper medium, entirely regardless to the vain fashions of the world...to see Believers anxious for new things merely on account of the fashion of other people is very disagreeable to me and a loss to the people of God.”⁵⁷ These teachings penetrated Shaker communities, evident in the writings of early followers and the remnant artifacts and descriptions of their living environments.

Visitors to Shaker communes often repeated admiration for the utility and simplicity that appeared in every corner, from the sparsely furnished but comfortable rooms to the level fields and ordered orchards.⁵⁸ Even the beautiful rosebushes adorning the roads were not intended for ornament; they were used to create rosewater for medicinal purposes.⁵⁹ To some, the appearance was inherently poor and primitive. From one report:

The lovers of gaudy decorations and "small display," would perhaps deem the style of architecture, employed by the Shakers as too modest, uniform and plain. They wish embellishments to alleviate a monotony, which, though rich and commodious, is not fanciful.... The low, dark, and heathenishly ornamented structures are not compatible with the liberal and enlightened spirit of modern times. They behoove despots and seem the concomitants of slavery and terror.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, Commonly Called Shakers*, 36.

⁵⁷ Jean McMahon Humez, *Mother's First-born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 91.

⁵⁸ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States* and Elkins, *Fifteen years in the senior order of Shakers*, 12.

⁵⁹ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 102.

⁶⁰ Elkins, *Fifteen years in the senior order of Shakers*, 52.

While this may have been the exterior view of the world, for Shakers, focusing on such simplicity allowed them to keep their minds fixed on eternal goals, rather than worldly achievements.⁶¹ Here, duality emerged again. Shakers believed that transforming the normative world into the one of their heavenly goals necessitated first creating heavenly goods. Thus, perfection became an ostensible goal for their craftsmanship.⁶² Perfection manifested in basic simplicity, achieved first externally and then internally. Shaker hearts were meant to be simple; doctrine expounded principles such as “Simplicity should have a place in thy heart and soul: this beautifies the child of God”⁶³ and “True gospel simplicity implies a godly sincerity, and a real singleness of heart...it is *without ostentation*, parade, or any vain show, and naturally leads to *plainness* in all things.”⁶⁴ Simplicity was God-like in its humility and showed deference by allowing the natural beauty of divine Creation to shine. Superfluities, on the other hand, were mere vain distraction. Community members even put structures in place to maintain this simplicity: the Millennial Laws dictate that one of the duties of trustees and deacons was to oversee business transactions and to purchase only needful articles for the community; all purchases were inspected and approved by leaders.⁶⁵ In some cases, clocks or other articles purchased from the world had superficial decorations removed from them so as to

⁶¹ John M. Anderson, “Force and Form: The Shaker Intuition of Simplicity,” *The Journal of Religion* 30, no. 4 (October 1950): 259, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1199188>.

⁶² *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God*.

⁶³ *The Youth’s Guide in Zion, and Holy Mother’s Promises*, 16.

⁶⁴ *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers, Commonly Called Shakers*, 297. Emphasis added.

⁶⁵ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 32.

better befit the aesthetic of the community.⁶⁶ The Laws also stipulate “the purchase of needful articles that appear substantial and good, and suitable for Believers to use, should not be neglected to purchase those which are needlessly adorned, even if they are a little cheaper.”⁶⁷ This addition proves that Shaker adherence to simplicity was not a mere financial principle. Instead, this served to keep practitioners religious-minded and to reinforce the unity of the settlement by providing material uniformity among the community members.⁶⁸

All of these teachings intended to reap great religious reward for Shakers. However, these dictates also allowed Shakers to innovate a variety of new technologies to make their work more productive. Working for a goal beyond personal advancement, Shakers produced a variety of goods still widely used. One author writes “anyone who has ever used a flat broom, an unadorned chest of drawers, garden seeds in printed paper packets, a circular saw or clothes-pins has engaged with Shaker aesthetics and innovations.”⁶⁹ Shakers quickly became known in the larger community for the quality of their goods, some farmers eventually turning to them for advice on what tools to use on their farms.⁷⁰ Shaker consciousness of their greater desires motivated all of these improvements. Ultimately, as Edward Deming Andrews states, “The Shaker brethren

⁶⁶ Elkins, *Fifteen years in the senior order of Shakers*, 26.

⁶⁷ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 32.

⁶⁸ Elkins, *Fifteen years in the senior order of Shakers*, 29.

⁶⁹ Esplund, “The First American Modernists.” These are all alleged Shaker inventions, though some are disputed.

⁷⁰ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 38.

and sisters were ever aware that theirs was a high calling, and that they labored for the greatest Employer of all.”⁷¹

Material

Furniture

Despite Shakers having their hands in countless industries, furniture constitutes the great art form of the Shaker community. Modern collectors admire Shaker furnishings for their streamlined aesthetic and high-quality craftsmanship. Yet, inside the community, the visual appeal of a piece of furniture was superseded by its alignment with spiritual progress and pragmatic function. Shaker furniture craft began within the first few years of the Believers’ settlement into communities.⁷² Understanding that furnishings would be a basic domestic need, and disliking ornamented styles for their vanity, converted carpenters and joiners undertook the task of creating distinctive furniture to fit the religious ideals they embraced.⁷³ Thus, the height of Shaker furniture production occurred during the first half of the 19th century, when several new communities were established across New England.⁷⁴ This half-century period provides the greatest insight into how Shakers viewed furniture and the extent to which their design principles originated in religious ideals of Millennial perfection.

⁷¹ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 266.

⁷² Ray, “A Reappraisal of Shaker Furniture and Society,” 112.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Marguerite F. Melcher, “Shaker Furniture,” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 27, no. 273 (Spring 1962): 91, doi: 10.2307/3795071.

As with all other areas of Shaker life, the watchwords in furniture craftsmanship were simplicity and functionality. When looking at a standard Shaker chair (fig. 1), these principles are evident.



Figure 1. Shaker chair, hung on pegs. Unknown maker. Circa 1830-1860. Unknown Wood. New York State Museum, Albany, NY. Photo by author.

The legs and stretchers are slim and cylindrical with no intricate carving or turning, the back extends up straight in a continuous piece from the back legs, with a low upper rail and a second, straight crossrail that only curves in places ergonomically necessary for the human back. There are no arms, no balled or clawed feet, no ornamentation at all of any note. Even the caned seat denotes rural austerity, no fussing with upholstery or

cushioning. It is intriguing that, given the opportunity to exercise full creativity, the standard Shaker chair is instead stripped to its basics.⁷⁵ Yet, Shakers saw each attribute not as basic, but symbolic, and capable of furthering a user's religious practice. Proud of their simplicity, the Shaker chair had a low back that encouraged strong posture, allowing congregants to sit upright. The lack of arms made them easy to get in and out of or allowed more movement of their arms during worship services. Unupholstered seats discouraged lounging, uncharacteristic for this group always at work. Shaker chairs are also nearly weightless, an important characteristic, for they needed to be "handled easily and moved about, or hung from the pegboards whenever floor space was needed for cleaning or for religious exercises."⁷⁶ The low stretchers made these chairs easy to hang upside down, as they often were to allow for multiple uses of space within a single room. Thus, they are definitively simple and functional. Shakers improved on that function as needed. One famous innovation dreamed up by Shaker carpenter George O'Donnell was a chair with tilting ball-and-socket feet (fig. 2).

⁷⁵ For further published examples of Shaker furniture, see Andrews, *Shaker Furniture*; A.D. Emerich, et al., *Shaker: Furniture and Objects from the Faith and Edward Deming Andrews collections, commemorating the bicentenary of American Shakers* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973); Timothy D. Rieman and Jean M. Burks, *Encyclopedia of Shaker Furniture* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2003).

⁷⁶ Melcher, "Shaker Furniture," 91.



Figure 2. Patent Model for Button Joint Tilter. George O'Donnell. 1852. Bird's eye maple and tape, with brass tilters and ferrules. Photo credit of *Shaker Design: Out of This World*, edited by Jean M. Burks.

Noticing the tendency of worshipping Believers to tip their straight chairs back, O'Donnell patented a design for the rear posts of a standard Shaker ladder-back chair with two tilter-feet, so the leaning chair did not scuff the floors.⁷⁷ Of course, no other features were altered beyond the moveable feet, since the chairs otherwise fit their function.

The Shaker chair demonstrates how function factored heavily into Shaker creations, befitting their belief in the importance of simple and usable goods rid of frivolity. In the Shaker mindset, a table need only be a table, and all “decoration” was circumscribed by necessity.⁷⁸ In some ways, this limited makers’ creative expression by decreasing output on the goods they produced. For example, having no tolerance for

⁷⁷ Jean M. Burks, “Faith, Form, and Finish: Shaker Furniture in Context,” in *Shaker Design: Out of This World*, ed. Jean M. Burks (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 51. This invention came a bit later, in 1852.

⁷⁸ Conversation with Jerry Grant, curator of Shaker Museum, Mount Lebanon, on February 26, 2016 at New Lebanon, New York.

earthly luxuries and indulgences, Shaker craftsmen never made tea tables, card tables, upholstered furniture, or sofas, all forms that became highly popular in mainstream society.⁷⁹ Instead, they designed forms that were extremely uncommon in single family New England homes, such as built-in closets.⁸⁰ This principle is visible in their remaining artifacts; the current collection of the Shaker Museum at Mount Lebanon, for example, exhibits a practical assortment of items, such as large blanket boxes, and common dressers.⁸¹ On occasion, specialized goods were made for specific purposes. One such example is a large tailor's bench in storage at the Shaker Museum today. This piece, an exceptionally large table/bureau, provides an ideal surface on which to cut large quantities of cloth, and tacks exist to mark different yard lengths to facilitate that function. The front of the bench features several different-sized drawers, built to accommodate storing a variety of materials, from fabrics to buttons and tapes. Regardless of its substantial size and unique construction, however, it provides little in the way of visual appeal by the standards of the day.

Similar objects appear repeatedly in collections of Shaker goods, underlying another vital doctrine in Shaker material culture: unity. For the duration of the Shaker furniture-making industry, little variation appears in the forms of Shaker furnishings. At the root of this continuity lies the Shaker principle of simplicity. Folded into the concept of spiritual simplicity was "real singleness of heart and mind in all things."⁸² This

⁷⁹ Ray, "A Reappraisal of Shaker Furniture and Society," 108.

⁸⁰ Burks, "Faith, Form, and Finish," 31.

⁸¹ The author visited the Shaker Museum, Mount Lebanon on February 26, 2016.

⁸² *One Hundredth Anniversary of the Organization of the Shaker Church, Enfield, N.H., October 18, 1893* (Enfield, NH: Abbott's Power Print, 1893), 31.

vaguely-defined principle most often manifested as kindness and union, a shared common goal: an eye single to God. Singleness materially appeared as uniformity in clothing, building, and ideally, every good, both within and across communities. When perfectly achieved, a Shaker would feel comfortable in any of the settlements, because they all existed and operated in the same ways. Furniture provided a significant familiarity in this sense, because the designs were largely similar across all the villages. Shaker chairs and bureaus are overwhelmingly uniform, distinctive only in the fact that they were often measured for specific spaces. Four Shaker-made chests in storage at the Shaker Museum illustrate the conformity with slight additions of variation (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Four Shaker-made chests. Unknown makers. Circa 1830-1880. Various woods. Shaker Museum, Mount Lebanon. Photo by author.

All four exhibit the same plain side panels, the only visible distinction in slight gradations of varnish and the fact that one has a side handle. Each chest features a visible lip on the

bottom (though on one the lip does not continue onto the side panel), and of course a lidded lip with a barely beveled edge. What stands out most is the base of these chests; all but one showcase a basic arch cut out to form the legs. The one exception has an added point, making it more bracket-shaped, but it still operates within the arched form template. These chests, despite being from different areas and spanning decades, capture to large degree the ideal of “singleness” and simplicity materially. This is further reinforced by the absence of individual craftsmen’s marks on most Shaker furniture. Partially because of the communal nature of these objects as well as the standard that country furniture was not meant for artistic recognition, but for practical use, few Shaker artists signed their work.⁸³ The principle of unity discouraged the type of artistry non-Shaker craftsman exhibited at the time. On the other hand, George O’Donnell’s tilt-enabling addition to the standard chair shows that, within their constraints, invention and creativity still appeared. Shakers consistently adapted old forms to fit new uses or used new tools to work more efficiently or productively.⁸⁴

Most prominently, Shaker forms consistently feature a rectilinear visual appearance. Not only does this assist with functionality (square objects fit together more easily, preserving space), but it also embodies the specific Shaker duality. Symmetry and

⁸³ Rural furniture traditions rarely dictated that a craftsman sign his own work, and so few examples of country furniture are signed. Shakers actually signed their furniture slightly more often, perhaps in response to the demand for true Shaker furniture outside the community.

⁸⁴ Janet Malcolm argues that if the Shakers had access to power tools, they would have used them, because they strongly believed in the positive role of efficient machinery to accomplish their same goals. Janet Malcolm, “The Modern Spirit in Shaker Design,” in *Shaker: Furniture and Objects from the Faith and Edward Deming Andrews Collection Commemorating the Bicentenary of the American Shakers* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973), 22.

squareness are both captured in the Shaker view of God. As Sally Promey explains, the squareness represented the relationship of the heavenly Son and Daughter to the Father and Mother. She writes, “In this context of heavenly hierarchy, ‘square’ or ‘four square’ implied wholeness, stability, and authority. Like the celestial quaternity, the Shaker ministry was ‘four square,’ or four sided.”⁸⁵ The four figures of Christ, Ann, God, and Heavenly Mother constituted the divine leaders of the Believers, who matched that basic structure in their communities, run by two Elders and two Eldresses. Four corners, then, was a godly design principle that promoted squareness, evoking remembrance of four holy figures and prompting users to ‘square’ their lives to the truth.⁸⁶ As a result, Shaker furniture overwhelmingly expresses balance, and a rectilinear foundation.⁸⁷

Other Shaker furnishings showcase an interesting use of color, which alternately reinforced and complicated the Shaker impulse for plainness. Early Shaker chairs and tables were sometimes painted or stained a dark red, a practice which was soon abandoned in favor of light stains or varnishes that enhanced the natural beauty of the wood grain.⁸⁸ These design principles loosely epitomize the fundamental Shaker belief in honoring the heavenly dimension of the existing world, particularly nature, God’s divine creation. Contradicting this taste for natural appearance, Shaker furniture is dotted

⁸⁵ Promey, “Celestial Visions,” 93.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁷ Burks, “Faith, Form, and Finish,” 36. Symmetry is often ascribed to Shakers as a rigid design principle, which may originate in the religious principles described here. At the same time, it likely originates more explicitly from traditional design principles of the day. Balanced, symmetrical pieces were the standard fare of non-Shaker furniture-makers. Additionally, plenty of asymmetric examples of Shaker furniture exist, so it must not have been a firmly held aesthetic.

⁸⁸ Melcher, “Shaker Furniture,” 91. Heavy lacquers or veneers were never used, because they were seen as more embellishment than enhancement.

with color throughout its development. Differing hypotheses on the use of color exist. One supposition is that color was used as a coding system to define furniture's uses within certain spaces.⁸⁹ Just as the Millennial Laws directed community meetinghouses be painted white, barns dark red or brown, and shops consistently colored with the homes, furniture may have fit into specific uses based on its color.⁹⁰ The palette was limited to "monochromatic applications of slate blue, forest green, yellow ochre, bone white and Venetian red" so as not to become ornamentation and therefore facilitate "the sin of pride."⁹¹ However, the material artifacts still extant in collections today do not seem to substantiate any pattern along those lines. Instead, it seems that Shakers merely enjoyed the use of color and so painted their items vibrant shades. The use of these colors was not deemed "unnecessary" in the way that curlicues and intricate veneers were, but was accepted by Shakers as pleasant improvements to their environment; Heaven was not necessarily without color.⁹² Yet, Shakers circumscribed the use of color within bounds; the addition was still modest by public standards. Paint was always applied in monochrome, never with added designs, and it was constantly retouched and reapplied to preserve the neat appearance of the object.⁹³ As visible in one Shaker washstand (fig. 4), which is painted yellow all over, the addition of this single color does

⁸⁹ Burks, "Faith, Form, and Finish," 55-57.

⁹⁰ Robert P. Emlen, "Shaker Villages and the Landscape of 'Gospel Order,'" in *Shaker Design: Out of This World*, ed. Jean M. Burks (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 15.

⁹¹ Esplund, "The First American Modernists."

⁹² Shakers also occasionally used porcelain knobs for their furnishings, which use followed the same principle of being merely pleasant, functional additions, not needlessly decorative.

⁹³ J. Davidsen, "Shaker Shock," designmatters, added January 16, 2011, <https://jdavidsen.wordpress.com/tag/shaker-color/>.

little to alter the furniture, only providing a little bit of life into an otherwise simple object.⁹⁴



Figure 4. Washstand. Unknown maker. Circa 1830. Pine with walnut knobs, yellow paint, and steel catch. Enfield, New Hampshire. Photo credit of *Shaker Design: Out of This World*, edited by Jean M. Burks.

A similar departure from bare plainness appeared in the porcelain drawer pulls occasionally found on Shaker objects; these were accepted as decoration, but within certain boundaries. (Dissent arose when one community had access to them and another did not.)⁹⁵ Both of these stylistic additions complicate the standard perception of Shaker

⁹⁴ Refer to note 75 for further published examples.

⁹⁵ Regarding the porcelain knobs, this was a problem. At one point, sisters in Mount Lebanon had porcelain knobs on their sewing drawers, and the sisters from South Union, Kentucky, complained that they did not.

design, contradicting the oft-held belief that Shakers were entirely without any desire for decoration. Rather, the Shakers welcomed brightness, so long as it did not upend the divine simplicity or unity they espoused.

All these principles, aesthetic and religious, worked together in the furnishing of an entire room. Hervey Elkins lists that the standard furnishings of bedroom were:

plain chairs, bottomed with rattan or rush, and light so as to be easily portable ;one rocking chair is admissible in each room, but such a luxury is unencouraged ; one or two writing tables or desks; one looking glass, not exceeding eighteen inches in length, set in a plain mahogany frame ; an elegant but plain stove; two lamps; one candle-stick, and a smoker or tin funnel to convey to the chimney the smoke and gas evolved from the lights; bedsteads painted green; coverlets of a mixed color, blue and white; carpets manufactured by themselves, and each containing but three colors.⁹⁶

Simplicity is evident in the plain, rush-seated chairs, function in the discouraged, limited rocking chair and the modestly sized and ornamented looking-glass. Color appears sparingly on the bed and in the carpet. Squareness is evident in the writing desks and lamps, and likely many other features as well, considering that nearly all rooms housed two individuals of the same sex. These principles pervaded the daily existence of Shaker dwellings.

While each element of Shaker furniture has its roots in a religious doctrine, a larger, overarching motivation spurred the objects' creation: the goal of transformation and perfection. Because of Shakers' Millennialist beliefs, they were not constrained by fashion, but were freed to create based on an entirely new motivation. Writer Thomas Merton explains: "There were of course rules to be obeyed and principles by which the

⁹⁶ Elkins, *Fifteen Years in the Senior Order of the Shakers*, 25.

work was guided: but the work itself was free, spontaneous, itself responding to a new and unique situation. Nothing was done by rote or by slavish imitation.”⁹⁷ Largely unaffected by the outside world, Shakers exhibited a sense of uniqueness in their furniture. Especially initially, they were unburdened by the necessity of providing something marketable to non-Shakers and could instead focus on creating something God himself could sit in. In other words, Shakers’ inspiration drew from what one author calls the “psychic reality of his vision.”⁹⁸ These craftsmen brought to *earthly* form something which already existed in *heavenly* form. Like a sculptor carving away all the stone which is not inherently part of the end form, Shaker craftsmen could conceivably bring to their communities a translation of the spiritual world through the creation of the right object.⁹⁹ Edward Deming Andrews sums it up thus: “The craftsmanship of the Shakers was an integral part of the life and thought of a humble but consecrated folk. They did not think of the work of their hands...as an art, something special or exclusive, but rather as the right way of sustaining their church order, the ideal of a better society.”¹⁰⁰

Textiles

Those same design principles which strongly dictated the creation of Shaker furniture—simplicity, squareness, and constrained use of color—repeated in another

⁹⁷ Andrews, *Masterpieces of Shaker Furniture*, x.

⁹⁸ Ray, “A Reappraisal of Shaker Furniture and Society,” 108.

⁹⁹ Thomas Merton describes it similarly, saying “The thing made had to be precisely what it was supposed to be. It had, so to speak, to fulfill its own vocation. The Shaker cabinetmaker enabled wood to respond to the ‘call’ to become a chest, a table, a chair, a desk.” Andrews, *Masterpieces of Shaker Furniture*, ix.

¹⁰⁰ Andrews, *Masterpieces of Shaker Furniture*, 14.

major Shaker industry—textiles. From clothing to bedding and floor coverings, Shakers similarly utilized basic patterns with little or no embellishment and an apparent disregard for fashion.

Shakers long supplied their own clothing. The operation began in New Lebanon under experienced tailor David Slosson, who converted to the community in its early days. At that time, the tailor shop made only men's clothing, including coats, vests, breeches, stocks, and hats.¹⁰¹ The sisters' contribution took place in the weaving shop, where they processed primarily flax and wool, weaving fabric that went to the tailors and, eventually, tailoresses of the community.¹⁰² Flax and wool led this production, supplemented by cotton in the last years of the eighteenth-century and, in a small way, silk, produced in the Kentucky and Ohio settlements.¹⁰³ This practice continued until the 1830s, when yards of wool or linen were much cheaper to purchase than to produce.¹⁰⁴ Even with purchased fabric, Shakers still sewed as much of their textiles as possible, and clothing remained an in-community production through the nineteenth century. All of this work was heavily motivated by the Shaker desire for self-sufficiency. Relying on the world as little as possible meant that they could limit contact with outsiders who lacked the Shaker sensibility and heavenly perspective, thereby maintaining the purity of the community. Clothing also provided a distinct opportunity for Shakers to express their

¹⁰¹ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 170-171.

¹⁰² Ibid., 172; Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 36. Shaker men also constructed the machinery for production, including power loom, spinning jennies, and carding machines. Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 71.

¹⁰³ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 41. Here, Gordon states that by the 1830s, there was enough silk to furnish everyone in the South Union, Kentucky community with a silk handkerchief.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 36.

communal lifestyle and distinguish themselves as a humble people. Clothes were the outward manifestation of their wearers' inward lives and captured in a personal way the soberness of the users' daily activities. A description in 1865 explained that the Shakers "mortify the body by early rising and by very plain living," including their "plain and simple dress, without ornament of any kind."¹⁰⁵ While the piece's author concedes that he found this apparel very unattractive, his inclusion of it as an example of the Shaker restraint captures how these vestments functioned within the Shaker community. Less a "uniform" than an aesthetic choice, Shakers' clothing separated the wearer from worldly fashion even as it united wearers as a distinct group.

Initially, Shaker leaders placed few restrictions on clothing. Obviously, simplicity was favored, considering Mother Ann's many injunctions against prideful possessions, but other than that, Shaker women simply wore what they had previously.¹⁰⁶ However, once they isolated themselves in the community, Shaker women in particular lost track of and interest in fashion, and their clothes slowly became outdated.¹⁰⁷ As uniformity became a greater concern, Shaker communities modeled their new look upon the leaders at New Lebanon. They emulated the style of "Mother" Lucy Wright, who favored simple striped cotton dresses with longer sleeves, which became a common standard.¹⁰⁸ A formula followed: simple, quality cloth of subdued colors cut in standard dimensions with plain buttons and small cuffs. These rules applied to every article of

¹⁰⁵ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

¹⁰⁶ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 175.

¹⁰⁷ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 147.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Regional geographies provide some variation on basic style.

clothing, for labor or for worship. Plain accessories, like hats or shawls, also embodied these qualities.

For men, work clothes were casual, with long trousers and plain shirts and a vest (fig. 5). Coats, when needed, were either blue or steel-mixed, based on whether or not dye was cheaply available.¹⁰⁹

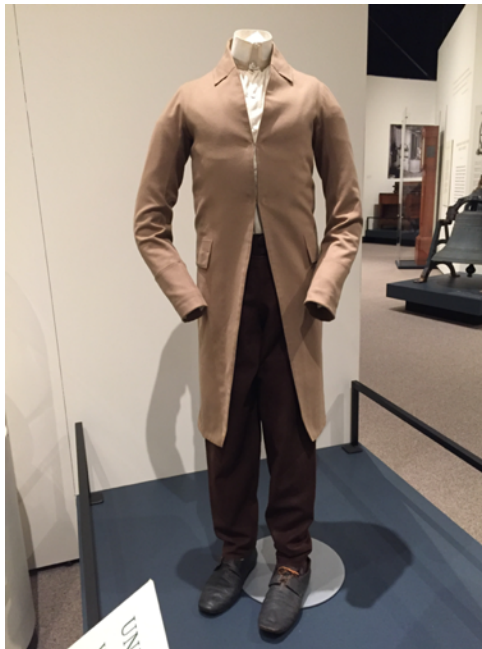


Figure 5. Shaker male costume. Unknown maker. Circa 1830-1860. Cotton, wool, and other materials. New York State Museum, Albany, NY. Photo by author.

There was some variation by season; for example, winter trousers were made of wool, whereas summer ones were typically linen or cotton.¹¹⁰ An outfit on display at the New

¹⁰⁹ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 178.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

York State Museum's Shaker exhibit captures standard everyday dress. This outfit, on the higher end of Shaker wear, is entirely nondescript. Its fitted jacket and high, wide collar were not unfashionable at the start of the community, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but certainly were by the mid-to-late nineteenth century. The colors are overwhelmingly drab, mere browns and whites, with clashing black shoes. The material, probably cotton, provides durability but not visual interest. The long pants are shapeless, made not for looks but purpose. For a rural population, the male Shaker costume was respectable, but not at all fashionable. These clothes served their function, and did little else to draw attention to the individual wearing them, except through their simplicity. Sabbath clothing was also plain, but featured an intriguing symbolism. This costume included a dark blue or brown coat with six-inch cuffs and lidded horizontal pockets. Beneath that, men wore boxy shirts with sleeve ties, a broadcloth vest with lidded pockets, plain black breeches with black stockings, and a neck covering called a "stock," made of white, stiff material that buckled in back.¹¹¹ One such example exists in a depiction of the Shaker Man's Costume drawn in the mid-twentieth century (fig. 6).

¹¹¹ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 176-7. Trousers eventually replaced breeches and stockings for Sabbath use.



Figure 6. *Shaker Man's Costume*. Unknown artist. Ca. 1880-1900. Watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Because of the blue vest, an outfit like this one was more likely worn for worship.

The drawing shows an outfit that looks altogether identical to the work clothing from the New York State Museum: chocolate-colored loose trousers, a long coat with a high collar and minimal cuff, as well as a white shirt with a “stock” at the neck. Clearly, Shaker clothing had changed little since its inception.¹¹² The visible difference, however, exists in a deep blue vest, worn over the white shirt, lending the ensemble visual interest. Sabbath-day vests were always blue, a color that according to Shaker belief, represented heaven. The chapel in which Shakers worshipped was the only building painted blue,

¹¹² It is unclear if the artist of this image is drawing from contemporary or historic Shaker clothing.

and Shaker men and women wore blue as part of their worship, and *only* while worshipping. For men, the blue appeared in their “meeting vest,” and for women, in their “meeting shoes.” Two examples are visible in figure 7 as part of the New York State Museum’s exhibit, their vibrant hue standing out amidst the overwhelming earth tones of countless other Shaker goods.¹¹³



Figure 7. Blue Shaker worship clothing. Unknown makers. Circa 1830-1860. Mixed materials. New York State Museum, Albany, NY. Photo by author. Items like this were traditionally worn during worship, the vest by men, the shoes by women.

These articles of clothing, however, are the exception to the rule of Shaker garb, and they are still altogether ordinary. Clothes reinforced Shaker priorities: deference to God, and

¹¹³ For further published examples of Shaker men’s clothing, refer to Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*.

disregard for fashion. Even at their most fashionable, Shaker men stood out for their austerity, rather than their stylishness, a visual manifestation of their spiritual conduct.

Shaker women also followed strict guidelines in dress once the communities established a code. Women's typical attire consisted of a short dress, an extended dress (worn underneath), an apron and/or kerchief, and a bonnet. The extended dress was typically black or blue, made with box pleats in the back skirt and a waist that hit closer to the hip.¹¹⁴ Bodices, initially worn under the dresses, were abandoned in 1811.¹¹⁵ The short dress—a jacket-style piece that extended to the hip—was typically made of light-colored, striped cotton and worn over the long dress but underneath the apron or kerchief.¹¹⁶ Sleeves went below the elbows, but did not extend longer until the 1820s.¹¹⁷ Aprons were cotton checked, constituting the only real use of patterning in their attire. Usually, the apron was added upon with the more common accessory was a long neckerchief, folded in half so it gathered in a point in the front by the waist.¹¹⁸ This outfit was topped with a white linen cap or bonnet.¹¹⁹ Typically, these same types of dresses were also worn for Sabbath services, or “nicer” dresses with more pleats in the skirt,

¹¹⁴ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 197-198.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 197.

¹¹⁷ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 167.

¹¹⁸ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 197 and Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 162. This was later replaced with a white, muslin collar with a cape that buttoned toward the neck.

¹¹⁹ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 198 and Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 162.

topped with the same apron, short dress, kerchief, and bonnet.¹²⁰ As visible in figure 8, the Shaker women's costume, like the Shaker men's, held little fashionable appeal.



Figure 8 Shaker female costume. Unknown maker. Circa 1830-1860. Mixed materials. New York State Museum, Albany, NY. Photo by author.

This particular example features a plain dress made out of a monochromatic plum material (albeit with a bit of shine), with a pointed neckerchief with a striped border, and a simple brown-and-white-checked apron. Although there is more individuality and color in this outfit than in the men's, the silhouette is still very simple and the fabric plain.

¹²⁰ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 164. In some communities, Sabbath attire for women was a white dress, symbolizing purity. Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 167. Counterintuitively, these were actually easier to clean, because they could be boiled without the dye leaking. Humez, *Mother's First-born Daughters*, 187-188.

Especially in contrast to the rising curvaceousness and patterning of the nineteenth century—with bustles and chintzes in fashion—this dress stands out. It, too, quickly distinguished Shaker women from their contemporaries.¹²¹

Dress styles for Shaker women served a greater purpose than mere distinction. Vitally, they downplayed the female body. Outside observers, like Charles Nordhoff, frequently commented that Shaker clothing did nothing to add beauty to the women. The large, loose dresses downplayed the women's natural shape and the large kerchief covered the décolletage—which was fashionable displayed in the world—and hid the shapes of the breasts. These choices were purposeful, attempting to desexualize Shaker women in a way suitable for this celibate society. Shaker women took this idea even further in their worship garments, which were colored either blue (in accordance to their color code) or white (fig. 9), highlighting their purity, both spiritual and sexual.

¹²¹ For further examples of Shaker women's costume, see Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*; Lynn Sorge, "The Evolution of Nineteenth-Century Shaker Dresses: Reflection of the World," *Dress* 21 (1994): 39-60.



Figure 9. *The March, Shaker Worship, Lebanon, Aug. 16, 1856.* Benson Lossing. *Harper's Weekly*, 1857. Ink on paper. New York State Museum, Albany, NY. As visible in this image, the women are wearing full white gowns with blue shoes, and the men are in their dark blue vests, with white shirts and darker trousers.

Just as the reactionary domestic authors of mainstream society valued women as the protectors of virtue, Shaker society placed the regulation of sexuality on women by adopting these forms of dress. By dressing to abolish their sexuality, women not only furthered the goal of celibacy; simplicity in women's dress also substantiated the belief that physical beauty was more an internal than external trait. Certainly, though Shaker grounds were known for being pristine (a trait of which Shakers were very proud), it was the peace and cooperation that truly imbued the community with its godliness. The same principle applied to clothing; a tidy appearance gives a good impression, but the state of the soul is more vital.

Yet, interest in fashion was hard to displace among Shaker women, who were well aware of current trends despite social insulation, as their internal correspondence

makes clear.¹²² In one 1819 letter, Ruth Farrington in Union Village, Ohio, thanks Rachel Spencer of New Lebanon to discuss her “new fashion of bonnets, as thou knowest that we old Shaker women are always after some new fashions.”¹²³ Ruth explains that they made a new style out of a variety of cloths and colors, and the sisters liked them much better than the old styles, so they continued to make them, even sending them out to the Eldresses in other communities, hoping that “my precious Mother and all my pretty sisters there liked them.”¹²⁴ Rachel replies that she enjoyed the “pretty bonnets” sent them; “Mother and Sister Ruth,” she writes “was much pleased with theirs, likewise Sister Olive and myself, for which we all unitedly send our kindest thanks. We thought they looked quite pretty and was made very neat.” However, Rachel writes, “as we have all got good silk bonnets made in uniform, we do not think it would be prudent to alter our fashion.”¹²⁵ As much as Rachel discourages the use of a second decorative bonnet, it is apparent that to both sisters the visual appearance of their clothing mattered, and they willingly experimented with new styles. Shaker women often personalized their clothing through subtle means such as adding a small lace trim or lining the inside with brightly

¹²² For general information on nineteenth-century women’s fashion, see: Daniel James Cole and Nancy Deihl, *The history of Modern Fashion: From 1850*, ch. 1, “1850-1890: The Dawn of Modern Clothing,” 13-54 (London: King Publishing, Ltd., 2015); Estelle Ansley Worrell, *American Costume: 1840-1920* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1979); Diane Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹²³ Humez, *Mother’s First-born Daughters*, 182.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 187-188.

patterned fabric.¹²⁶ Though they favored these decorative additions, leaders did not. For example, Mother Lucy reportedly lectured the Shaker women to avoid too many pleats in their gowns, saying

I do not like to see them worn in meeting Sabbath days it breaks the uniform and does not look pretty...I do not like to see you stand bent over the ironing table laying box pleats in your dark colored and everyday cotton gowns. I think that four or five half pleats on a side in your cotton gowns look much the prettiest on you....¹²⁷

This reprimand illuminates two points: first, Shaker sisters endeavored to alter their simple dresses to make them more appealing; second, because Mother Lucy invokes beauty in order to correct their behavior, she highlights perhaps the implicit concern Shaker women had for their appearances. She implores them not with the doctrine that vanity is sinful, but that the simple pleats are most attractive, using their own preoccupation with looks to instigate change.

Despite Mother Lucy's injunction, Shaker women never lost this sense of fashion. In the 1870s, neckerchiefs worn for a full century began to be replaced with circular berthas buttoned in the front that still covered the neck and shoulders, but more gracefully, and in the same color as the dress. Textile historian Beverly Gordon argues that this change was largely a fashion choice. She explains that "the outmoded triangular neckerchiefs had been worn for a full hundred years. A bertha covered the bodice in essentially the same way as a neckerchief and was more in keeping with the styles and sensibilities of the day." These semicircular berthas were typically finished with a

¹²⁶ "Clothing and Style in Shaker Communities," Shaker Heritage Society of Albany, New York. June 11, 2013, <http://shakerheritage.org/archives/clothing-style-shaker-communities>.

¹²⁷ Humez, *Mother's First-born Daughters*, 241.

lace trim that emulated a longer bib on a fashionable, Victorian dress, which similarly highlighted the curve of the torso and the narrowness of the waist.¹²⁸ A group photograph of the Watervliet South Family (fig. 10) depicts many Shaker women wearing these circular berthas. Were the photograph not dated, it would likely be attributed to the nineteenth century, when berthas were more popular, but in fact the picture is from 1916, proving that, even when Shakers readily adopted a fragment of fashion, the evolution was still glacial in comparison to the rest of the world.



Figure 10. Watervliet South Family, 1916. Photograph. Photo credit of Shakerheritage.org. Several women in this photo, particularly on the middle row, left side, are wearing the new circular bertha.

Regardless of the pace, the details of Shaker women's dress illustrate an interest in fashion which opposes their standard characterizations. As the Shaker community diminished and clothing production decreased, fashion came in more quickly when

¹²⁸ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 173.

members by necessity purchased pre-made clothing in more modern styles. Though their clothing remained simple in shade and pattern, the silhouettes and accessories gradually changed, lessening the gap between Shaker women and their counterparts.

Shaker weavers, primarily women, made other textiles, in addition to clothing, that offered a creative outlet in an otherwise aesthetically stark society. Carpets in particular constituted a unique mode of expression, because fewer guidelines dictated how they ought to look; crafters could exercise individual preference in making these floor coverings.¹²⁹ Beginning in the 1830s, Shakers began creating rugs from everything from handmade yarn to scraps of fabric left over from other projects, all hooked, crocheted, braided, or woven together. Each maker exercised individual preference in their craft (within bounds) and so their products vary widely. For example, rugs appear in different sizes, depending on where they were intended for use, from large rooms to near doorways to on staircases.¹³⁰ These rugs also created an opportunity to incorporate a rainbow of color. Though rag rugs were made from discarded fabric, typically in somber hues, they could be woven together with reds, yellows, or oranges, colors seldom found in the community.¹³¹ Patterns could emerge, aside from the straight stripes or checks displayed elsewhere, though frequently, the patterns were made in lines, with defined borders being the most prominent design feature.¹³² A braided rug from the New York State Museum (fig. 11) illustrates not only the versatile patterns, but the effect of the rug in a room.

¹²⁹ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 95.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 103.



Figure 11. Shaker rag rug. Unknown maker. Circa 1840-1880. Mixed materials. New York State Museum, Albany, NY. Photo by author. This display, with the furniture, illustrates how these items contrast with their other surroundings.

This braided rag rug incorporates reds, blues, greens, and other shades in variegated rings, alternating braided and solid. The impression is one of movement and vibrancy, though the humble materials still imply simple country living. Even more interesting, when placed with handcrafted Shaker furniture, the rug exudes domestic warmth and aesthetic interest, an effect heightened by the furnishings' minimal construction. The addition of the rug is vivid. Rugs such as this one still cater to the Shaker sense of regularity; the color is consistent and subtle patterns mix with solid color to showcase order. Yet, the rugs also instill liveliness, a strong counteraction to the stereotypical sobriety of Shaker existence. Permitted due to usefulness—as a way to utilize scrap

fabric and to preserve warmth—these rugs, like boldly-painted furniture, brightened up Shaker life.¹³³

While the color and design of rugs pushed the boundaries of Shaker simplicity, their use also significantly furthered the Shaker proclivity for cleanliness. Charles Nordhoff recalls a conversation he had with a brother at New Lebanon, recounting:

I asked Elder Frederick whether, if they were to build anew, they would not aim at some architectural effect, some beauty of design. He replied with great positiveness, "No, the beautiful, as you call it, is absurd and abnormal. It has no business with us. The divine man has no right to waste money upon what you would call beauty, in his house or his daily life, while there are people living in misery."...He described to me amusingly the disgust he had experienced in a costly New York dwelling, where he saw carpets nailed down on the floor, "of course with piles of dust beneath, never swept away, and of which I had to breathe;" and with heavy picture-frames hung against the walls, also the receptacles of dust.¹³⁴

Elder Frederick's distaste for the dusty carpeted floor is echoed in Shakers' actual use of the carpets, which were never nailed down, but simply laid upon a bare or oil-cloth covered floor, so they could be removed and cleaned regularly. Nordhoff himself experienced that "the strips of carpet are easily lifted, and the floor beneath is as clean as though it were a table to be eaten from."¹³⁵ Neatness was everywhere practiced, a statement true of all Shaker textile use. Even clothing was carefully laid out when removed so it wrinkled less. Men, not always trusted to care for their own clothes, were assigned a sister who looked after the necessary washing and mending, as well as

¹³³ For further published examples of Shaker rugs, see Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*; Sharon Duane Koomler, *Shaker Style, Function, and Furniture*, ch. 6, "Shaker Textiles," 130-149 (London: PRC Publishing Ltd., 2000).

¹³⁴ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

informing him when a new article was needed.¹³⁶ Not only did this strong sense of order maintain a positive outward appearance to all who ventured into the Shaker world from the outside, but Shakers believed this organization and cleanliness would penetrate the characters of the believers. Order, it was said, is “heaven’s first law.”¹³⁷ In bringing heaven to earth, order would have to prevail.

Shakers made few other household linens for anything but function. Bedcloths were made of linen and plain sections of bolts of wool. Millennial Laws stipulated that only two colors ought to be used in blankets, which meant a simple checked pattern typically appeared, with few exceptions.¹³⁸ Towels were made of unbleached or white cotton or linen, sometimes in a checked design.¹³⁹ Tables were either unadorned with cloths or placed with a simple oil-cloth for easy cleaning.¹⁴⁰ Functionality reigned in all of these endeavors, yet order did not fail either: most textiles were made with simple initials or numbers which signified its specific user (for example, in clothing) or room in which it belongs.¹⁴¹ Thus, at the end of the day, there was a place for everything, and everything was in its place, just as the Shakers believed it should be.

Saleable Goods

Goods used inside the Shaker community embodied the essentials of members’ devout lives: humility, simplicity, practicality, and worshipfulness. As visible in both

¹³⁶ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

¹³⁷ *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God*.

¹³⁸ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 87.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁴⁰ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*; and Elkins, *Fifteen years in the senior order of Shakers*, 24-25.

¹⁴¹ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 93 and Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 194.

their furniture and their textiles, Shakers' first impulse was to match their goods to their purpose. At the same time, Shakers were not immune to the influences of the outside world. Textiles captured this interference to a small degree. However, nowhere in Shaker material is outside cultural sway more visible than in goods made for mainstream society. Despite the fact that Shakers exhibited great business sense and long profited financially and socially from selling goods to non-Shakers, it is within these interactions that the idealism of perfection and the reality of existence in an imperfect world came to a head.

Shaker manufacture emerged in the group's infancy, a product of financial need coupled with strong production. As early as 1789, the New Lebanon community recorded sales of chairs produced in the community. By 1800, the raising of garden seeds in signature Shaker packets was ostensibly a "prominent industry."¹⁴² They established a store by 1827.¹⁴³ At their height after the Civil War, Shakers produced a number of goods, from animal skins and harnesses to lavender bath salts and children's dolls.¹⁴⁴ The sheer quantity and influence of Shaker industries, developed within its communities for outside consumption, substantially raised the profile of Shakers in the greater community, and had a profound impact on American society. Historian Edward Deming Andrews praised them as among the first to grow farming, gardening, and manufacturing from household to mass production scales. He lauds their economic policy and efficient

¹⁴² Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 66.

¹⁴³ Melcher, "Shaker Furniture," 90 and Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 209.

¹⁴⁴ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 122; Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 246 and 250.

industrial and agricultural activities which were so successful that they “influenced opinion and practice in many places and over a span of time reaching from the first formation of the American republic until well after the middle of the last century.”¹⁴⁵

This monumental impact began in the true Shaker way—simply. Initially, members sold surplus goods, leftovers of what the community produced for its own use. These included shingles and bricks, as well as leather boots or shoes with linen tops, that were made and used by the Believers, but also sold to others throughout the early nineteenth century.¹⁴⁶ Packaged seeds comprised a staple product for the public, so much so that Shakers built kilns for drying corn kernels and other seeds, then developed paper packets to in which to package the seeds (fig. 12).¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 11. For more on Shaker products, see Stephen Miller, ed., *Inspired Innocations: A Celebration of Shaker Ingenuity* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2010).

¹⁴⁶ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 119 and 128.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 84. For more on Shaker seeds, see M. Stephen Miller, “Garden Seeds,” in *Inspired Innovations: A Celebration of Shaker Ingenuity*, ed. M. Stephen Miller, 29-42 (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2010).



Figure 12. Shaker seed packets. Mount Lebanon Shaker community. Circa 1860-1880. Printed paper. Photo credit of *Shaker Design: Out of This World*, edited by Jean M. Burks.

All of these products aligned with the Shaker lifestyle and mindset, and yet their sale fell under strict supervision. The Millennial Laws commanded that “Believers should have no connection in trade or barter with those who have turned their backs on the way of God,” the latter descriptor referring to all non-Shakers.¹⁴⁸ As a result, deacons and appointed care-takers conducted sales outside the commune to seclude the community from corruption by the outside world.¹⁴⁹ However, as Shaker business grew, the benefits to the community began to outweigh the perceived dangers. Community leaders soon found that a business relationship with the greater society improved public opinion of Shakers. Early on, Joseph Meacham and other Shaker leaders adopted friendly business relationships with outsiders, understanding that “at a time when Shakerism was widely misunderstood and condemned, it would have added to the difficulties of developing a

¹⁴⁸ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 32.

¹⁴⁹ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

sound institutional life if the Shakers had rigidly cut themselves off.”¹⁵⁰ Instead, they bought and sold openly in the world’s markets and maintained ties to reputable merchants and tradesmen. Not only did these traders benefit from Shaker business, the Shakers themselves quickly reversed their public perception. Whereas previously, New Englanders viewed the Believers with wariness at best and vitriol at worst, they soon began to praise the communities and patronize their stores. It certainly helped that Shaker goods were widely accepting as being of outstanding quality. Buyers associated the Shakers with excellent craftsmanship, and appreciated their honest marketing, a refreshing occurrence in the industrial world.¹⁵¹ Customers flocked to Shaker settlements and stores, especially those near fashionable establishments. For example, the socialites who traveled to Lebanon Springs often made a trip out of visiting the Shaker shops nearby to purchase small goods.¹⁵² This shift in opinion proved a boon to the financial resources of the Shaker communities, easing the burden these settlements had felt in sustaining themselves agriculturally.¹⁵³

At the same time, some of these visitors found themselves intrigued by the Shaker lifestyle and explored these curious people’s religious beliefs as well. The leading elder of the Canterbury society reported to Charles Nordhoff that “though in numbers they were less than formerly, the influence of the Canterbury Society upon the outside world was never so great as now : their Sunday meetings in summer are crowded by visitors, and they believe that often their doctrines sink deep into the hearts of these chance

¹⁵⁰ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 120.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 265.

¹⁵² Ibid., 209.

¹⁵³ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

hearers.”¹⁵⁴ Conversion provided a powerful argument in favor of further business interaction with regular consumers. Shakers frequently “sought interaction with the outside world in order to proselytize their faith,” and goods were a subtle vehicle for appeal. Because Shakers believed that an ordered environment instilled good character and godliness—the main impetus behind their homemade goods—they could reasonably imagine that dispersing such goods throughout society could have a redemptive effect, in addition to the financial gain they offered the community. Their fellow non-Shaker citizens may have likewise believed in the power of well-made goods; the Victorian “cult of domesticity” extolled the virtue of the home as a center for moral training—the right physical environment within those walls could keep the wicked world and its corrupting values. Thus, both societies operated (consciously or unconsciously) under the assumption that if Shaker goods occupied more Victorian homes, not only would their money be better spent, but the benefit would be moral as well.¹⁵⁵

Shaker business expanded as the mechanisms for selling grew, and it became apparent that members of the congregation possessed a keen business sense. They reached out beyond their stores to county and state fairs, pushing their products further

¹⁵⁴ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

¹⁵⁵ For more sources on Victorian morality and domesticity, see: Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 151-174; Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930*,” ch. 2, “The Comfortable Theater: Parlor Making in the Middle-Class Victorian Household, 1850-1910,” 64-88 and ch. 5, “The Quest for Refinement,” 143-175 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997); Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880*, ch. 1, “Around the Parlor Table,” 1-29 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

afield.¹⁵⁶ Edward Deming Andrews explains the breadth of their business methods: consigning goods to be sold on commission, establishing traveling sales routes, retailing at local shops, wholesaling through distributing houses, and bartering or exchanging goods.¹⁵⁷ This broad scope ensured them wide success. Shakers sold medicine, baked goods, food products like fruit wines, applesauce, and nuts.¹⁵⁸ They continued to market chairs and their exclusively-owned patented goods, benefitting from their monopoly of those commodities. Though they still espoused the ideals of a “community of goods” and shared their profits equally, their dealings with the outside world operated firmly on capitalist principals.

As the century progressed, a chasm appeared between Shaker consumption and production. Shaker craftspeople began to cater more to the sensibilities of the greater world in order to sustain themselves, even while still practicing their own humble asceticism. Population decline and the subsequent faltering of the communities’ base industries only exacerbated the problem.¹⁵⁹ Toward the 1870’s and 1880’s, sales of trendy goods became an increasingly vital source of income for the Believers, leading to production of merchandise incongruent with their internal materiality. “Fancywork” was the last of the great Shaker industries.¹⁶⁰ These types of goods—small, decorative items of a “fanciful” nature to adorn Victorian homes—best lent themselves to the delicate

¹⁵⁶ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 124.

¹⁵⁷ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 48.

¹⁵⁸ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*; Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 208 and 252.

¹⁵⁹ Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers*, 249.

¹⁶⁰ Some communities never fully embraced the fancy good production. The villages in Kentucky and Ohio notably retained their agricultural identities until they were closed. Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 206.

craftsmanship of the Shaker sisters, and were exclusively female-made. Products manifested the Believers' love of fine materials; they used velvets, silks, satins, as well as decorative ribbons, bows, and embroidery which would never have been tolerated previously. Shakers catered to popular trends, making miniature baskets and sewing accessories to suit the Victorian "penchant for miniaturization." Beverly Gordon also explains that "crocheting, a Victorian passion, began to supplement plain knitting, and crocheted furniture covers (doilies, antimacassars, 'tidies,' clothing (hats, booties), facecloths, washcloths, and toys appeared in great number."¹⁶¹ Velvets, silks, satins, decorative embellishments for clothing, miniatures—the breadth of objects is extensive. Shaker collections extant today still store varieties of these goods, including memorable knitted dusting gloves (fig. 13) and a drawer of diverse ribbons and small crocheted animals (fig. 14), in storage at the Shaker Museum at Mount Lebanon.

¹⁶¹ Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 205.



Figure 13. Shaker dusting gloves. Unknown makers. Circa 1870-1880. Yarn. Shaker Museum, Mount Lebanon. Photo by author.



Figure 14. Crocheted animals. Unknown makers. Circa 1870-1880. Mixed materials. Shaker Museum, Mount Lebanon. Photo by author.

In addition to their vast popularity, however, these goods shared another trait in common: they departed from traditional Shaker aesthetics. Though the Millennial Laws explicitly prohibited the Shakers from making fancy goods “or articles which are superfluously furnished, trimmed or ornamented,” by the postbellum period, Believers not only were “making trimmed and ornamented articles...even referring to them as fancy goods, and to their stores as fancy goods stores.”¹⁶² These goods expressly defied the condemnation of “worldly ornament, fancifulness and display” as “something extraneous, useless, superfluous, and therefore extravagant and distracting.”¹⁶³ Examination of a miniature Shaker basket (fig. 15) encapsulates this dramatic shift. This small basket, called a “sewing carrier,” features a standard small sewing box with a silk interior (not visible) for keeping threads and ephemera, including a strawberry-shaped emery and a velvet pincushion and a needle case, positioned on top in the image. The box itself and its tools are all pragmatic additions, necessary to the task of sewing, though perhaps embellished (the emery need not be strawberry-shaped to be functional). Yet, this basket is also bedecked with ribbons, popping up across the sides and top without function! Additionally, the basket is made to look like a miniature of a picnic basket, with a square body and two handles, distinctive from other Shaker sewing boxes which are not only circular—similar to the bent wood boxes Shakers are known for—but also

¹⁶² Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 204.

¹⁶³ Andrews, *Shaker Furniture*, 18. For further published examples of Shaker fancywork, see Beverly Gordon, “Victorian Fancy Goods: Another Reappraisal of Shaker Material Culture,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 25, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 1990): 111-129; Sumpter Priddy, “Plain Shakers, Fancy World,” in *Shaker Design: Out of This World*, ed. Jean M. Burks, 31-60 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

feature only one handle, as well as being regular-sized (see fig. 16 for comparison).

These features give the box a “cutesy” look, rather than one based on practicality and simple decoration.

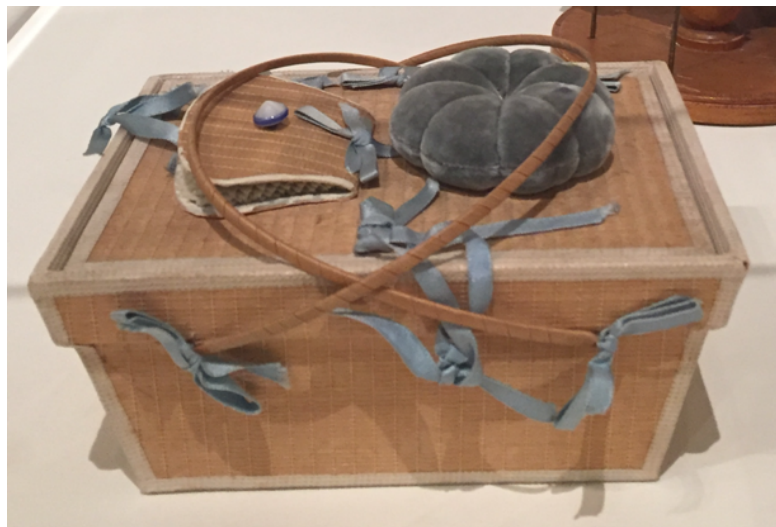


Figure 15. Miniature sewing basket. Unknown maker. Circa 1880. Mixed materials. New York State Museum, Albany, NY. Photo by author. This basket features a strawberry emery and needle case, from the Shaker fancy goods stores.



Figure 16. Traditional Shaker sewing basket. Unknown maker. Circa 1840-1880. Maple and pine, with swing handle. Photo credit of Willis Henry Auctions. In comparison to the fancy goods-style box, this particular box is markedly less elaborate and more functional.

Placed next to Shaker goods from decades earlier, this product is jarringly out of place. Its extraneous decoration and fanciful “just because” whimsy are entirely opposite the modest craftsmanship integral to their daily existences.¹⁶⁴

Justification for such a jarring shift typically originated in the Shaker praise for progress and technology. Continually seeking to simplify and improve their lives, Shakers sought out new skills and machinery, to stay abreast of emerging inventions. They also faced the challenge of staying relevant to the world, which expressed less and less desire for the simpler goods of agricultural Americans over the course of the

¹⁶⁴ For more published examples, see Richard Dabrowski, “Fancy Goods: Poplarware,” in *Inspired Innovations: A Celebration of Shaker Ingenuity*, ed. M. Stephen Miller, 135-148 (New Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2010).

nineteenth century. Shaker anxiety over this is captured in a statement by Union Village member Oliver Hampton in 1887, who expressed that

Forms, fashions, customs, and external rules all have to bow to the fiat of evolution and progress toward that which is more perfect. This need not alarm the most conservative Believer. For unless we keep pace with the progress of the universe our individual progress will be an impossibility. We shall be whirled off at some side station and relegated to the limbo of worn-out superannuated and used-up institutions.¹⁶⁵

The threat of obsolescence haunted the Shaker community at the close of the nineteenth century and prompted members to reconsider the basic values inherent in all of the materials sold in earlier days. The rapid loss of their key aesthetic with regards to manufactured goods proves particularly shocking in Shaker history, especially considering that within the communities themselves, followers still clung to the simplest lives they could manage, even as they faced decline. Divorced production and consumption within the Shaker communities sparked a complex newfound duality of their existence: on one side, the worshipful, pragmatic Believer, on the other, the caterer to fickle consumer will.

¹⁶⁵ Burks, "Faith, Form, and Finish," 48-50.

CHAPTER TWO: ONEIDA PERFECTIONISTS

Background

Utopia took on new character in the society of John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida, NY community which put perfection in its very name. Born in 1811, a generation after the Mother Ann's followers organized at New Lebanon, Noyes cuts an interesting, enigmatic figure in religious history. Raised in a stable, well-to-do family—his father was a shopkeeper and, at one point, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives—young Noyes struggled with his own faith.¹⁶⁶ As a child growing up in Putney, Vermont, during the Second Great Awakening, Noyes experienced intense religious preaching. Then, at the tender age of twenty, Noyes' explorations in the revivals of his area resulted in a personal religious conversion, inspiring him to pursue a career as an evangelist. Noyes enrolled at the Andover Theological Seminary before transferring to the Yale Divinity School in 1832.¹⁶⁷ During his time at Yale, he undertook in-depth study of the Bible. While examining the prophecies pertaining to the Second Coming of Christ, Noyes became convinced that Biblical record showed that the resurrection had occurred in AD 70, at the fall of Jerusalem, and thus, the day of judgment was approaching.¹⁶⁸ Imminent judgment necessitated in Noyes' mind the “progressive development of a millennial kingdom on earth,” and he began to gather

¹⁶⁶ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 75.

¹⁶⁷ Van Wormer, “The Ties That Bind,” 39.

¹⁶⁸ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 77.

around him a group of followers, dubbed New England Perfectionists based upon their belief that they could attain perfection in this life.¹⁶⁹ By 1837, Noyes had begun to set up rules for his new community, which included a highly controversial belief in dissolution of monogamous marriage in favor of “complex marriage” between all community members.¹⁷⁰ Mainstream American society reacted violently to this teaching, forcing the Perfectionists to withdraw from the public eye and temporarily reconsider the practice, only to reemerge ten years later, in 1847, with a revitalized effort toward communal perfection, including instituting complex marriage. Yet, the public had not forgotten their blasphemy, and so expelled the Perfectionists from Putney, forcing them to move across state lines and finally settle in Oneida, New York, on a member’s farm. On that farm, in 1848, the community officially established.¹⁷¹

Oneida grew rapidly, not unlike the Shakers, but with smaller numbers. By 1849, there were 87 adherents, by 1850, 172, and by 1851, 205 people belonged to the community.¹⁷² Before its dissolution in 1880, membership had reached about three hundred, based in Oneida with a few small branch communities elsewhere.¹⁷³ Initially,

¹⁶⁹ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 187; Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 73.

¹⁷⁰ Distilled, complex marriage was a system of polyamory, wherein any two consenting adults could have sexual intercourse with each other, so long as they did not practice exclusivity with one sexual partner. The practice came with multiple nuances, including male continence and a hierarchical sexual mentoring structure.

¹⁷¹ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 74.

¹⁷² Ibid., 103. Much of this growth is due to conversion; population control within the group operated under strict guidelines and, despite the Perfectionists’ sexual practices, produced relatively few offspring.

¹⁷³ Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 174 and Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 188. The Perfectionists had small satellite communities in Newark, New Jersey, as well as Cambridge and Putney, Vermont. Their largest settlement outside of Oneida was Wallingford, Connecticut.

the nucleus of the religion was members of Noyes' family and some early converts, but they quickly gained influence among New England farmers, many of whom donated their land to the community after joining.¹⁷⁴ In time, membership grew even wider demographically, attracting "a wide range of occupational skills, emotional types, and personal interests....many of them were relatively affluent."¹⁷⁵ This affluence proved beneficial for the early years of the Oneida Community, which were plagued by financial struggle; one historian estimates that by 1857, \$108,000 had been invested in the community, which covered losses of around \$40,000.¹⁷⁶ Though they lived on working farms, Perfectionists struggled to maintain themselves agriculturally, and instead stayed afloat through the contributions of new, wealthy members. Perhaps this is why, despite their great financial distress early on, maintaining a printing-office where they circulated their free paper remained a top priority.¹⁷⁷

Overseeing the community and ruling with patriarchal dominance, Noyes dictated much of the community's operations as well as people's interactions with each other. His level of control over the community solidified their practice and shaped their perception. Lawrence Foster, longtime historian of Oneidans, attributes the community's longevity to its emphasis on regulation. He writes, "Oneida, with its restraints and necessary emphasis on the subordination of the individual to the common good, revealed a strong

¹⁷⁴ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 76; Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

¹⁷⁵ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 103.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 103-104 and Jane Kinsley Rich, ed. *A Lasting Spring: Jesse Catherine Kinsley, Daughter of the Oneida Community* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1983), 13.

¹⁷⁷ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

stress on authority, security, unity, and self-control, and an internal consistency in its continuing search for a middle ground between the untenable extremes of libertinism and repressing that were then agitating external society.”¹⁷⁸ Ultimately searching for the same stability that Shakers pursued in the fast-changing world, Perfectionists found their answer in distinctly traditional patriarchal leadership instructing them in how to live a distinctly *non*-traditional family life. Their existence consistently battled this tension between the workings of the world and the ideals of heaven.

Religious Beliefs and Practices

Although Noyes’ leadership and the community as a whole was undoubtedly religious in origin, that religion took a different shape than its contemporary faith traditions. Perfectionists based their belief in Millennialism, their conviction that the return of Christ occurred with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70, and ushered in a millennial kingdom. Within that world, perfection was not only possible, but necessary for earthly life to imitate heavenly life.¹⁷⁹ As one of their publications explained, Oneidans

believe that the second advent of Christ took place at the period of the destruction of Jerusalem...at that time there was a primary resurrection and judgment of the spirit world...that the final kingdom of God then began in the heavens; that the manifestation of that kingdom is now approaching; that its approach is ushering in the second and final resurrection and judgment; that a Church on earth is now rising to meet

¹⁷⁸ Lawrence Foster, “Women, Family, and Utopia: The Oneida Community Experience and Its Implications for the Present,” *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 28, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 46-47, <http://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1295&context=libassoc>.

¹⁷⁹ Van Wormer, “The Ties That Bind,” 51.

the approaching kingdom in the heavens, and to become its duplicate and representative.¹⁸⁰

Noyes believed strongly that a perfect society was attainable, but he tempered what it entailed.¹⁸¹ He argued that “perfection did not mean that one was not capable of improvement, but simply that so long as one’s attitude and motivation were right, one’s acts would follow a pattern acceptable to God.”¹⁸² Within his community, perfection could be achieved externally once the hearts of the followers faultlessly followed righteous doctrines. Of course, these doctrines necessitated specific customs. First and foremost, Perfectionists practiced communal unity, what they called “Bible Communism.” Similar to the Shakers’ “community of goods,” Perfectionists’ communistic living aimed to eliminate selfishness or neglect of others, “perhaps the greatest [sin] of all,” by establishing joint ownership and sharing goods in common.¹⁸³ “Bible communism” certainly assisted in a sense of material unity, but unity of heart posed a greater threat. Thus, Perfectionists also addressed an ever-present inequality in people’s faithfulness. One Oneidan reportedly claimed

We consider the community to be a Church, and our theory of a Christian Church...is that it is a school, consisting of many classes, from those who are in the lowest degree of faith to those who have attained the highest condition of certain and eternal salvation from sin...some of us claim to live sinless lives, and some do not.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*, quoting from an edition of the *Circular*.

¹⁸¹ For this reason, Noyes rejected the term ‘utopian’ in relation to his efforts because, from his perspective, utopia was something impractical and unachievable, whereas perfection by his definition was neither. Foster, “Women, Family, and Utopia,” 48.

¹⁸² Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 77.

¹⁸³ Wonderley, “The Most Utopian Industry,” 167-177.

¹⁸⁴ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

Those discrepancies posed a threat to the existence of the community and to its eternal goal of being raised up as God's kingdom on Earth. To resolve it, Oneidans commenced community criticism sessions, in which members scrutinized an individual's behavior and then instructed him or her how to correct their behaviors. Perfectionists were also encouraged to undergo self-criticism to identify and eliminate character flaws inhibiting perfection.¹⁸⁵ To their eyes, this practice unified the community by applying collective insight to the failings of its members and resolving problems together.¹⁸⁶

Another way to reinforce communal unity and cooperative support was by redefining social building-blocks, which Noyes did by instituting complex marriage among his followers. The idea for this practice originated in Noyes' study of several Biblical verses which describe heaven as a place where people "neither marry, nor are given in marriage."¹⁸⁷ In an 1837 letter to a friend, Noyes reiterates this idea, stating

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...In a holy community, there is no more reason why sexual intercourse should be restricted by law, than why eating and drinking should be.¹⁸⁸

Noyes' foundational problem with monogamous matrimony was not the sexual relationship, as it was for Shakers, but rather the exclusivity. In his perception, loyalty to

¹⁸⁵ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 187.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. Despite the fact that it seems a harsh way to enforce communitarianism, it is worth noting that the practice of mutual criticism is lauded in member reminiscences.

¹⁸⁷ KJV Matthew 22:30. It should be noted here that Noyes was married in 1838. Noyes and his wife had one child who lived to adulthood (four who died as infants). They separated in 1844. Further discussion on how this relationship impacted Noyes' doctrines can be found in the works of Foster Lawrence.

¹⁸⁸ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 81.

the nuclear family overrode loyalty to the community. That separation “contributed to the fragmentation of social relations,” one of the foremost problems Oneidans identified in mainstream society.¹⁸⁹ In a community focused on unity, fragmentation and isolation must be excised. Knowing this would be controversial, Noyes did not start to introduce the practice to his followers until 1846.¹⁹⁰ Once it was introduced, however, it became regulation. Within the community, members exchanged sexual partners under a set of provisions, including mutual consent and the obstruction of exclusive emotional connections—so-called “special love.”¹⁹¹ “Special love” involved not just strong romantic relationships, but also parent-child connections, which were also forbidden. Breastfeeding your biological child was allowed out of necessity, but once that child was weaned, he or she became simply another member of the community, claimed communally. Particular attention to one child by either of its parents—“philoprogenitiveness”—was condemned.¹⁹² In part because of this filial thread, reproduction operated under strict regulation through the practice of male continence, a birth control practice in which men did not ejaculate. When accidents happened, they were viewed as the failure of the man to exercise sufficient self-control, only furthering

¹⁸⁹ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 92; Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 24-5.

¹⁹⁰ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 82. The 1837 letter had been published by his friend and the resulting public outcry contributed mightily to the eventual exile of the Perfectionists from Vermont.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁹² Rich, *A Lasting Spring*, 5. If such a case arose (as it did frequently), parent and child were removed to different communities to break the connection. Such a circumstance occurred with Jesse Catherine Kinsley and her mother.

them from perfection.¹⁹³ Abiding by these practices, Noyes believed, would ultimately maximize and perfect love and permit “sexual relations, just as other activities in life, [to be] expressed in an outward manner that would be pleasing to God.”¹⁹⁴

Despite this irregular perception of the ideal family, life in the Oneida Community proceeded much like that in other communities. Like Shakers, Oneidans described their lives as “continued worship,” in a sense consecrating their everyday activities.¹⁹⁵ Unlike Shakers, the restrictions on their time and activities were not quite as strenuous. Rising sometime between five and half-past seven, depending on their individual chores, they ate breakfast at nine, dinner at three, and went to bed between eight-thirty and ten-thirty. Children slept as long as they liked.¹⁹⁶ Community work assignments varied, continually rotating to remove the drudgery of a standard routine.¹⁹⁷ Worship was relatively formless; they did not have specific Sabbath services or standard preaching. Instead, Oneidans’ religious instruction came from Noyes’ evening “Home Talks,” which all attended.

Community organization and development replaced members’ sense of religious ritual.¹⁹⁸ Perfectionists welcomed art and literature in the community, hosting plays and

¹⁹³ Rich, *A Lasting Spring*, 4. Members were largely told to refrain from having children for approximately the first twenty years of the community, due in part to the financial strain. Despite this, on occasion, some children were brought into the world under the express guidance of the leaders.

¹⁹⁴ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 16 & 79.

¹⁹⁵ Van Wormer, “The Ties That Bind,” 51.

¹⁹⁶ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

¹⁹⁷ Foster, “Women, Family, and Utopia,” 51.

¹⁹⁸ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 188.

dances as well as owning an extensive library.¹⁹⁹ Children and adults alike participated in classes on subjects such as Bible study, Latin, art appreciation, and natural history, taught by the number of college-educated community members.²⁰⁰ This degree of freedom was, however, circumscribed in regulation. Over twenty-one standing committees managed finance, amusements, education, clothing, landscape, and much more, subdividing into forty-eight departments tending to laundry, printing, photographs, and stationery, among others daily concerns.²⁰¹ Counteracting the freewheeling permissiveness that seems to distinguish the Perfectionists from other communal groups, these structures provided a distinct bureaucracy. In fact, these boundaries comprised precisely what appealed to Noyes' followers: a contrast to the seeming disorder of greater society. Acutely conscious of the social disintegration he witnessed outside, Noyes believed his endeavors to create a cohesive, well-defined, oligarchic community would prove a refuge for his followers, not only attracting the disoriented, but providing them a place wherein they could focus on eternal goals.²⁰² The Oneida Community's unique sense of structure, coupled with allowance, fueled this group's dichotomous material culture. This unlikely tension between ambivalence and authority infiltrated their physical environment, evident in the remnants of the society today.

Attitudes on Material Goods

Despite his upper-class background, John Humphrey Noyes widely condemned the world's interest in what he called the "grab-game." God was the true owner of all

¹⁹⁹ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 117 and Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 197.

²⁰⁰ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 85.

goods, Noyes believed, therefore, the manner by which “prizes” were distributed purely to the craftiest instead of the most deserving was doctrinally false.²⁰³ Rather, Noyes stipulated that man was a “subordinate joint-owner” with God and that “the right of possession, in the case of articles directly consumed in the use, is necessarily equivalent to exclusive ownership; but in all other cases, is only the right of beneficial use, subject to the principle of rotation, and to the distributive rights of God.”²⁰⁴ The idea that there is no exclusive ownership, and that all things belong to God, and therefore to everyone, stimulated Noyes’ concept of communalism. He took to heart the Bible which describes the people of God on the day of Pentecost, saying “they were of one heart and one soul ; neither said any of them that aught of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.”²⁰⁵ Because his community lived in the Millennium, Noyes believed they must appropriate that ideal, practicing self-denial and sacrifice for others. Following his instruction, the Perfectionists denounced private ownership and personal attachment to goods. Just as exclusive marriages fostered dissidence, exclusive goods fostered pride and selfishness, and any sense of entitlement was promptly quashed. As an example of this firm teaching, one historian cites the following anecdote:

²⁰³ Oneida Community, *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 Circular, 1853. Reprint Philadelphia, P.A.: Porcupine Press, 1972), 10-11.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 11. This was expressed in a pamphlet called “Theory of Rights of Property,” which Noyes authored.

²⁰⁵ Oneida Community, *Oneida Community: a familiar exposition of its ideas and practical life, in a conversation with a visitor* (Wallingford, CT: Office of the Circular, 1865), 9.

During the 1850s, someone gave each of the young girls a doll, so that they could learn to make and mend clothing. Not unexpectedly, the girls became attached to their dolls. Adults in charge of the children's upbringing...brought the girls into a room with their dolls for a criticism session. They stood circling the stove and, one by one, were convinced to throw their dolls into the fire in order to relinquish their dangerous individual attachment to material objects.²⁰⁶

Forcing children to abandon their dearest toys may appear extreme, but the story demonstrates the serious level to which self-denial extended. Community reminiscences repeat similar narratives, violins or heirlooms stripped from their original owners because they promoted exclusivity. Children still fought over toys, but were never taught that any particular amusement belonged to them alone. Pierrepont Burt Noyes, one of the children bred among the community, recalls this emphasis. He recalled:

Throughout my childhood the private ownership of anything seemed to me a crude artificiality to which an unenlightened Outside still clung. We children struggled for the use of things we desired, but ownership was never seriously considered. For instance, we were keen for our favorite sleds, but it never occurred, to me at least, that I could possess a sled to the exclusion of the other boys.²⁰⁷

Inventories from the Community reinforce that even objects consistently used by the same person were never counted as personal possessions.²⁰⁸ At no point did any individual Perfectionist own anything, for everything belonged first to God and second to their fellow believers.

²⁰⁶ Van Wormer, "The Ties That Bind," 52. This episode is repeated in Harriet Wolton's reminiscences as well.

²⁰⁷ Pierrepont Noyes, *My father's house; an Oneida boyhood* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1937), 125-6. Heather Van Wormer does note in her article that Noyes indicates that, although toys were shared communally among the boys, these were kept separate from the young girls' toys. Van Wormer, "The Ties That Bind," 52.

²⁰⁸ Van Wormer, "The Ties That Bind," 52.

Yet, Noyes' brand of communalism was not characterized by the same asceticism which marked the Shakers' relationship toward material goods. Preaching that "there can be no poor unless all are poor," Noyes also said, "There can be no rich unless all are rich."²⁰⁹ Due to the shared nature of all material, improved wealth only bolstered the community. In fact, wealth not only practically benefitted the community, it evidenced increasing perfection. While, to some degree, the Perfectionists believed that "a pleasant, efficient physical environment would help the group achieve a spiritual equilibrium," they also believed in the inverse—the continued internal perfection of the believers would result in physical improvement of their lands and lifestyles.²¹⁰ In one of their publications, they express this sentiment through an imagined conversation between a fictional Oneida Perfectionist spokesman—Mr. Freechurch—and an anonymous outside interviewer. Asked by the interviewer about how their community relates to the writings of contemporary Utopian socialist Charles Fourier, Mr. Freechurch replies:

[Fourier] begins with industrial organization and physical improvements, expecting that a true religion and the true relation of the sexes will be found out three or four hundred years hence. We begin with religion and reconciliation of the sexes, and expect that industrial reform and physical improvement will follow, and that too within less than three or four hundred years.²¹¹

In another fake interview from Perfectionist circulation, the following assertion appears:

At the Second Coming...the true church passed into the invisible state, and there inaugurated the kingdom of heaven, by perfect unity with Christ and each other. Thus while the institutions of selfishness have flowed on

²⁰⁹ Oneida Community, *Hand-book of the Oneida Community; with a sketch of its founder, and an outline of its constitution and doctrines* (Wallingford, CT: Office of the Circular, 1867), 18.

²¹⁰ Van Wormer, "The Ties That Bind," 43.

²¹¹ Oneida Community, *Bible Communism*, 7-8.

without interruption in the visible sphere, Communism has moved in a parallel course in the heavenly world; and... the time must come when this perfected social state will begin to extend and reproduce itself in this world, and raise our visible human society to its own standard.²¹²

Aside from explanations that, eventually, the practice of complex marriage would be adopted and embraced by the entire civilized world, little explanation is given of what “visible perfection” of the “physical improvement” involve. However, other texts indicate that there was an environmental component. For example, upon winning commendation from the magazine *Horticulturalist* in 1864 for their production of fine fruits, community members reported that “horticulture was simply ‘applying our system of criticism and self-improvement to the land,’”²¹³ judiciously intersecting these physical and spiritual atmospheres. Detailed illustrations of their buildings and the vivid, dotting descriptions of their interiors which fill their publications underscore this belief.²¹⁴ Oneidans’ reverence for the *constructed* elements of their surrounding world demonstrate that these endeavors marked a form of success which inextricably connected to their spiritual progress. Their physical environment stemmed from their internal perfection.²¹⁵

Though their doctrine authoritatively connected spirit and matter, the Perfectionist tendency toward flexibility resulted in an ill-defined materialism. Being concerned instead about internal progress and assuming external improvement would follow naturally, Perfectionists put little care into defining this latter aspect of their communalism. An 1865 pamphlet describes that “the Community is founded on religious

²¹² Oneida Community, *Oneida Community*, 9.

²¹³ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 191.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

ideas and sympathies, rather than in considerations of a mere economic or material kind.”²¹⁶ Pierrepont Burt Noyes’ recollections express regret “if the Oneida Community were to be confused with that modern ‘communism’ which denies God and makes material considerations paramount.”²¹⁷ Even the Oneida Community handbook asserts brazenly “The Communities have not made the accumulation of wealth a primary object. They care not for money, except as it enables them to publish what they consider the truth, and to embody their ideal of a true life.”²¹⁸ Perfectionists advertised that they did not pursue wealth beyond basic need, but provided no measure for what to do if wealth accumulated.²¹⁹ As the Oneida Community surpassed subsistence and began to earn excess, John Humphrey Noyes assured the followers that their fundamentals would not change. He advocated “true economy,” the use of materials determined by wisdom rather than cost.²²⁰ One vivid sermon paints this picture:

In reflecting on the subject of our business, I compare it to the human body...It seems to me that individuals and corporations when they begin to amass that does not play an important part in their business and their moral influence in society, are like persons who are getting a big, overgrown belly. Now a man does not want to carry around a larger belly than is necessary to furnish all the blood he wants.... I am ambitious to see the Community grow strong and acquire a great deal of power, but I don’t believe that God purposes to have us become pot-bellied.²²¹

²¹⁶ Oneida Community, *Hand-book of the Oneida Community*, 18.

²¹⁷ Noyes, *My father’s house*, 125.

²¹⁸ Oneida Community, *Hand-book of the Oneida Community*, 18.

²¹⁹ Constance Noyes Robertson, “The Oneida Community,” *New York History* 30, no. 2 (April 1949): 145, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23148211>.

²²⁰ John Humphrey Noyes, *Home Talks*, vol. 1, ed. Alfred Barron and George Noyes Miller (Oneida, NY: Oneida Community, 1875), 169-170.

Paired with this evocative simile is Noyes' plainer teaching, "Wealth will not bloat us."

Believing that internal perfection and righteous desires precede material blessings, Noyes felt unconcerned about acquiring wealth and luxuries, provided that they did not foster pleasure-seeking or selfishness. Indulgence, shared communally, was welcome.²²² Economic abundance also furthered members' spiritual ideals by fostering the intellectual development that the community diligently pursued. Growing wealth allowed the Perfectionists to construct new habitation, fund plays and orchestras and educational programs, and sponsor events to which they invited outsiders. And, as the Oneidans prospered, luxuries did begin to pervade their society. The children recalled having toys of all varieties to play with, including a magnificent rocking horse with a "flowing mane and tail and its body all covered with hair" that was the highlight of the playroom.²²³ Abundant vegetables, milk, and desserts like custard and tapioca replaced simple early menus.²²⁴ Members renovated the central Mansion House with brick, then built additions and fitted it with modern heating. Ultimately, the entire farmstead was rebuilt and improved upon as a marker of community growth and spiritual development.

²²¹ Robertson, "The Oneida Community," 142. In the same quotation, Noyes also, confusingly, stated "I cannot think that God cares much about having a great deal of unemployed capital. I believe that His purpose is to make us strong and rich in the sense that we shall have a great deal of property invested...Our ambition should be to have enough capital to carry on our business to a good advantage." Additionally, in reference to the bodily analogy, Noyes believed the Shakers had become "pot-bellied," in that they were wealthy but it did no good.

²²² Cooper, "Relations of Modes of Production in Nineteenth Century America," 9.

²²³ Noyes, *My father's house*, 24.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

Noyes' coupled his acceptance of wealth with a substantial admiration for the manufacturing processes which had made that wealth possible. After struggling in the first several years to survive on agriculture alone, Noyes and prominent community members began to develop their commercial production. A man with a strong business sense, Noyes defined several "Principles of Business" which helped the community reach solvency, incorporating the following four elements, among others: "1—Everything for sale except the soul. 2—Prompt clearing out of all dead property at any price that can be got. 3—The rule of prices—'Sell as low as you can' instead of 'Get all you can.' 4—Prepayment in buying and selling."²²⁵ The Oneida Community built on its own inventiveness, coming up with new products to sell, like the lazy Susan dining table and an improved washing machine.²²⁶ Over time, these endeavors proved wildly successful, convincing Noyes that manufacturing, not agriculture, was the future of communal societies. Farming, he decided, was "the enemy of communitarianism," not only because it fostered dissension, but also because it could not provide the greater comforts of life Oneida soon acquired.²²⁷

Thus, for the Oneida Perfectionists, material goods occupied a strange role as both potentially anathema to communal unity and simultaneously manifestations of spiritual achievement. As a result, they practiced no communal asceticism, just lack of personal

²²⁵ Robertson, "The Oneida Community," 142-3.

²²⁶ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 198.

²²⁷ Cooper, "Relations of Modes of Production in Nineteenth Century America," 10-12. Ultimately, this source argues, manufacturing was the downfall of the Oneidans. Continually torn between building efficiency in production and the importance of labor in personal development, the scale finally tipped toward the former, to the detriment of the entire community.

ownership, and their leaders actively pursued capitalistic commercial enterprises in the name of community development. Far more complex than the direct relationship between spiritual perfection and simplicity which defined Shakers, this unique perception of the intersection between internal and external worlds led to an almost entirely opposite material culture for the followers at Oneida.

Material

Furniture

At the center of the Perfectionists' physical community sat the Oneida Mansion House (fig. 17), built and improved upon as the community stabilized.



Figure 17. Oneida Community Mansion House, ca. 1870. Photograph. Syracuse University Library.

Construction on this large brick building at the center of their flagship community began in 1848 and continually expanded to accommodate the growing population of followers.²²⁸ The Mansion House constituted the physical symbol of Perfectionist life, both social and spiritual.²²⁹ Contemporaries described the Mansion House as “a large brick building with some architectural pretensions, but no artistic merit.”²³⁰ Certainly, the outside of the house exhibits no singular style and little artistry of note, but the significance of the Mansion House did not originate in its exterior, but its interior. Per one description:

The interior of the house is well arranged; the whole is warmed by steam; and there are baths and other conveniences. There is on the second floor a large hall, used for the evening gatherings of the community, and furnished with a stage for musical and dramatic performances, and with a number of round tables, about which they gather in their meetings. On the ground floor is a parlor for visitors; and a library-room, containing files of newspapers, and a miscellaneous library of about four thousand volumes.²³¹

In addition to the dining room, great, hall, and library mentioned in this passage, the Mansion House also contained several parlors and sitting rooms, a chapel, a reception-room for outside visitors, a small museum, and many private apartments.²³² As central social spaces for the Perfectionist community, care was taken to ensure their appearance and furnishings fit their ideals.

²²⁸ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 199 and 202.

²²⁹ Green, “The Social Functions of Utopian Architecture,” 1.

²³⁰ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (New York: Hillary House Publishers, Ltd., 1961. Reprint of 1870 edition), 641.

The central ideal being unity, the most decorative attention went to the shared rooms in the Mansion House. First and foremost was the Family Hall (also called the Great Hall) (fig. 18), the nucleus of all community activity, the site of all the theatrical and musical productions put on by the members as well as the locus of the “Home Talks,” Noyes’ nightly teachings.

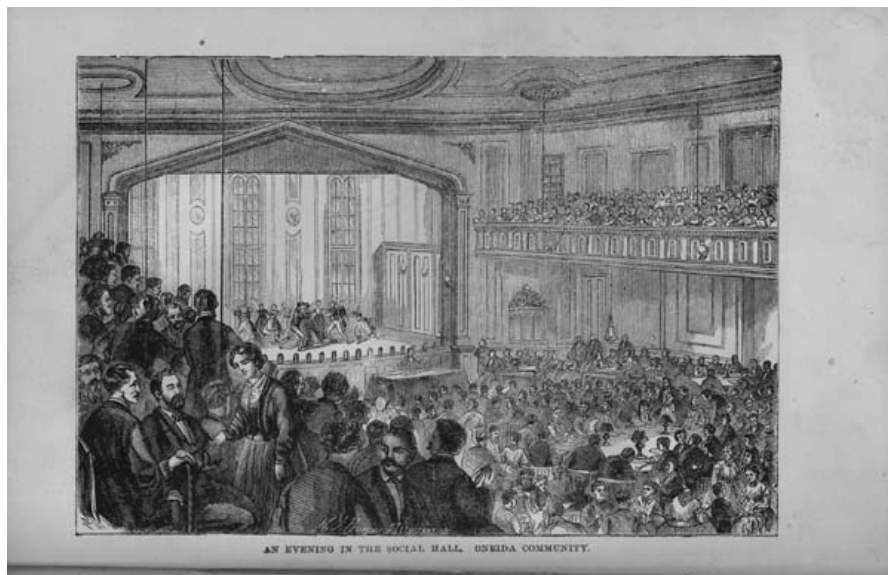


Figure 18. *An Evening in the Social Hall. Oneida Community.* Unknown artist. Circa 1850-1870. Ink on paper. Syracuse University Library. Illustration of the typical setup of the evening events, with tables and chairs set up.

Made to fit all of the Perfectionists at once, as well as some curious outsiders, the Family Hall was essentially a massive auditorium. One Oneida publication paints a picture of the room as “a large, well-ventilated, handsome apartment, capable of containing about seven hundred people. It is well painted and frescoed...The whole apartment presents,

first the appearance of a comfortable little theater, and, secondly, the look of a cozy sitting or sewing and reading room.”²³³ Furniture delivered the “reading room” feel. Despite being the size of a theater, the Hall featured not mere rows of forward-facing pews or seats, but rather, small tables, each reportedly “furnished with a neat cloth, and yet a neater-seeming lamp.”²³⁴ Organizing the room into tables encouraged socialization and allowed work to continue in the evening-time, especially for women who took the Home Talks as an opportunity to enjoy some needlework, lit by small lamps, listening as they stitched. By adopting these round tables, the Perfectionists translated this place for community gathering and learning to an intimate, domestic setting.

Historically, the Family Hall constituted the most important room in the Mansion House, serving a vital function by providing one physical space wherein all could be together. Even before completing all of the private rooms and for members, when the Perfectionists still slept in small shanties and log cabins, they invested time in making the Great Hall beautiful, with fantastic views and verandas, as well as devoting enormous floor space to it.²³⁵ Yet, initially, the Community had no money to furnish the room nicely. One woman raised in the Community wrote nostalgically about the unrefined look of the early Hall:

The room was pleasantly situated, and commanded fine views of the surrounding country in nearly every direction. The furniture was far from elegant indeed was somewhat rude. But what if the seats were pine benches without any backs, the floor uncarpeted, the walls unpapered and the windows uncurtained? We were none the less happy for all that. The walls were smooth and white, and the floors neatly oiled; with the large

²³³ Oneida Community, *Hand-book of the Oneida Community*, 8.

²³⁴ Ibid. In some cases, the pews and tables were both used.

²³⁵ White, “Designed for Perfection,” 119.

book-case on the north side, the handsome old-fashioned clock suspended at one end, opposite a good-sized mirror, and a number of very pretty pictures distributed about, the room was peculiarly ‘homey.’”²³⁶ Of course, following the doctrines of external beauty succeeding internal progress, the Hall was improved over time, eventually papered and curtained, heated by hot-air, and finally, fitted with new furniture decorative enough to occupy this powerful space and signify the Perfectionists’ spiritual and economic growth.²³⁷

While primarily a private space, the Family Hall also functioned as a partially public space, where visitors and neighbors could come and attend functions, and it was meant to be impressive. Its luxurious painted murals and panoramic windows certainly did the trick.

Visitors also remarked about another area of the house intended to astonish. At the top of a large staircase, amid a “roomy and elegant corridor,” appeared an incredibly unique feature for this insular group: a cabinet of curiosities (fig. 19).

²³⁶ Harriet M. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories, by one brought up in it* (Oneida, NY: Oneida, Ltd., 1950), 12-14.

²³⁷ Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 12-14.



Figure 19. Vestibule “cabinet of curiosities.” Various unknown makers. Unidentified wood and glass. Oneida Community Mansion House. Photo by author.

Constructed by the cabinetmaker and tin shop, the “cabinet” consisted of several glass-topped showcases, displaying any number of magnificent ephemera: ancient coins, copies of Russian poetry, the Koran, the Talmud, medals, shells, even an autographed letter from Horace Greeley.²³⁸ Obviously meant as an attraction for visitors, this furnishing represented the Community’s emphasis on education and worldly learning, not merely religious instruction. Fixtures of upper-class Victorian exteriors, cabinets of curiosities connoted knowledge as well as wealth.²³⁹ Aware of this greater public fashion, the

²³⁸ Noyes, *My father’s house*, 122 and Oneida Community, *Hand-book of the Oneida Community*, 5.

²³⁹ For background on cabinets of curiosities and the rise of exoticism, see: Mark Meadow, “Merchants and Marvels: Hans Jacob Fugger and the Origins of the Wunderkammer,” in *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Pamela Smith and Paula Findlen, 182-200 (New York: Routledge, 2002); Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Kristin Hoganson, *Consumer’s Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity*, “Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Imperial Accessories: Importing the American Dream,” 13-56 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Perfectionists used their own cabinet similarly, to display not only relevance, but affluence and intellect. Being able to afford and gather such unique objects as carved ivory or sandalwood fans clearly communicated that, despite the reputation of this religious order, they were definitively relatable and cultured. To further cement that public perception, the Perfectionists saved the best furniture for the public Reception room, where visitors were brought. Situated nearest to the front door, the Reception room featured on-trend Victorian mahogany furniture and historical engravings, to “austerely impressive” effect.²⁴⁰

Of course, the Oneida Community welcomed refinement in their private spaces as well as their public ones. Continuing the tradition of domestic feeling which began in the Family Hall, the Mansion House contained not one, but several sitting rooms or parlors where individuals could gather in their free time. The quantity of these rooms reinforced the leadership’s warnings against isolation or exclusiveness—a repeated refrain in every aspect of Perfectionist life. Members were encouraged to ‘keep in the circulation,’ by rotating through sitting rooms.²⁴¹ Much of the nicest furniture in the Community occupied these rooms. According to reminiscences, the Back Parlor featured “heavy, marble-topped furniture.”²⁴² Another had a statue of Venus.²⁴³ Even the branch community in Wallingford had a “great fireplace and a marble mantel at one end” and a

²⁴⁰ Noyes, *My father’s house*, 38.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 111, remembered by Pierrepont Noyes because they used toy crossbows to fire shingle nails at it one afternoon.

“great haircloth sofa.”²⁴⁴ By far the most elaborate was the Upper Sitting Room (fig. 20), described thus by an occupant:

The Upper Sitting Room was a sunny, spacious room, lighted by four high windows which looked out on the eastern lawns. Two tiers of bedrooms opened out of this sitting room. The upper tier was reached by a balcony on the front of whose wide-paneled balustrade there stared at us a collection of small engravings, each showing a classic head. All the Muses were there, and Homer with his blind eyes and curly beard, and Socrates, and Pythagoras, and Vergil, and Pindar, and Plato, and others of ancient renown.²⁴⁵

The presence of artwork in the Upper Sitting room underscores its value as a space meant to inspire intellectual and social development in a similar way to a standard Victorian parlor.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Noyes, *My father's house*, 27.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

²⁴⁶ Unfortunately, there are no published examples of furniture in the Oneida Community. For any examples, see photographs in the Syracuse University Library: <http://library.syr.edu/digital/guides/o/OneidaCommunityCollection/hsr1.htm>.



Figure 20. *Above*: Upper Sitting Room. Unknown photographer. Circa 1880. Photograph. Syracuse University Library. *Below*: Upper Sitting Room. Present day. Photo by author.

Yet, while meant to encourage deep thinking and conversation, as well as a worldly sense, the furnishings do denote also a level of restraint relative to the typical refined parlor of the outside world. A New York newspaper asserted that to call the room “fancy” would be “in error, for, though certainly a very cozy as well as unique apartment, the furniture here, as well as elsewhere, is of the plainest description compatible with

comfort and a certain degree of ornament.”²⁴⁷ The reconstructed room as it appears today probably captures well the feeling of the room during its heyday: the furniture is decent, moderately fashionable with full upholstery, carved crown rails, and curved arms and seats, but does not exhibit the high-class appeal of true wealth, like tufted upholstery or thin, turned legs. This level of modesty indicates both an influence of public opinion and trend, matched with only moderate resources, juxtaposing humility with worldliness in a way that distilled into the Perfectionists seated within these rooms.²⁴⁸

In contrast to the formal sitting rooms, community bedrooms were decidedly smaller and less comfortable. Sparsely furnished, they reiterated the injunction against isolation.²⁴⁹ For the most part, the rooms consisted only of a small bed, a side table and washing station, one or two chairs, and little else (fig. 21).

²⁴⁷ Oneida Community, *Hand-book of the Oneida Community*, 8.

²⁴⁸ For further information on parlors and refinement, see: Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880*, ch. 4, “Preparing for Parlor Life,” 71-100 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, ch. 7, “Vernacular Gentility in Rural Delaware,” 207-237 (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). See also sources from note 149.

²⁴⁹ Green, “The Social Functions of Utopian Architecture,” 3.



Figure 21. Bedroom, Oneida Community Mansion House. Present day. Photo by author. Current representation of a standard bedroom in the Oneida Community Mansion House.

In addition to the minimal furnishings, the available pieces were simple, unupholstered, pieces, without uniform style. Again, the emphasis on communal wealth versus individual wealth elucidates the furnishing choices for public versus private spaces. However, despite this emphasis, the Perfectionists' sexual norms necessitated distinctive ownership of particular rooms. An individual could gather and decorate their rooms in a personalized manner, depending on their status in the community and what resources were allotted them. Pierrepont Noyes describes his mother's room distinctively, writing:

Hers was a pleasant room, lighted by two windows set deep in an embrasure made necessary by the slant of the mansard roof...broad window seat...At one side of my mother's room was a wardrobe with ample drawers below. In addition, there was a desk and desk chair where she did her writing, a comfortable rocker, and a bed. Hanging on the wall was a whatnot. I especially remember this because on its three shelves, of diminishing size, were many articles that I used to tease my mother to let

me take--figurines, little boxes, sparkling cards, daguerreotypes in marvelous frames, and a miscellaneous collection of little mementoes. Hanging also on the walls were several pictures and a mirror in an old-fashioned wooden frame.²⁵⁰

Since Harriet Worden, Pierrepont Noyes' mother, was a prominent member of the Oneida Community (given her sexual relationship with John Humphrey Noyes and their offspring, some of the first stirpiculture children), her room does not exemplify a standard bedroom in the Mansion House. It *does* exemplify a degree of personalization and comfort, particularly as the community became more affluent. The presence of a window seat, an ample wardrobe, a desk, a rocking chair, and several shelves for personal artifacts, shows that the priorities of the leadership were not in simply restricting material possessions for the sake of asceticism. This pattern continued on a larger scale with smaller, individual furnishings that arose late in the community. Beginning in the 1870s, the Oneida carpentry shop began to craft miniature bureaus. Typically made by males for individual females as love tokens (already an indicator of changing priorities for the Perfectionists), these objects appeared in varying styles. One example from the Mansion House (fig. 22) today is quite simple, with four large drawers in its body, framed by beveled edges on top and bottom, and topped with two smaller drawers, features only lightly carved knobs as its decorative feature. Another example (fig. 23) is entirely opposite, made with tiered drawers, framed by curved, carved edges, all stained in a dark varnish.

²⁵⁰ Noyes, *My father's house*, 65-66.



Figure 22. Miniature bureau #1. Unknown maker. Circa 1870. Unidentified wood. Oneida Community Mansion House. Photo by author.



Figure 23. Miniature Bureau #2. Unknown maker. Circa 1870. Unidentified wood. Oneida Community Mansion House. Photo by author. In comparison to the bureau in figure 22, this bureau is far more elaborate, intricately carved and varnished.

Their elaborate decoration signified the Community's preoccupation with style and individuality during this period. However, Oneidans' production and use of these objects indicates a newfound acceptance of the accumulation of personal goods, possessions to go inside these decorated drawers that were singularly owned. Once these began to appear in Perfectionist bedrooms, a shift away from communal ownership had already begun.

The rest of the house evokes little sense of continuity in furnishings. Extant furnishings today do not instill any sense of pattern, but rather a haphazard accumulation of goods. An intriguing high-backed Windsor-style chair occupied one room, while another room featured an elaborate whatnot more loosely Baroque in inspiration than anything else (fig. 24).



Figure 24. Chair and Whatnot, Oneida Community Mansion House. Unknown makers. Unknown dates. Unidentified woods. Photos by author.

It appears that the rule was to furnish comfortably with what was available regardless of fashion. Rooms devoted to specific tasks adhered more ostensibly to this rule. For example, the two dining halls were furnished with a dozen oblong tables as well as a few round tables, each fitted with a 'lazy Susan' rotating center, a Perfectionist invention meant to enable equitable access to every dish.²⁵¹ The Library featured comfortable armchairs and sofas where people could read newspapers or the books kept in the floor-to-ceiling glass-door cupboards.²⁵² Children's rooms also followed function, with a lengthy wainscoting to protect the walls and uncushioned chairs on bare floors so nothing could be stained.²⁵³

Ultimately, Oneida furnishings capture the Perfectionists' fluctuating acceptance of materiality. Fancy sofas and round tables in public and shared rooms emphasized interaction and cultural refinement but fashionable cabinets and whatnots downplayed the Perfectionists' distinctiveness. Simple, unupholstered chairs in modest private bedrooms discouraged isolation but miniature bureaus conversely facilitated individuality and personalization. Furthermore, the discontinuity of styles belied an even greater ambiguity on material identity. Certainly, Perfectionists welcomed luxury when it arrived, ever confident that "in due time the interior life which is given [them] will ultimately have the means of clothing itself in fitting forms of external excellence and

²⁵¹ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*; Noyes, *My father's house*, 43. Apparently, the lazy Susan also facilitated bad manners, as some community members would swivel them around so the most desirable food was always in close proximity.

²⁵² Noyes, *My father's house*, 39.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 37. The Girls' room different from the boys, being described as definitively more decorated, which is why, as one young boy recollected "it always remained exclusively a girls' room."

beauty.”²⁵⁴ Yet, their indiscriminate acceptance of wealth in its form fomented the self-focus that their indistinct, undefined material culture could not combat.

Textiles

While a dichotomy of acceptance and restraint informed the use of furniture at Oneida, the use of textiles—and, particularly, clothing—operated under strong regulation. However, that regulation originated less in religious doctrine than in practical, social beliefs. Like the Shakers, John Humphrey Noyes preached of beauty found in function. He taught, “That doctrine is that beauty has no independent existence, but that all beauty is to be secured by strictly conforming to what is useful...everything is constructed with reference to its use--beauty being incidental to use.”²⁵⁵ He proclaimed that all dress should be defined by that utility and that this eventuality would be “the cure of extravagance.”²⁵⁶ He warned “the whole matter of dress is a ‘scaly’ concern, and the less capital we invest in it the better.”²⁵⁷ Noyes felt that dress posed a particularly worldly threat, both distracting from the heavenly goal and detracting from the communal spirit by fostering self-indulgence. Hoping that the penchant for fashionable dress would diminish, Noyes urged simplicity and humility in dress, but inconsistently enforced it.

Despite the fact that both women and men originated in the same philosophy about simple living, the narratives and realities accompanying this philosophy uncovers a large split between standards for the sexes. Rhetoric condemning fashion and

²⁵⁴ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 188.

²⁵⁵ Noyes, *Home Talks*, 172.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

encouraging exacting parameters for dress were overwhelmingly directed toward women in the Oneida Community, and their textile traditions evinced that dynamic.

Men reportedly dressed “as people in the world do, but plainly, each one following his own fancy.”²⁵⁸ Though their garb was simple and manageable, men’s clothing also manifests fashionability and individuality, as is evidenced in the portraits of Oneida men (fig. 25).



Figure 25. Oneida Community “work bee.” Unknown photographer. Circa 1870. Photograph. Syracuse University Library. Though it is difficult to see in one image, the various styles of men’s dress are visible on the different men in this image, as well as the young boys.

²⁵⁸ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

Unlike the Shakers, whose control over clothing dictated even cuts and colors, the men in the Oneida community faced no such restrictions. A man could simply go to a tailor, be measured, and chose whatever style or cut suited his tastes.²⁵⁹ Thus some men wore vests, paired with simple neckties or cravats of varied patterns. Their only limitation was in fabric, since only a few fabrics (practical flannels and linens) existed in the community. To accessorize, men could also wear watches, so long as they obtained approval for such an ornament from the “Incidentals” committee, who aimed to distribute them equitably as a reminder of communal ownership.²⁶⁰ Aside from these protocols and the rhetoric against excess, no instruction or parameter guided Perfectionist males. All in all, men dressed the same way they had before joining the community.

Women faced endless censure, some originating from Noyes, but much of it from Perfectionist women who preceded them. Oneida women were particularly known for their unique “uniform,”—a short dress accompanied by loose trousers called “pantalettes” (fig. 26).²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ For further discussions of Perfectionist women’s clothing, see Fischer, “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish Trowsers.’” The best examples exist in photographs.



Figure 26. Oneida Community photograph. Unknown photographer. Circa 1860-1880. Photograph. Syracuse University Library. This image showcases the standard women's dress; each woman here is wearing a short dress with pantalettes that come up past their knees.

These pantalettes were not pants like men's, but more like fabric tubes fastened to the undergarments above the knee. Because their dresses only fell just below the knee, the pantalettes reached to the ankle, providing a bit more freedom of movement, a pragmatic reason for their adoption.²⁶² Yet, the public viewed this garb extremely unfavorably, especially when Perfectionist women began pairing their attire with new, bobbed haircuts. Charles Nordhoff wrote that, while

The dress is no doubt extremely convenient... it was to my unaccustomed eyes totally and fatally lacking in grace and beauty. The present dress of

²⁶² Van Wormer, "The Ties That Bind," 52.

women, prescribed by fashion, and particularly the abominable false hair and the preposterously ugly hats, are sufficiently barbarous; but the Oneida dress, which is so scant that it forbids any graceful arrangement of drapery, seemed to me no improvement.²⁶³

Traditionally-garbed Victorian women expressed shock upon seeing such dress, which quickly became a talking point for the Perfectionists; many of the Oneida Community's public pamphlets address the outfit as a distinct question from fictional "visitors," who are given the answer that the women chose to wear it on the claim of convenience, health, and discouragement of vanity.²⁶⁴

Women's choice is a common narrative in the origin story for Oneida pantalettes. The memoir of Harriet Worden, an early Perfectionist convert, recounts the story as she heard it:

"During the summer some new ideas had been broached on the subject of women's dress; Mr. Noyes in his Bible Argument... had made the following remark: *"The present dress of women, besides being peculiarly inappropriate to the sex, is immodest. Woman's dress is a standing lie. It proclaims that she is not a two-legged animal, but something like a churn standing on castors. When the distinction of the sexes is reduced to the bounds of nature and decency, by the removal of the shame partition, and woman becomes, what she ought to be a female-man (like the Son in the Godhead), a dress will be adopted, that will be at the same time the most simple and the most beautiful, and it will be the same, or nearly the same, for both sexes. The dress of children - frock and pantaloons - is in good taste. This, or something like it, will be the uniform of vital society."*...Not long after, three women might have been seen in the garret of the Log House (then one of the temporary dwellings of the (O.C.) contemplating their wardrobe with eager, earnest countenances. They were Mrs. M. E.

²⁶³ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

²⁶⁴ Oneida Community, *Oneida Community*, 13; Oneida Community, *Hand-book of the Oneida Community*, 28. Oneida women did not wear these outside of the community. Because their surrounding neighbors condemned this dress, leaders decided that, when they needed to leave, Oneida women would revert to traditional long dresses. Therefore, the pantalettes came to attract visitors to the community, eager to see for themselves the strange costumes of the Perfectionist women.

Cragin, Mrs. IJ. A. Noyes, and Mrs. H. H. Skinner; and they had met in this secluded place to devise a fashion adapted to the every-day life of a Community - dress, all once simple, modest and attractive. After various experiments and many "contrivings," they finally made short dresses of their long ones. and of the part cut off made pantalets to correspond. They tried them on, and were almost frightened at themselves. Had they courage to wear them?...But conscious of a right motive, they resolved to don the new suit and take the consequences. Their first appearance took the family by surprise, and, as they had apprehended, produced a sensation. To some they looked exceedingly comical; a number of the women were very much shocked; others declared the new costume ridiculous and absurd; and a few were greatly distressed. But the voice of the majority commended their trim appearance, and after the first surprise most of the family were delighted with the change. The advantages to be derived from its adoption were very apparent to the more candid, and it was not many weeks before the fashion became universal. This was in June, 1848. After more than twenty years' trial, the short dress and pantalets are still worn by the women of the O.C., and it is needless to say, greatly preferred to any other costume now in vogue."²⁶⁵

Choice here appears multiple times, first in contemplating the words of Noyes, then in devising the new fashion, then in choosing to wear it, and finally in the rest of the women's response of to the look. Noyes' only instruction is his initial statement that women should dress more like children so as to become "what she ought to be, a female-man." Of course, Noyes also argues that eventually, both sexes would adopt the same style of dress, a statement which appears entirely overlooked and eventually forgotten in the moment's legacy. In fact, later reminiscences attribute the invention of pantalettes not to Noyes' proclaimed designation that women's clothing reduces their sex, but to a desire to discourage "feminine vanity."²⁶⁶

Modern historian Gayle V. Fischer offers a different interpretation of the women's dresses and pantalettes, one that belies the narrative of choice and instead

²⁶⁵ Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 10-11. Emphasis added.

²⁶⁶ Noyes, *My father's house*, 126-7.

asserts standard patriarchal rule. Unlike other contemporary dress reformers, the Oneida “short dress” originated not in menswear, but in children’s wear, as Noyes himself pointed out in the previous quotation. Thus, rather than trying to appropriate male power by adopting pants, Oneida women actually chose a more submissive garment, which catered to Noyes’ urgings to value youth and virginal attractiveness.²⁶⁷ Certainly, the women accomplished youthfulness; nineteenth-century visitors noted that discerning the women’s ages by appearance was challenging. At the same time, Fischer argues that Oneida dress reform did not encourage women’s equality in the community, but rather gave way to more patriarchal guidance under the guise of their infantile dress.²⁶⁸

Regardless, Perfectionist women’s accounts often speak in favor of the short dress and pantalettes, citing that the new garb afforded them freedom from the restrictions of their previous lives.²⁶⁹ Likewise, the women felt strongly enough about this garment to recycle the same pattern for the lifespan of the Community.²⁷⁰ At the same time, Noyes’ judgments fell upon women in ways that they did not for men, judging by the lack of support for altering men’s dress. Additionally, while the short dress and pantalettes never officially constituted a “uniform,” (it was never mandated), clear pressure pushed women to continue dressing that way. Historical recollections remark that some of the older women never embraced the short dress, choosing instead to wear “fancy lace caps, long

²⁶⁷ Fischer, “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish Trowsers’,” 134. See also Gayle V. Fischer, *Pantaloon and Power: Nineteenth-century Dress Reform in the United States* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001).

²⁶⁸ Fischer, “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish Trowsers’,” 132.

²⁶⁹ Van Wormer, “The Ties That Bind,” 52.

²⁷⁰ Fischer, “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish Trowsers’,” 132.

dressess, and old-fashioned hoopskirts” instead of cutting their hair and their hems.²⁷¹

Pierrepont Noyes, in his memoir, ponders:

I have never found anyone who could explain these exceptions to the short-dress fashion of the Community and am left to conjecture that it was another example of John Humphrey Noyes’ tact and common sense. It may be that in these three or four elderly women he ran up against violent prejudices which he was unwilling to violate.²⁷²

This interpretation indicates that Noyes applied pressure to conform to this standard, but that, in cases where that push threatened to fracture the community, it was abandoned.

Whether or not Noyes himself intervened, his influence is clear, as his son notes

“Conformity, as with many details of conduct, was enforced by public opinion or desire for the approval of Father Noyes.”²⁷³ In the Oneida Community, John Humphrey Noyes’s will was felt, even when it was not made explicit. The Oneida Perfectionist short-dress and pantalettes were no exception.

All purchases and uses of clothing for the community were monitored based on needs. At the beginning the year, the Community leadership allotted certain amounts of money and divided among the children, infants, women, and men.²⁷⁴ Members had to make their individual allocations last the year. This method supposedly taught principles of good economy, a virtue that the Oneida Community in its prosperous years could actually afford to teach. One record denotes that for women, the amount allocated was thirty-three dollars for all clothing, including shoes and hats. A member remembered this

²⁷¹ Rich, *A Lasting Spring*, 18; Noyes, *My father’s house*, 79.

²⁷² Noyes, *My father’s house*, 79.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

amount—roughly the equivalent of five hundred dollars today—as more than adequate, writing:

Minus the superfluities and waste of fashion, we find thirty-three dollars a year plenty enough to keep us in good dresses, two or three for each season, summer, winter, fall, and spring (the fabrics are not velvets and satins, of course—they are flannels and merinos, the lighter kinds of worsted, various kinds of prints, and Japanese silk); to fill our drawers with the best of under-linen, to furnish us with hoods and sun-bonnets, beaver and broadcloth sacks, and a variety of shawls and shoulder-gear, lighter and pleasanter to wear, if not so ingrained with the degradation of toil as the costly Cashmere.²⁷⁵

This passage captures the Oneida disdain for extra, but hints as well at a knowledge that these goods, though functional, are not the finest. Remnants of the poor days of the Community still governed the distribution of vital materials, as in the case of their “going-away” clothes. When preparing for a jaunt to the outside world, adults and children both received designated clothing kept in stock, especially for women, as they donned more traditional long skirts for their outings.²⁷⁶ Children’s clothing also proved definitively more communal. Pierrepont Noyes’ recollection includes memories of “little tots in the same Scotch plaid dress and five- or six-year-olds in the same white blouse and velvet knickers.”²⁷⁷ Whereas women’s clothing was deemed electively uniform, the precedent of homogeneity, especially for women and children, was established here unequivocally for the youth in the Community, who shared community uniforms according to Perfectionist ideals.

²⁷⁵ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

²⁷⁶ Noyes, *My father’s house*, 127.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

Beyond clothing, there is little record that much care was taken in the selection and use of textiles for domestic interiors. More public rooms, especially the sitting rooms, were decorated nicely when the money was available to do so; one Oneida woman describes “drab moreen curtains were substituted for cotton...the curtains were surmounted by a neat little frill or valance of blue woolen delaine, which had the effect of a cornice, and gave to the whole a finished and even elegant appearance.”²⁷⁸ In the early days, these curtains did not merely cover windows, they delineated space within the large second floor of the Mansion House. Curtains hung on wires comprised walls, and thick woolen sheets constituted doors to individual rooms.²⁷⁹ Eventually, as the Mansion House underwent renovations in the 1850s, actual walls and doors soon supplanted the curtain dividers. Yet, simpler times persisted in Community memory. As the Community grew in wealth, even textile production became less vital, and the Perfectionists purchased more goods than they made. Women still retained the task of sewing many of the clothes, their burden relieved significantly with the investment in a Singer Sewing Machine.²⁸⁰ Ultimately, the importance of Community-made textiles for internal use declined, especially as increasing emphasis was placed on the profitable sale of goods to the outside world. The mounting interest in silk production, in particular, shifted Community focus to outside its own walls, rather than encouraging greater self-sufficiency, and even regulation and uniformity struggled to combat market interests.

²⁷⁸ Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories*, 7-8.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-9.

²⁸⁰ Oneida Community, *Bible Communism*, 16.

Saleable Goods

The legacy of the Oneida Community is tied up in its manufactures, and for good reason. Throughout the settlement's history, the Perfectionists devoted substantial effort and manpower to the production of consumer goods, marketed and used broadly outside the Community. At first, this mechanism existed to ensure the members' survival as they struggled through financial weakness. Despite building on plentiful contributions from converted members, failed agricultural ventures and poor investments, as well as the publication of a free paper, dragged on the group's finances. Then, in December 1848, Sewell Newhouse joined the Oneida Community. Newhouse brought with him an empire in one stable, profitable good: animal traps (fig. 27).



Figure 27. Newhouse Trap advertisement. Unknown maker. Circa 1880. Ink on paper. Photo credit of *Steel Traps* by A.R. Harding. This period advertisement showcases the variety made by the Oneida Community.

He had been developing the traps in Oneida since the 1820s, and his production climbed because his traps were renowned for being stronger and more durable than his competitors.²⁸¹ By the time Newhouse joined the Oneida Community, his business operated successfully at profit. However, to test his commitment to the communal order after his conversion, the Perfectionists restricted Newhouse from making traps until 1851. Newhouse coexisted faithfully and, after the trial period ended, resumed his business under new auspices within the Community. With members providing his labor, they filled the first order—for five hundred traps—and profits flowed right to the Perfectionists. At first, the trap business competed for top billing with community-made brooms and “rustic furniture,” but by the mid-1850s, the trap industry boomed and business changed.²⁸² Coupled with the rise of fashionable furs, especially muskrat, otter, mink, and opossum, demand for traps soared, and by the 1860s, the Newhouse trap was the standard for the United States.²⁸³ This left the Perfectionists attempting to manufacture tens and even hundreds of thousands of traps a year. To fulfill their orders, the Community members implemented industrial workflows and did their best to face the unrelenting anxieties upon them.

For an insular community, this stake in the economy proved a philosophical hurdle. How could they shun the world while embracing the profit it had to offer, especially considering their inability to live self-sufficiently? Oneida curator Anthony Wonderley argued that, for the Community to be able to support trap work meant

²⁸¹ Wonderley, “The Most Utopian Industry,” 177.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 193. Demand extended even as far as Canada, Russia, and Australia, by Pierrepont Noyes’ report.

“communizing it,” meaning reconciling its use with their values and incorporating it into the family. Wonderley chronicles how the Perfectionists went about this, first by subjecting all trap workers to “mutual criticism”—their technique for correcting anti-communal selfishness—and then by drawing them into more social activities with the Community members, increasing their ties to the group. Finally, Wonderley adds, “the Community encouraged everyone to have more fun making traps by dancing together on their breaks.”²⁸⁴ These endeavors made the trap-making a joint project for the entire Perfectionist settlement, to the degree that, by 1864, the traps were stamped “S Newhouse Oneida Community,” attributing as much credit to Newhouse for his invention as to the Community which assembled and distributed them.²⁸⁵ Yet, similarly to Shaker industry, Oneida Perfectionists accepted the trap-making industry as a way to build up God’s kingdom, rather than a greedy pursuit of superior wealth. Noyes reportedly wrote that traps “built their home, improved their surroundings, and set the Oneida Community before the world as a successful business enterprise.”²⁸⁶ They believed that use of traps could advance civilization by killing vermin and providing a more refined environment.²⁸⁷ By participating in this industrial effort, Oneidans could view themselves as socialist revolutionaries, proving that agriculture was not the only way to sustain a communal environment.

Perfectionists marketed numerous other goods, many of which never grew to industrial scale. At various points, the Oneidans pursued blacksmithing, sawmilling, and

²⁸⁴ Wonderley, “The Most Utopian Industry,” 180.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

selling furniture, baskets, and shoes to supplement their income.²⁸⁸ They made traveling-bags and satchels, and turned a decent profit from the sale of preserved fruits (\$27,417 in 1873).²⁸⁹ Most of this production constituted early attempts to sustain the community, growing to profitable levels by the mid-1850s.²⁹⁰ The community even won a silver medal at the New York State Fair for their “rustic seats.”²⁹¹ However, after witnessing the success of their trap industry, the Perfectionists expanded their production of other financially profitable commodities. Once again, the Community looked to its own members, and found in converts who had once been peddlers and salesmen another boon: silk. Though the peddlers knew how to sell silk, no one knew how to make it, so they looked outside for guidance. Three young people—Charles Cragin, Elizabeth Hutchins, and Harriet Allen—were sent to a Connecticut silk factory to gain hands-on experience. When they were sufficiently trained, they returned to the Community to share their knowledge.²⁹² By 1865, the Community spun and dyed their own silk, earning a positive reputation in the market for the quality of the fabric.²⁹³ Many hands went into making these textiles; an informative brochure on the Oneida Community lists:

eleven winding, nine cleaning, three doubling, six spinning, two twisting, one matching, one stretching, and ten spooling machines...employed in making machine-twist and sewing silk. Two looms, one spinning and

²⁸⁸ Van Wormer, “The Ties That Bind,” 41. Unfortunately, no published examples exist of these goods.

²⁸⁹ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

²⁹⁰ Rich, *A Lasting Spring*, xiii. Noyes himself encouraged this production, arguing that the community could not sustain itself on only its horticulture. Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 197-8.

²⁹¹ Oneida Community, *Bible Communism*, 16; Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

²⁹² Noyes, *My father's house*, 15

²⁹³ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*.

throwing machine, and other small machines, are employed in weaving ribbons and belts. Over one hundred hands...are employed in both branches of the business.²⁹⁴

By 1868, the Community had manufactured 4,664 pounds of raw silk, to a profit of approximately \$170,000.²⁹⁵ However successful, silk production marks a value shift for the Perfectionists. By cautiously exploring this manufacture—experimentally sending out a handful of young people to assess its viability—the Oneida Community performed a calculated test of profitable business (on top of the profits already achieved through trapping) with a willingness to drop it if it proved unsuccessful.²⁹⁶ This venture purposely set aside subsistence and turned the Community toward affluence.

John Humphrey Noyes preached that the Oneida Community “must make business a part of our religion,” but doing so required some doctrinal finagling. Production of traps and silk and all other goods necessitated intermingling with outsiders, with whom the Perfectionists had a contentious history and an unpleasant view. Pierrepont Noyes writes about growing up in “a strange world—a world bounded on four sides by walls of isolate; a world wherein the customs, laws, religions, and social formulas accumulated by civilization came to us only as the faint cries of *philistine hordes outside our walls*.”²⁹⁷ Almost all members of the Community were forbidden from speaking with outsiders, in part because of the latter’s uncleanness and in part

²⁹⁴ Oneida Community, *Hand-book of the Oneida Community*, 13-15. Silk was also produced at Wallingford, which operation employed 30 people.

²⁹⁵ Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 642; Oneida Community, *Hand-book of the Oneida Community*, 13

²⁹⁶ Cooper, “Relations of Modes of Production in Nineteenth Century America,” 11-12.

²⁹⁷ Noyes, *My father’s house*, 3, emphasis added.

because of the tension between themselves and the town.²⁹⁸ In practice, one appointed business man oversaw the buying and purchasing for the entire group.²⁹⁹ When the Community sent out men to sell their new skeins of silk—as they did more or less constantly—they traveled in pairs and, upon return were “subjected to a spiritual bath before being allowed to associate with the Family—a cleansing designed to remove any possible contamination resulting from their worldly contacts.”³⁰⁰ All of these accounts, particularly of actual spiritual cleansing, demonstrate that Perfectionists spurned association with the outside world on the basis of outsiders’ unworthiness and took precautions to prevent infiltration. Simultaneously, thriving business brought the outside right in and set them to work right alongside the Perfectionists.

At its peak, The Oneida Community contained scarcely three hundred members, many of those children or elderly, and therefore lacked the manpower necessary to produce hundreds of thousands of steel traps each year while also maintaining their surroundings and producing other goods for sale. So, in the 1860s, the Perfectionists began to invite hired workers to their factories to keep up. While initially the number of outside employees was minimal—between twenty-five and fifty workers—by the early 1870s, they had roughly twenty to thirty-five farm laborers and around two hundred full-time manufacturing workers.³⁰¹ For a group of people who regularly criticized their neighbors, utilizing them for production and allowing them to live on the community (as

²⁹⁸ Noyes, *My father’s house*, 25 and 113-114.

²⁹⁹ Oneida Community, *Oneida Community*, 4-5.

³⁰⁰ Noyes, *My father’s house*, 15.

³⁰¹ Nordhoff, *The communistic societies of the United States*; Cooper, “Relations of Modes of Production in Nineteenth Century America,” 10.

many did) posed a unique dilemma. As Anthony Wonderley spells out, “the ‘hireling system’—the world of wage-earning was antithetical to their communal and socialist values. As religious people and as people who led deeply self-examined lives, being employers bothered them. The problem was a frequent topic of discussion in their daily meetings.”³⁰² Other community members romanticized the time before the infiltration of outside workers as “our happiest years.”³⁰³ To mitigate the sinfulness of comingling, the Perfectionists were generous employers, offering eight-hour workdays, lodging, fair pay, and even access to the Community’s education classes. Nevertheless, these concessions did not prevent a vital shift on dynamics: the society became capitalistic.

Historian Heather van Wormer calls the Perfectionists “communal capitalists,” interacting with the outside world as an individual, while existing as a group.³⁰⁴ Though they acted as a corporation to their workers, Perfectionists still lived communally among the members. This arrangement assuaged the tension between their communal inner life and their commercial outer life, but still fomented class distinctions. Just as their nineteenth-century contemporary Karl Marx opined in his theory of alienation, Oneida Perfectionists became increasingly divided from the products of their labor, the actual production, and their producers. They began to employ outside labor to accumulate personal capital, rather than purely sustain reasonable production.³⁰⁵ Even fair treatment of workers could not hide the fact that, by the 1870s, the Community members “although

³⁰² Wonderley, “The Most Utopian Industry,” 85.

³⁰³ Noyes, *My father’s house*, 16.

³⁰⁴ Van Wormer, “The Ties That Bind,” 53.

³⁰⁵ Cooper, “Relations of Modes of Production in Nineteenth Century America,”

owning their property in common and enjoying equality of wealth and income amongst themselves, stood as capitalists in relation to their labor force.”³⁰⁶ As a result, their profits grew increasingly dependent on the hired workers instead of the group’s own hands. Even their contemporaries could see the effects within the Community. Visitor Charles Nordhoff remarked that Oneida “is in reality more a large and prosperous manufacturing corporation, with a great number of partners all actively engaged in the work, than a commune in the common sense of the word.”³⁰⁷ Noyes himself warned that the men in the trapshop were “neglecting their spiritual growth in their efforts to increase production.”³⁰⁸ By then, however, the metaphorical snowball was already rolling.

Repeating the pattern of numerous other similar utopian societies, Oneida soon fell victim to the capitalist world outside their walls, having invited it into their community in the name of growth. Ultimately, that production was all that survived when the community dissolved in 1881. Out of the remnants of the Perfectionists rose a joint-stock company, called Oneida Community, Ltd., where community members were stakeholders, earning modest profits off of their membership. The Oneida Community, Ltd. continued to manufacture the Newhouse traps for some time, adding as well the Victor line as a supplement.³⁰⁹ They remain known, however, for the small industry they began to grow at the tail end of the Community, in 1877: silver-plated tableware, which still graces tables today.

³⁰⁶ Cooper, “Relations of Modes of Production in Nineteenth Century America,” 10.

³⁰⁷ Qtd. in Cooper, “Relations of Modes of Production in Nineteenth Century America,” 12.

³⁰⁸ Carden, *Oneida*, 47.

³⁰⁹ Wonderley, “The Most Utopian Industry,” 175-176.

CHAPTER THREE: LATTER-DAY SAINTS³¹⁰

Background

John Humphrey Noyes was not the only religious leader to emerge from nineteenth-century New England. Born in 1805 in Sharon, Vermont, Joseph Smith, Jr. faced the same tumultuous religious environment, particularly after his family moved to western New York in 1817. An area of burgeoning economic growth, this part of New York became a hotbed for new religious and social movements through the 1820s and 1830s.³¹¹ The region even earned the nickname the “burned-over district” because it was so frequently “burned over” by the fire of religious enthusiasm.³¹² In this setting, with a religiously divided family, a fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith pondered his own religious beliefs, which resulted in a vision in 1820. In this vision, Smith recounted, he saw God and Jesus Christ, who told him that all contemporary religions were false and that the true, historic church would soon be restored to the earth. Subsequent visitations followed this initial one, including a revelation from one heavenly visitor who divulged the existence of ancient golden plates which recorded the religious and political history of

³¹⁰ Though this thesis addresses the history of the church, the analysis is focused on the Mormons once they settle in Utah. This is done for the express purpose of examining their experiences in a material vacuum, and seeing what they do when given the chance to establish an entirely new environment.

³¹¹ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 129. Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 5 notes that Charles Grandison Finney got his start there, as did the Millerites.

³¹² Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 129.

early American peoples, an account deemed comparable to the Biblical history in the ancient Middle East. By 1827, Smith began translating these plates and published that translation as the Book of Mormon in 1830. Shortly after that publication, in April 1830, Smith organized a formal church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which became colloquially known as Mormons, after their unique religious text.

Smith's church grew rapidly but moved frequently, due to external backlash to their radical religious claims. From upstate New York, the Church moved to Ohio, then Missouri, then Illinois. Despite their persecution, most of these communities prospered. In Illinois, particularly, the members produced a viable agricultural community, despite the swampy environment. Church membership increased as expansive proselytizing spread to the Eastern United States and even overseas. However, the Mormons continued to attract violent torment from surrounding communities, particularly after their implementation of polygamous marriage. On June 27, 1844, while being held in prison, Smith was attacked by an angry mob, who shot and killed him, threatening the future of the organization.

After some dispute, which resulted in offshoots of the mainstream LDS Church, a fiery man named Brigham Young assumed leadership. As one of his first prophetic endeavors, Young facilitated a mass exodus of devoted Mormons to the West, where he hoped they could escape the vitriol of their neighbors once and for all. So, in 1847, the first Mormons arrived in the Utah territory and settled. At the time of settlement, the church had roughly 1,680 members, but by 1852, that number reached approximately twenty thousand, attributed both to prolific reproduction and the influx of converted

members from abroad. In 1869, when the transcontinental railroad was completed in Utah, Mormons numbered around seventy thousand.³¹³ Before the end of the century, Mormons had hundreds of communities all over the West, though primarily in Utah, and over a hundred thousand members, exponentially more than any other utopian community.³¹⁴

It is this period in Utah that provides a glimpse into the Mormon views of communalism and the Millennial world. Such an existence had been attempted previously but Mormons had abandoned it during the years of their persecution. In Utah, they could establish an isolated community, geographically and spiritually. Independent of a state or national government, Mormons tried to build a theocracy, ruled by Young and other men, who guided the spiritual and temporal lives of all of the established communities, according to the dictates of their God.³¹⁵ Their isolation, coupled with their unique social and religious order, afforded Mormons a unique opportunity to craft a new culture—material included—shaped entirely by religion, untethered by external forces.

Religious Beliefs and Practices

By the time the early Mormons moved west, they had already established a series of beliefs and practices distinct from the American Protestant base. Aside from the belief in the Book of Mormon as scripture, Joseph Smith had set forth his heavenly communications in a book known as the Doctrine and Covenants, as well as a series of extrapolations from ancient texts called the Pearl of Great Price. These scriptures evinced

³¹³ Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture*, 28.

³¹⁴ Hayden, *Seven American Utopias*, 105.

³¹⁵ Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 159-160.

a central Mormon doctrine: continuing revelation. Rather than believing that the Bible contained all relevant instruction on living a righteous life, Latter-day Saints preached that revelation from God did not cease with the Bible. Words from God could be received via a new organization, patterned after the apostolic church of Christ, with a prophet at the head, supported by twelve apostles (arranged by seniority) and other, lesser quorums at regional and local levels. Vitally, the entire Church was beholden to the words of Young as the prophet and president of the organization.

In addition to continuing revelation and ancient hierarchy, Mormons preached against Original Sin, baptized by immersion in Christ's example, and performed sacred rituals in private temples constructed for that purpose. These buildings operated with such sacred purpose that, when the Saints reached the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, temple construction began almost immediately because Mormons believed only within the temple could they receive full saving ordinances.³¹⁶ The temple serves as a significant manifestation of Mormon priorities. Though in many ways distinct from other Protestant organizations of the period, Mormons shared the Millennial spirit. Believing that they were ushering in the Second Coming of Christ, Mormons consistently strove for perfection and the establishment of a godly community. They referred to this community as "Zion," a theoretical place of perfect righteousness and harmonious living. Joseph Smith expounded the idea, his study of the Bible telling of an ancient city which had

³¹⁶ They had built temples in Kirtland, Ohio and in Nauvoo, Illinois, prior to this, but had to abandon them in their exile.

allegedly become so perfect it was received into heaven as a whole.³¹⁷ Scripture described this city, and its people, as Zion because “they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness, and there was no poor among them.”³¹⁸ Mormons took hold of these words, as well as passages from other books translated by Smith that described people who had “all things in common,” and lived in love and peace.³¹⁹ Zion existed in duality, as a heavenly state of being, intangible because it lives in the heart of the people, but also as a physical location.³²⁰ Zion was to be “gathered in the flesh,” an actual city of holiness, built by the Saints, that would survive the destruction of the world at Christ’s Second Coming.³²¹ The site of this fabled city shifted with the Saints, moving west as they did, from Missouri, to Illinois, and finally, to Salt Lake City.³²²

The Saints took seriously the call to establish Zion in its literal, geographic sense, and the Great Basin provided them a blank slate on which to work.³²³ Being scarcely populated, especially by white civilians, Mormons saw their opportunity to create what

³¹⁷ Known in Mormon parlance as the City of Enoch, written in the Pearl of Great Price book of Moses.

³¹⁸ Moses 7:18.

³¹⁹ 4 Nephi 1:3; Doctrine & Covenants 82:3; Alma 1:26. These references are described in A. Don Sorensen, “Zion,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

³²⁰ Robert L. Millet, “Zion,” in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saints History*, comp. Donald Q. Cannon, Richard O. Cowan, and Arnold K. Carr (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2000).

³²¹ Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 159; Minutes of the Meeting of the United Order, August 4, 1875, Salt Lake City United Order Number 1, minute book, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

³²² Millet, “Zion.” Zion is a multi-meaning part of Mormon theology historically. Officially, Joseph Smith’s revelations place this city of Zion in Jackson County, Missouri, but rhetoric surrounding Zion evolved with the Church and the term grew to include many nuanced meanings, both geographic and theoretical.

³²³ Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1958), 5.

one author called “a symbolic universe of their own design, not only one that reflected in its physical form their core beliefs about what an ideal religious community should be but also one that put these beliefs on display as the tangible reality of everyday life.”³²⁴ New leaders, fresh from the trek west, laid out towns according to a divine plat handed down by Joseph Smith years earlier.³²⁵ The design prioritized Zion-making in two respects: religious union and material prosperity. Historian Dean May characterizes the former priority as “building the heterogeneous harvest of converts...into a unified, harmonious, orderly community.”³²⁶ Thus, Mormons lived in mid-size settlements, built large enough to protect them from hostile Native American tribes, but small enough group promote interaction.³²⁷ Cooperation was the heart of Zion. Yet, Zion also needed infrastructure to prosper materially, so major thoroughfares, businesses, and extensive irrigation cropped up as well.³²⁸ Ostensibly, “building” Zion required actual building, an idea consistently reinforced by Brigham Young, who pontificated that “We are not going to wait for angels...to come and build Zion, but we are going to build it.”³²⁹

Ideally, when the heart of the people knit together in unity, the proof of their righteousness would emerge materially, in temples and missions and charity.³³⁰ Saints

³²⁴ Carter, *Building Zion*, xxiii.

³²⁵ Carter, *Building Zion*, 2. A drawing of Smith’s “Plat of the City of Zion” is in the LDS Church archives.

³²⁶ Howard M. Bahr, *Saints Observed: Studies of Mormon Village Life, 1850-2005* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014), xii.

³²⁷ Carter, *Building Zion*, 25.

³²⁸ Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture*, 70.

³²⁹ Edwin B. Firmage, “Restoring the Church: Zion in the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries,” *Sunstone* (February 1989): 33. Another great quote here if this is “build” too many times.

³³⁰ Minutes of the Meeting of the United Order.

viewed the economic growth of the area as evidence of God's involvement and approval.³³¹ In his book, *Great Basin Kingdom*, Leonard Arrington describes this succession incrementally, from the gathering of the pure in heart, to the actual "redemption" of the earth (transforming the desert landscape into a verdant farmland) as well as economic independence.³³² Thus, Arrington argues persuasively for religious connection between prosperity and righteousness. This duality of the material and spiritual pervades the Mormon theology of Zion and seeped into everyday life in the valleys of the Utah territory.

Two fundamental principles undergirded the construction of Zion in Utah: unity and work. From the beginning, as in other Utopian experiments, community centered Latter-day Saint religion was strengthened by the joint experience of persecution and suffering. Already tested by outside terrorism, the passage West only further whittled away the uncommitted, leaving a resolute group determined to establish principles of communalism and stewardship.³³³ Additionally, ensuring their own survival on the land necessitated sublimation of self, sacrifice for the collective. By nature of their isolation, individualism had little place in the Mormon settlements, where settlers' needs were only met in cooperation. To quote one historian, "independence was a communal concept."³³⁴ Members were instructed by the Church leaders to support each other temporally as well as spiritually, to put forward their surplus for the building of temples and the feeding of

³³¹ Ethan R. Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 100-101.

³³² Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 24-28.

³³³ Ibid., 27; Firmage, "Restoring the Church," 34.

³³⁴ Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region*, 99-100.

the poor. Mormon historian Alexander Morrison summarizes the phenomenon well:

“The lesson is plain: Zion cannot be built up by a people whose vision extends no further than me and mine.”³³⁵

Work was also vital to the success of the Saints, with scriptural basis. The Book of Mormon account of Fourth Nephi discusses the rapid rebuilding of cities following the destruction at Christ’s death and the Doctrine and Covenants explicitly states “Thou shalt not be idle; for he that is idle shall not eat the bread nor wear the garments of the laborer.”³³⁶ Brigham Young frequently extolled the virtue of hard work. He expressed his personal feelings in the statement, “I have believed all of my life that, that which was worth doing was worth doing well, and have considered it as much a part of religion to do honest, reliable work.”³³⁷ One speech of Young’s even defines real wealth as “the bone, sinew, and time of the people,” because it is only through work that gardens, homes, and societies are constructed.³³⁸ Men and women were all expected to participate, not just in building the economy through canal-digging and structure-erecting, but also through church activity and contributing in social exchanges of goods.³³⁹ Temple construction occupied both spheres as a religious act and a public works project that united the community.³⁴⁰ The Saints meant to “make every hour of the day useful,” and not give in

³³⁵ Alexander B. Morrison, *Visions of Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010).

³³⁶ Doctrine & Covenants 42:42.

³³⁷ Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture*, 49.

³³⁸ Minutes of the Meeting of the United Order.

³³⁹ Belk, “Moving Possessions,” 356.

³⁴⁰ Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 185.

to laziness, but to constantly participate in perfecting their world, particularly because only after the transformation of their physical environment would Christ visit.³⁴¹

For all of the rhetoric about community and sacrifice, Mormons did not exercise communalism in the same sense as either the Shakers or the Oneida Perfectionists, despite similar origins of thought. Both of the latter communities disavowed individual ownership. They lived their ideals through even distribution of all goods, from housing to clothing and food, all provided with joint effort. That is not the case with the general Mormon settlements. Families and individuals were allotted plots of land and duties and cultivated them individually for their own sustenance; any extra then went to fill needs that remained to be met. As a result, Mormons termed themselves “stewards,” rather than “communalists.” They did not abandon and redistribute personal possessions top-down, but were expected to give their belongings and surpluses freely to their neighbors. This iteration of communitarianism was not necessarily doctrinal, but pragmatic, especially because the geographic spread of the settlements would have made central regulation unwieldy if not impossible.

That being said, there are definitive communal experiments in Mormonism that more closely match the models of other nineteenth-century Utopian communities. Early on, Joseph Smith called for “the consolidation of personal property in communal storehouses administered by Bishops who would redistribute the goods according to members’ needs,” a practice known as the Law of Consecration. The plan was never adequately instituted, and in 1841, Smith replaced it with the Law of Tithing, in which

³⁴¹ Carter, *Building Zion*, 4.

members sacrificed one-tenth of their income to the support of the Church, which would allocate it to multiple endeavors, including sustaining the poor.³⁴² Tithing, rather than communal living, encouraged American individualism and capitalism, but allowed it to work for the benefit of the Church as a whole.³⁴³ Tithing funds proved advantageous for religious and civic purposes, but the Law of Consecration still maintained its pull, lauded as a program that would be achievable if the people were more obedient. Brigham Young certainly hoped that, given the strict reproach that the Law of Consecration failed due to the “transgressions of [God’s] people,” the Saints would reform and eventually embrace this higher law.³⁴⁴ Young even tried to revive the Law of Consecration during his tenure as President of the Church, most notably through a program called the United Order, a successor to Consecration, intended to achieve the same goals.³⁴⁵ Explained by L. Dwight Israelsen in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, “Brigham Young saw the United Order as an intermediate step between the cooperatives of the 1860s and Joseph Smith’s ideal community based on consecration and stewardship.”³⁴⁶ Young organized the first United Order at St. George, Utah in 1874, growing that number to two hundred by the end of the century.³⁴⁷ Each community executed Young’s idea differently. In some, members contributed economic property and received dividends (dictated by a governing

³⁴² Carter, *Building Zion*, xxix.

³⁴³ Ibid., 68.

³⁴⁴ Morrison, *Visions of Zion*.

³⁴⁵ Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation Among the Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 7.

³⁴⁶ L. Dwight Israelsen, “United Orders,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

³⁴⁷ Israelsen, “United Orders.”

board) based on need, capital and labor input. Others operated more communally, with members living as a family contributing all their property and sharing equally in the product.³⁴⁸ Young took these United Orders so seriously that many who committed to them were rebaptized and put under covenant to obey rules pertaining to the success of the Order.³⁴⁹ Ultimately, the efforts of Brigham Young proved temporary. By the turn of the century, Mormon attempts at communal living in its myriad forms had essentially dissolved, victim to the influx of outsiders and economic prosperity, as well as an increasingly worldly group of believers.

Attitudes on Material Goods

The Mormon narrative on material fluctuates, at times highlighting destitution and at other times emphasizing refinement. Richard Bushman, another renowned Mormon historian, acknowledges these competing histories, opining, “We have accounts of pioneers eating crickets and of water dripping from sod roofs to prove the pioneers really did suffer. We also have records of barrels of fine china being carried across the plains to show that the Mormon settlers brought civilization to barren Utah.”³⁵⁰ Indeed, the story

³⁴⁸ Israelsen, “United Orders.” The most famous example of this second type is the Orderville community in southern Utah, in which members lived communally for several years before numerous pressures forced their dissolution. For more on this community, see Alexander Morrison, *Visions of Zion* and Leonard J. Arrington, “Orderville, Utah: A Pioneer Mormon Experiment in Economic Organization,” *Utah State Agricultural College Monograph Series* 2, no. 2 (March 1954).

³⁴⁹ Arrington, “Orderville, Utah,” 6-9.

³⁵⁰ Richard Lyman Bushman, “Was Joseph Smith a Gentleman? The Standard of Refinement in Utah,” in *Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah’s Mormon Pioneers*, ed. Doris R. Dant and Ronald W. Walker (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 29.

of Mormon material culture juggles a professed ambivalence toward the “things of the world” and a passion for cultivating the material evidence of civility.

The artifacts of Mormon settlement underlie a fundamental Mormon belief in the tie between material and spiritual. Mormon scripture taught that God’s laws were spiritual as well as temporal, never merely the latter and that “if you are not equal in earthly things ye cannot be equal in obtaining heavenly things.”³⁵¹ Undergirded by the belief that they were building the literal kingdom of God, Mormons asserted that spiritual things comprised “the refined essence of the material world.”³⁵² Richard Bushman elucidates this belief in his essay on refinement in Utah, writing the narrative of early Utahns paints them as unfinished and unrefined by pure gospel living. “In time,” Bushman says, “the uplifting spirit of the Mormon religion, plus a little prosperity, would civilize crude farmers and turn their cabins into comfortable and refined houses.”³⁵³ As Bushman explains, spiritual progression resulted in increasingly “civilized” living, characterized not just by manner, but by material. Rhetoric from Church leaders advocating clean and beautiful homes reinforced this perception. John Taylor, third President of the LDS Church, delivered the following injunction: “It is our duty to adorn and beautify [our home] to make it so lovely and attractive that angels may condescend to

³⁵¹ Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 5; Robert L. Millet, “The Development of the Concept of Zion in Mormon Theology” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1983), 90. The second quote comes from Doctrine & Covenants 78:6.

³⁵² Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 159.

³⁵³ Bushman, “Was Joseph Smith a Gentleman?,” 30.

visit it.”³⁵⁴ In order to invite God, Taylor made clear, believers had to cultivate the right material environment.

While Mormons shared with the Perfectionists a fundamental faith in material prosperity as evidence of correct living, they also shared a distaste for “worldliness,” essentially meaning fashionability. Church leaders, especially Brigham Young, criticized all appearances of frivolity in behavior and look. In one 1875 address, Young lectured at length for simplicity. Beginning with extolling the virtues of a fifteen- or twenty-cent breakfast over a hundred-dollar one, Young also explained that the principles of simplicity would allow the Saints to “live our religion as well as we know how.”³⁵⁵ Young’s comments frequently targeted women, reprimanding them for their clothes. In that same 1875 sermon, though the men are also briefly scolded (not for their dress), the President waxed long-winded about the pitfalls of women’s costume. He began by urging them to abandon their customs of fashion, then went on:

My wives dress very plainly, but I sometimes ask them the utility of some of the stripes and puffs which I see on their dresses.... what use are they? None whatever. Some ladies will buy a cheap dress, say a cheap calico, and they will spend from five to fifteen dollars’ worth of time in making it up, which is wasting so much of the substance which God has given them on the lust of the eye, and which should be devoted to a better purpose. It adds no beauty to a lady in my opinion to adorn her with fine feathers....If a woman is clean in person and has on a nice clean dress, she looks a great deal better when washing her dishes, making her butter or cheese, or sweeping her house, than those who, as I told them in Provo, walked the streets with their spanker jib flying.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Richard G. Oman, “The Homemade Kingdom: Mormon Regional Furniture,” in *Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah’s Mormon Pioneers*, ed. Doris R. Dant and Ronald W. Walker (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 171.

³⁵⁵ Minutes of the Meeting of the United Order.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

Martha S. Heywood, a woman in attendance at one of Young's similar sermons, recalls his preaching on "lazy women and men who want nothing but fine clothes—sowing seeds for their own destruction."³⁵⁷ Mormonism was not an ascetic religion, but leaders expounded a deeply rooted belief that worldliness bred frippery and fracture within the community.³⁵⁸ As Young and other Mormon leaders proclaimed, money spent on enhancing one's appearance was money lost to the greater causes of building temples, sending missionaries abroad while supporting their families at home, or providing education.³⁵⁹ These efforts at community building were a substantial part of creating Zion, and so leaders condemned any apparent self-interest which superseded them as wasteful and ungodly.

This widely expounded belief opposed the reality of hard frontier living. Among the few articles brought across the plains were many items of personal comfort, bringing a sense of civility to the undeveloped West. Women in particular carried china and fine fabrics with them, seeing them as objects which "represented civilization and allowed the continuance of domestic rituals."³⁶⁰ Lace curtains or fine silver could provide settlers an escape from the harsh existence in their new surroundings, and so constituted a separate reason for aspiring materialism. As the Saints flourished, they took an American interest in new, fancy goods. These goods' abundance, evident in the collections at the Pioneer Memorial Museum (among other collections), showcase a standard capitalist taste. As

³⁵⁷ Martha S. Heywood journals, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

³⁵⁸ Belk, "Moving Possessions," 358.

³⁵⁹ Minutes of the Meeting of the United Order.

³⁶⁰ Belk, "Moving Possessions," 351.

historian Thomas Carter details, “It cannot be overemphasized that Mormon society from the outset retained its American materialism. Church leaders like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young could preach about the evils of ‘worldliness,’ but in everyday practice their word went unheeded, even by themselves.” Carter points out that, coupled with the Mormon belief that material blessings were evidence of spiritual diligence, fine goods—large homes, modern furniture, fashionable dress—were also declarations of righteousness.³⁶¹ Even Brigham Young promoted a fine appearance; nineteenth-century visitors to the region noted that, though Young lived simply, his homes were elaborate and all completed before the temple.³⁶²

The struggle for refinement as a proving measure for the Saints further complicated the tension between righteous simplicity and meritorious materialism. Standard consumption allowed the Saints to prove not only that life on the frontier was not anarchic barbarism, but that the religion itself had value. Thus, the Saints aimed to surround themselves not just with culture and the arts (a performing theater was one of their first endeavors), but with objects of worth.³⁶³ Imports of fashion, furniture, and other goods from the East boosted the American opinion of Mormons. Material prosperity legitimized the religion to the outside world, providing physical evidence that the Mormon message was true.³⁶⁴ Saints felt they could earn respect by proving themselves equally cultured as Easterners, both with plays and education and with lace

³⁶¹ Carter, *Building Zion*, 22.

³⁶² Bahr, *Saints Observed*, 74-75.

³⁶³ Main, “Pursuing ‘The Things of This World’,” 25-26. Regarding the theater, a social hall was erected as early as 1853 for lectures, dances, and theatrical performances. See Carter, *Building Zion*, 191.

³⁶⁴ Carter, *Building Zion*, 105.

curtains and flower vases.³⁶⁵ All of these factors—comfort, religion, and perception—contributed to an uneasy relationship with consumption and capitalism, and a confused and conflicted material landscape for the early Saints in Utah.

Material

Furniture

Just as the Great Basin provided a blank canvas for the creation of Zion, the isolation of the Utah Territory offered a creative haven for artisans of every kind. Freely unburdened by the dictates of Eastern styles and high-class commissions, Mormons in Utah operated untethered to specific, popular styles. Mormon cabinetmakers and carpenters in particular showcase that freedom. One hall in the Pioneer Memorial Museum demonstrates that—more similar to the Perfectionists than the Shakers—Latter-day Saint furniture features no distinctive pattern (fig. 28). Instead, the hall is populated with long rows of distinctive chairs that look nothing alike. Fancy, turned Windsor-style chairs occupy space next to simple ladder-back constructions with worn caned or rush seats, interspaced with square chairs with vaguely urn-shaped splats. One yellow painted beauty stands out like a Finlay piece amid this horde of browns, spotted with the occasional variation of color, but it is clearly an upper-class exception to an otherwise unimpressive tradition.

³⁶⁵ Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 210.



Figure 28. Section of chairs in the Pioneer Memorial Museum. Unknown makers. Circa 1850-1900. Mixed materials. Pioneer Memorial Museum, Salt Lake City, UT. Photo by author. The sheer variety of chairs here demonstrate the expansiveness of Mormon material culture.

As these chairs show, Mormon furniture offered little discernible continuity stylistically.³⁶⁶ The assortment emerged thanks in part to the varied local economies of Utah, some of which were more affluent and some which were not, making certain styles and materials more amenable to different areas. However, in addition to economic discrepancies, the distinctive incorporation of any and all styles in Mormon furniture also demonstrates the conflicted nature of Mormon material culture, pitting simplicity against comfort and practicality against perception.

Church leaders encouraged Mormon cabinetmakers to showcase creativity in their pieces. Brigham Young—himself a cabinetmaker—instructed the furniture makers of

³⁶⁶ Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture* constitutes the best source for published examples of Mormon furniture. Some further discussion can be found in Oman, “The Homemade Kingdom.”

Utah to “exercise...individual ideas about beauty and function.”³⁶⁷ Perhaps hoping to organically unearth a signature style or, more likely, to simply foster production in the barren environment, neither Young nor any other leaders ever sponsored a single design. Rather than struggling to embody religious ideals in furniture, Mormons embodied their religion in merely working to build a physical environment. So long as the design was excellently executed, cabinetmakers were free to choose their designs.³⁶⁸ By default, many of them worked in the fashionable styles they had mastered prior to their migration, such as the American Empire style, with its Gondola chairs, as well as other Classical styles. Just as with their Eastern counterparts, furniture in these styles occupied the fancy buildings of the new settlement, gracing the homes of leaders and culturally important structures. For smaller, less affluent areas, Shaker ladder-back chairs sometimes made appearances, simply constructed with woven seats.³⁶⁹ To some degree, rectilinear foundations spoke to the leaders’ sense of order, echoing their grid-like cities with straight lines and basic shapes.³⁷⁰ Scandinavian design often captured this aesthetic and thus appealed to Mormon cabinetmakers, but again it never constituted any semblance of “official” design.³⁷¹ Rather, facing limitations in materials, cabinetmakers mostly executed simple designs, well-suited to their rural settings.³⁷² Most of these designs are entirely plain, indistinguishable from any similar products back East. However,

³⁶⁷ Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture*, 26.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 17-19 and 41.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 27. The square in Mormon symbology also represents fastidious obedience to God.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 121.

³⁷² Main, “Pursuing ‘The Things of This World’,” 49.

occasionally, furniture makers branded their constructions with distinctive religious symbols, such as the All-Seeing Eye or the Handclasp.³⁷³ The Mormon Beehive, an adopted symbol of productivity and cooperation, proved one of the more popular motifs, but even it does not appear consistently in Mormon furniture.³⁷⁴

Contributing to these conservative styles was a lack of resources. Despite the wealth of trees along the Wasatch Front, the valleys themselves were deserts, lacking in proper furniture-making wood. Marilyn Conover Barker, author of *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture*, points out that “to the Mormon immigrants, nothing was so highly prized as wood, next to the value of water and food. Wood was necessary for shelter, furnishings, transportation, and fuel. The same limited supply was needed for all stages of establishing the culture in an arid, inhospitable, but beautiful environment.”³⁷⁵

Competing with housing needs, cabinetmakers often lacked the materials with which to make fanciful furniture. Instead, they made use of what they had, which was mostly pine, especially from the old wagon boxes which had brought the Saints into the Valley in 1847. Simple pine furniture offered little beauty, but certainly fulfilled urgent need. Yet, despite their spoken penchant for simplicity, conflicted Mormon interest in presenting a successful face to the public once again posed a challenge. To address this concern, Mormon cabinetmakers creatively adapted their furniture to seem more luxurious than it actually was. For instance, these artisans learned to polish their

³⁷³ Richard C. Poulsen, *The Pure Experience of Order: Essays on the Symbolic in the Folk Material Culture of Western America* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 50. These are Masonic symbols, obviously, but Mormons adopted them as well, due to Joseph Smith’s Masonic participation.

³⁷⁴ Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture*, 10.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 12.

softwoods to imitate hardwoods. Utah craftsmen also “mastered the art of ‘graining,’” painting the surfaces of their wares to replicate the appearance of oak or mahogany.³⁷⁶ Brigham Young even owned several pine pieces that were convincingly painted to look like marble, including a personal desk and a fireplace mantel in his home (fig. 29).



Figure 29. Beehive House mantelpiece. Truman O. Angell. Painted pine. Circa 1854. Pioneer Memorial Museum, Salt Lake City, UT. Photo by author. This mantelpiece from the home of Brigham Young, is a simple pine, but with green faux granite graining for the appearance of wealth.

The aim, of course, was to project luxury and therefore success to the outside world. Before the Saints could establish firm trade options, imitation constituted the best they could do to represent wealth. Even this early evidence suggests divergent Mormon

³⁷⁶ *Artifacts from the Pioneer Memorial Museum*, 27.

priorities. Rather than merely sustainably meeting basic needs, Mormon furniture often pursues style for the benefit of an external viewer. Especially in the case of Brigham Young, these touches of luxury—like the pine mantle—reflect a preoccupation with perception.³⁷⁷ This smacks not of merely beautifying the home for the sake of heaven, but for the sake of worldliness. As trade between the Eastern and Western states improved, Mormons used the boon of incoming materials to cement their status as a civilized society. Eventually, they gained access to imported woods like walnut and oak, as well as new inventions for furniture-making.³⁷⁸ Furthermore, imported pulls and ornaments were shipped in and attached to “homemade” pieces to spruce them up, the bronze or faux stones dramatically improving their appearance.³⁷⁹ Increasingly adorned with these fashionable touches and materials, Mormon furniture grew slowly divorced from simplicity and more demonstrative of modest wealth and overt self-consciousness.

As with Shakers, the forms produced within the Mormon territories are as telling as the materials and styles they attempted to evoke, though the goal is opposite. Despite early needs for basic furniture, by the 1870s and 1880s, LDS artisans sold a variety of luxury goods, crafted in-house for primarily local clients. Historian Kari Main’s analysis of one cooperative store in Brigham City, Utah highlights this shift in consumption. Prior to the 1870s, most of the home-manufactured products were utilitarian—bedsteads, chairs, tables, etc.—but beginning in that decade, more orders came in for specialized

³⁷⁷ A similarly grained desk exists in the LDS Church History Museum.

³⁷⁸ Main, “Pursuing ‘The Things of This World’,” 34; Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture*, 51. Brigham Young encouraged the importation of these types of machinery.

³⁷⁹ Main, “Pursuing ‘The Things of This World’,” 32.

items, such as parlor furniture, picture frames, and sideboards, even a toy rocking horse, all denoting wealth and leisure.³⁸⁰ Even the popular Victorian form, the “whatnot,” begins to appear in Brigham City co-op records, selling for \$3.25 each.³⁸¹ Evidence of this shift exists not only in store records, but in the actual artifacts. Rooms of the Pioneer Memorial Museum showcase upholstered fauteuils with delicately carved legs, as well as one bureau with spindle decorations and shell-shaped carved drawer pulls. One room features several examples of these luxury furnishings, usually dating from around the 1880s. A relentlessly decorated cedar bedstead, complete with a carved swan in mid-flight on the headboard, occupies the center of the room, which also contains an elaborately embellished antler-headed hall stand with mirror and a small chess or checkerboard table (fig. 30).

³⁸⁰ Main, “Pursuing ‘The Things of This World’,” 25.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 30.



Figure 30. Room at the Pioneer Memorial Museum. *Center*: Bedstead. Ralph Ramsay. Circa 1860-1890. Pioneer Memorial Museum, Salt Lake City, UT. The hallstand on the left and the chess table in the right foreground all denote the interest in luxury in Mormon territory. Unknown makers. Circa 1860-1890. Unknown materials. Photo by author.

Not only do these items signify a greater availability of luxury, they point to a definite worldliness. Despite the fact that these items were “homemade” in the West, the forms themselves originated in Eastern Victorian society. By manufacturing and purchasing these items, Mormons clearly demonstrated a failure to divest themselves of the Eastern trappings of wealth, regardless of having physically separated themselves from that society. Instead of defining new standards of status and class, Mormons took hold of standard markers of wealth and adopted them for their own use.

Mormon cabinetmakers long viewed themselves as creators of their new society, shaping the physical environment with creativity and freedom. Seen as the harbingers of

culture, their goods earned the praise of Church leadership, who saw their production as a way to ensure self-sufficiency while also cultivating refinement.³⁸² Additionally, cabinetmakers provided apprenticeships and trained new converts, resulting in the speedy buildup of Zion. Because Latter-day Saints believed beautifying their surroundings would usher in heaven, they construed the act of creating furniture as an undertaking of worship, style notwithstanding.³⁸³ In that way, furniture captures the tie between material and spiritual for Mormons. Yet, their adherence to worldly status symbols of wealth in furniture indicates another motivation. Continually determined to prove themselves to the world which had relentlessly rejected them, the Latter-day Saints saw their furniture as a way to establish their Victorian normalcy. Eventually, furniture became less a way to establish themselves apart from the world; it became a way for them to fit in to mainstream America.

Textiles

Beyond providing basic homes and food, the first Saints in the Utah territory quickly realized they also needed clothing and bedding. Cloth rapidly became a valuable commodity, a “scarce and highly prized article.”³⁸⁴ To remedy its scarcity, early Mormons turned to home production to speedily build up a thriving textile industry. For leaders, domestic manufacture not only allowed the community to escape the corrupting influence of imported, fashionable goods, but also enabled them to achieve independence from outside suppliers. Brigham Young had previously advised the pioneers to take with

³⁸² Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture*, 121.

³⁸³ Oman, “The Homemade Kingdom,” 159. Home manufacture is a significant part of their praise, for reasons that will be discussed.

³⁸⁴ “Textile Making Figures in History of Utah,” *Deseret News*, March 18, 1933.

them sheep and machinery for spinning when they crossed the plains, while one of his Apostles, George A. Smith, warned the people that the question of home production was as simple as “clothes or no clothes.”³⁸⁵ Women took up the reins of this movement, providing the first locally-produced clothing from their own spinning wheels and looms, manufacturing carpets, bonnets, stockings, and thousands of yards of cloth.³⁸⁶

Counsel from church leaders encouraged women in this endeavor, urging “our wives and daughters [to] employ themselves industriously at their wheels at home, that our wants may be partially supplied until more machinery shall be made and set up.”³⁸⁷ Many women took up entrepreneurial roles from their homes, such as Mrs. Hannah Romney, who made gloves and other items (in addition to doing washing and nursing) to support her family while her husband traveled on a mission for the Church.³⁸⁸ Women frequently sold caps, bonnets, shawls, and cloaks, among other goods, as a way of fulfilling the needs of the Saints and establishing an income.³⁸⁹

At the same time, Brigham Young built a separate industrial sector dedicated to mass-producing textiles. While charging women with the vitality of the task of cloth-making, he also pushed businessmen to import machinery and crops necessary for the operations. Cotton and wool proved valuable commodities for the Saints. Cotton made its debut in the region in 1852 as Southern converts moved into the territory, settling

³⁸⁵ Carter, “Woolen and Cotton Mills,” 433.

³⁸⁶ “Textile Making Figures in History of Utah.”

³⁸⁷ Carter, “Woolen and Cotton Mills,” 434.

³⁸⁸ Andrew H. Hedges, “Battle of the Homefront: the Early Pioneer Art of Homemaking,” in *Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah’s Mormon Pioneers*, ed. Doris R. Dant and Ronald W. Walker (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 133.

³⁸⁹ Clayton, “Clothing and the Temporal Kingdom,” 108.

along Washington Valley, a place called “Utah’s Dixie,” where they established decent production.³⁹⁰ Picked tufts were turned over to women, who carded, rolled, and colored the yarns, using basic hand cards and primitive dyes. Minerva Dart Judd, one of the women involved in the making, recalls “That season [1857] I manufactured and colored the yarn for a piece of check for shirts and two coverlairs. I employed Sister Meeks of Parowan to do my weaving. The completion of a piece of cloth in those times was an event of considerable importance in the family.”³⁹¹ Eventually, the work of women was supplanted by the Washington Cotton Factory, which made yarn and cotton that could be sold even outside the Mormon communities.³⁹² As an industry, wool production also began on the home scale, using sheep brought during the migration. This wool, like the cotton, was combed, carded, spun, and woven by women’s hands, eventually replaced by industrial machinery.³⁹³ In 1851, Brigham Young pushed the General Assembly of the State of Deseret (the collective name for Mormon territories) to appropriate \$2,000 “to encourage the manufacture of wool in Great Salt Lake County” that could be used for clothing the people.³⁹⁴ That year, the first carding machinery came to Provo, followed by a large woolen mill, called the Deseret Mill, erected by President Young in 1861.³⁹⁵ So

³⁹⁰ The first man to plant cotton in the valley was Jacob Hamblin.

³⁹¹ Carter, “Woolen and Cotton Mills,” 445.

³⁹² William Albert M’Cullough, “Cotton Raising Era in Southern Utah Recalled by Early Settler,” *Deseret News*, December 9, 1939. Particularly in the Civil War, cotton produced outside of the South was a valuable commodity, and Utah participated in trade with the North during that period. “Textile Making Figures in History of Utah.”

³⁹³ “Textile Making Figures in History of Utah.”

³⁹⁴ Carter, “Woolen and Cotton Mills,” 439.

vital was the wool effort that even a train of mule teams dispatched under the Perpetual Emigrating Fund—money set aside to sponsor poor converts making the trek to Utah—was re-assigned the task of hauling wool machinery to Salt Lake City.³⁹⁶ All men and women were instructed to wear the home-produced fabric instead of other goods. Even Brigham Young's own son, Don Carlos, was presented with two fine suits made by the mills prior to leaving on a mission in 1893.³⁹⁷ The mills were lauded as beneficial to everyone, providing good suits accessible to even the poorest people at a reasonable price.³⁹⁸

In his reminiscences, Brigham Young claimed ownership of the woolen and cotton factories, calling them “his.”³⁹⁹ Yet, proud as he was of the cotton and wool production, Young set his sights on a particular cloth, one that could effectively solidify Mormons' reputations in the outside world: silk. Though he oft preached against the pitfalls of fashion, President Young touted silk production as a vital undertaking for the burgeoning community. And, despite the desert, sericulture in Utah developed into a massive, albeit short-lived endeavor. A significant women's movement, church leaders encouraged silk production seeing it as a hallmark of civilized society, proof that frontier life was not barbarous. During the nineteenth century, silk work had grown popular

³⁹⁵ Carter, “Woolen and Cotton Mills,” 436-442. Abraham O. Smoot erected the Wasatch Woolen Mill six years later, and Alanson Norton, also one of the settlers of Brigham City, remembered that his first assignment in that settlement, in 1865, was to “go East and purchase machinery for the factory” that would entirely process raw wool. Numerous wool factories throughout the territory followed the Deseret Mill.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 438.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 436. Don Carlos' suits were made of goat hair, but processed at the Deseret Mills.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 453-454.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 439.

across Western civilization, deemed a fine occupation for women who “may have no other means of profitably employing their time.”⁴⁰⁰ Though more fully developed on the East Coast, women in Utah also expressed interest in silk production. For them, the industry took on a personal significance, a way to manufacture some of the finery many had never owned, as well as supplementing their husbands’ incomes at low cost.⁴⁰¹ Thus, in 1855, Mormon women began breeding silkworms. Led by influential women such as Zina Young (one of Brigham’s wives) and an Italian convert named Susannah Cardon, who had sent to France for some eggs, women took particular care of these charges.⁴⁰² Mulberry seeds brought from the East were planted in the valleys to feed the fast-growing worms. One woman—Priscilla Jacobs of the Logan Fifth Ward—wore the worms in a pouch around her neck and slept with them under her pillow because she had heard the “Oriental people” did that.⁴⁰³ Another woman vacated nine of the ten rooms in her home to accommodate the number of silkworms she attempted to raise.⁴⁰⁴

Once the worms had spun their cocoons, the women unraveled and spun the silk into fabric, worn like a badge of honor by men and women. Elizabeth Mills Oakden Whitaker reminisced in her memoir about making a variety of clothes for Brigham Young. She recalls “I made a silk vest, and knitted a tie and a pair of silk socks for

⁴⁰⁰ Arrington, “The Finest of Fabrics,” 378-382. Arrington points out that silk was booming starting in the 1830s in the Midwest, where Mormons had been settled prior to their move to the Salt Lake Valley.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 383.

⁴⁰² Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture*, 10; Arrington, “The Finest of Fabrics,” 379.

⁴⁰³ Arrington, “The Finest of Fabrics,” 381.

⁴⁰⁴ Jude Daurelle, “Produce What You Consume: The Silk Industry in Utah,” *Piecework* (July/August 1994): 46.

Brigham Young, and one set exactly like it for my husband...Brigham complimented me on my beautiful weaving and knitting from the silk. He said I'd go down in Utah history for it."⁴⁰⁵ Whitaker's was not the only praised work—Brigham Young publicly lauded women who wore their own silk, once asking a woman wearing a silk dress to stand up at a meeting in order to congratulate her on producing the garment.⁴⁰⁶ These accounts speak to the enormous weight that home-produced silk carried in Mormon society, especially among women. In fact, the very first sermon given by a woman at the Church's General Conference was offered by Zina Young, on sericulture.⁴⁰⁷ Women produced and used silk veils, handkerchiefs, and scarves, selling them in their Women's Commission House.⁴⁰⁸ In June 1875, the women involved in sericulture incorporated the Deseret Silk Association, with the mission of "encouraging the raising of cocoons and the reeling of silk here, instead of merely producing and exporting the eggs."⁴⁰⁹ The Utah Silk Association, incorporated a few years later in 1880, sold shares at \$10 to women, and only women were permitted to be members, due to the perception that "sericulture was the responsibility of women."⁴¹⁰ In two crowning achievements, Utah women presented Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes with white silk collarette of Utah silk in 1880, and a silk gown to Susan B. Anthony at her eightieth birthday in 1895.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁵ Nora Whitaker Barber Miles, *The Biography of Elizabeth Mills Oakden Whitaker* (Centerville, UT: Publisher's Press, 1986).

⁴⁰⁶ Arrington, "The Finest of Fabrics," 383.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.* Young was President of the women's organization, the Relief Society, as well as head of the Deseret Silk Association.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 387.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 392.

Despite the fact that many women did not care for the work of sericulture, which was tedious and required constant attention to the worms, they still saw the movement as a powerful testament to home production as well as to their own civilized natures. They recognized silk as a luxury item, associated with “highly refined people attaining the upper strata of culture and civilization...the jewel of the great agricultural diadem with which society has crowned itself.”⁴¹² Women strove for that level of status and familiarity to the societies in which they had lived prior to migration, all of which silk embodied. After years of being regaled with censures opposing fashionable dress and appearances of worldliness, women could finally allowably pursue this measure of sophistication. Sericulture thus proved a way for women to reclaim fashion as a victory, rather than a sin. Unfortunately, regardless of the women’s efforts and the dedicated appeals of Church leaders, sericulture struggled more than succeeded, and declined to extinction near the turn of the twentieth century.

Of course, cloth production provides only part of the narrative of textiles among the Mormons. Clothing, handiwork, and a variety of other textile artifacts remain, capturing the complex culture of fashion and heritage that accompanied their production. Clothing remained one of the basic needs of the early Saints. Early into settlement, the Saints had only animal skins or fibers to supplement the clothes they had brought with them.⁴¹³ Once cloth production achieved viability, Saints finally had the opportunity to fashion their own clothing in a vacuum. Yet, despite injunctions against following Eastern, non-Mormon society, the Saints found themselves caught between their desire

⁴¹² Carter, “Silk Industry in Utah,” 68.

⁴¹³ Hedges, “Battle of the Homefront,” 132.

for distinctiveness and their search for external approval. Unlike both Shakers and the Perfectionists, Mormons never established an identifiable, characteristic uniform of outer dress.⁴¹⁴ Guided again by their leadership's conflicting messages, clothing instead reflected a deep internal debate.

Women faced particular struggle on the issue of dress. Viewed as particularly susceptible to the temptations of fashion, they were often singled out for censure by leaders. Simultaneously praised for their part in producing cloth, early Church leaders targeted women as inherently impressionable and weak-willed when it came to dress. Just as Brigham Young condemned the women who spent money on embellishing their dresses, he criticized women for placing value on those fashions. One particularly reproachful discourse went after mothers for not teaching their children properly:

Mothers, will you be Missionaries? We will appoint you a mission to teach your children their duty; and instead of ruffles and fine dresses to adorn the body, teach them that which will adorn their minds...You see young ladies here wandering after the fashions of the world; I attribute it to their mothers, and the mothers knew little more than their daughters.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁴ Though their outer, public dress was indistinguishable from other rural fashions, Mormons did use symbolic clothing in more private contexts. Most notably, they adopted the use of specific religious undergarments for adult men and women, which were to be worn essentially at all times. Additionally, they wore symbolic garments as part of temple rituals. I do not address these here in the interest of both time and the private nature of these garments, which makes them less relevant to my argument of visible material culture.

⁴¹⁵ Brigham Young, "Missionaries—The Influence of Mothers," August 27, 1871, in *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 14 (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1854-1886), 220-221, accessed online: <http://jod.mrm.org/14/220>.

Contemporary fashions, according to church leaders, only deformed the shape of women and wasted fabric, themes which emerged time and time again in lectures. Brigham Young disparaged the popular Grecian Bend and mutton-legged sleeves of his day, saying that the first “gave a hump on their backs that made them look like camels,” while the second “took seven yards for the sleeves and three for the dress.”⁴¹⁶ Long skirts came under fire for being wasteful and against the Saints’ standards of cleanliness. Lorenzo D. Young, a bishop in Salt Lake City, remarked about seeing sisters with their skirts dragging four to six inches of fabric in the mud, and suggested they could “cut off...inches from the skirt, and make their children a dress of what they wear out and waste on the ground; and if they have no earthly use for it themselves, perhaps some of their neighbors would be glad of it.”⁴¹⁷ Heber C. Kimball, a member of the First Presidency of the Church, picked up the same theme, but with stronger language, commenting,

In our city there are a great many poor women—I am aware of that; and they will be eternally poor, for they waste everything they can get hold of; and they are nasty and filthy, for I have seen them dragging their dresses behind them; and though they are so poor that they cannot get up in the morning and wash their faces and hands before breakfast, yet they have got about eighteen or twenty inches of their dresses dragging in the mud....I can recollect, when I was a young man, I used to go with the ladies; and when they came to a mud-hold, they would catch up their dresses and trip over. I like to see it. Say I, That is a decent woman; she

⁴¹⁶ Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 252.

⁴¹⁷ Lorenzo D. Young, “The Religion of the Saints and Its Rejection By the World—Training of Children—Home Manufactures,” December 13, 1857, in *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 6 (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1854-1886), 211-214, accessed online: <http://jod.mrm.org/6/211>.

is nice and clean. My advice to you is, when you go home, tuck up that dress or cut it off.⁴¹⁸

In addition to being accused of being selfish and filthy, women who wore fashionable dress were accused of being in alignment with “Babylon” rather than Zion.⁴¹⁹ Male dress rarely elicited a similar reproach, despite the fact that their fashion changed along with women’s. For instance, men wore four distinct coat styles throughout the nineteenth century—the cutaway, the tail coat, the frock coat, and the sack jacket, often owning multiple coats for different occasions.⁴²⁰ Trouser lengths and materials changed. Regardless, women bore the brunt of the censures surrounding modesty in dress.

While Church leaders spouted criticisms of fashion, their behavior established a conflicting message. Despite preaching against wasteful and worldly fashion, they also encouraged it, at least to a degree. Leaders instructed women to be creative in making home-manufactured clothing more fashionable (it was frequently accused of being the opposite). Retrenchment societies launched in wards fostered moderation in dress, but not utter plainness.⁴²¹ Stylish dress actually played a significant role in cementing the Mormon public image. Historian Ruth Vickers Clayton asserts that nineteenth century fashion was a symbol of refinement, especially for lower classes, and extends that mode to the Saints. She explains, “Mormons believed they were God’s elect people, destined to achieve the best possible life through building God’s kingdom in preparation for

⁴¹⁸ Heber C. Kimball, “Enmity of Sectarian Priests Towards the Saints—Economy—Home Manufactures, Etc.,” December 20, 1857, in *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 6 (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1854-1886), 130-135, accessed online: <http://jod.mrm.org/6/130>.

⁴¹⁹ Clayton, “Clothing and the Temporal Kingdom,” 127.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 137.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 158.

Christ's millennial reign. Their adoption of fashionable clothing as a symbol expressed this possibility."⁴²² Thus, Clayton goes on to say, fashionable clothing homemade in Utah was part of the "corporate image" of Zion as a successful home for God's chosen people, temporal proof of spiritual righteousness.⁴²³ Explicit verbalization of this doctrine certainly demonstrates this belief, but so do the descriptions of Church leaders' dress. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, Church leaders consistently donned fashionable attire, even of imported rather than homemade textiles, to project a successful image on their worldly travels.⁴²⁴ Susa Young Gates, one of Brigham Young's daughters, owned a wardrobe with printed cottons, ruffles, calicos, black silk ribbons, and pagoda sleeves, all popular items.⁴²⁵ Meanwhile, the single attempt at standardizing women's dress failed miserably. Called Deseret Costume, the garment sprouted from the mind of iconic Mormon leader Eliza R. Snow in the 1840s, but no evidence suggests a concerted attempt to enforce the style, which was considered wildly unfashionable.⁴²⁶

Admittedly, women were not immune to the enticements of fashion, particularly as they witnessed upper-class Mormon women wearing modern clothing.⁴²⁷ Expressions of envy pop up in diaries, such as one memory of Martha Cragun. Cragun recounts that,

⁴²² Clayton, "Clothing and the Temporal Kingdom," 152.

⁴²³ Ibid., 194.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 195.

⁴²⁵ Carma De Jong Anderson, "Mormon Clothing in Utah, 1847-1900," in *Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah's Mormon Pioneers*, ed. Doris R. Dant and Ronald W. Walker (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 187.

⁴²⁶ Clayton, "Clothing and the Temporal Kingdom," 151-152. Drawings of the outfit show it as similar to the attire of the Oneida women, with a short dress and pantalets, though a bit more tailored.

⁴²⁷ See note 118 for sources on nineteenth-century costume and fashion.

during the winter of 1866, a Miss Romney came from Salt Lake City to help at their local Sunday School in St. George. Martha wrote of this event:

‘I took note that many of the children in the class beamed with pleasure over the change of teachers. This hurt me some but I made a mental picture showing the contrast between my own appearance and that of Miss Romney. She was not only neatly but very richly clad and glistening rings gleamed underneath the silk mitts on her white and beautiful hands and breast pins she had and ear jewels. I was a sorry opposite in my home made dress and home made shoes and with no ornament whatever, and I did not blame the children, but went no more to the S.s. [Sunday School].’⁴²⁸

Cragun’s explicit jealousy of Romney, and her subsequent withdrawal from activities, demonstrates the weakness of the Mormon message regarding fashion; despite Church exhortations to simplicity, encouraging also a successful worldly appearance merely perpetuated the class divisions they attempted to uproot. The fight is evident in the remaining costume artifacts from the era, which show as much variety in dress as existed in mainstream American society. On the understated side, simple prairie dresses, such as the one in figure 31, remain. This dress, with its brown printed pattern and plain front, accompanied by plain bonnet, signify a common end of the spectrum of Mormon dress, more characteristic of the first pioneers.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁸ Qtd in Clayton, “Clothing and the Temporal Kingdom,” 163-164.

⁴²⁹ For further published examples of the evolution of Mormon costume, see Carma De Jong Anderson, “Mormon Clothing in Utah, 1847-1900,” and Clayton, “Clothing and the Temporal Kingdom.” Few published examples exist, but the collection at the Pioneer Memorial Museum is extensive.



Figure 31. Mormon pioneer costume. Unknown maker. Circa 1850-1860. Cotton. Pioneer Memorial Museum, Salt Lake City, UT. Photo by author. This mannequin is adorned in simple pioneer garb, characteristic of rural wear early in the settlement.

. Yet, silhouettes shifted along with contemporary society, featuring fuller skirts and extensive pleating, with crinolines underneath, through the 1860s, then a more streamlined skirt with a v-shaped top and a narrow waist enhancing a bustled skirt (see fig. 32).⁴³⁰

⁴³⁰ Clayton, “Clothing and the Temporal Kingdom,” 147-148.



Figure 32. Mormon woman's dress #1. Unknown maker. Circa 1880. Unknown materials. Pioneer Memorial Museum, Salt Lake City, UT. Photo by author. This checked dress with tassels illustrates the design shifts in Mormon clothing throughout the late nineteenth-century Mormon community.

Piping, pleating, and lace adorned women's garments.⁴³¹ Necklines became lower, even sometimes exposing the shoulders.⁴³² One dress from the Pioneer Memorial Museum captures these more liberal styles; the sleeves are shorter, the neckline lower, and the overall feel less structured and more breathable, mimicking mainstream fashion (fig. 33).

⁴³¹ Anderson, "Mormon Clothing in Utah, 1847-1900," 180.

⁴³² Clayton, "Clothing and the Temporal Kingdom," 149.



Figure 33. Mormon woman's dress #2. Unknown maker. Circa 1880-1890. Unknown materials. Pioneer Memorial Museum, Salt Lake City, UT. Photo by author. This glittery, modern red dress with sequins epitomizes turn-of-the-century style in Utah, which mimicked that of the Eastern Victorian society.

Given the class divisions, women in poorer communities showed less variety in dress, typically wearing a dress with a long, large skirt and high neck, topped by an apron, rather than the slinkier, more supple dresses of the upper echelon.⁴³³ Yet, even for these women, taste was shaped first and foremost by the world, rather than by religious ideals.

While in the midst of an identity crisis regarding what they could or could not wear, Mormon women found other modes of creative expression in textiles that came with fewer conflicts. Quilts became chief among their handicrafts, sewn both by

⁴³³ Anderson, "Mormon Clothing in Utah, 1847-1900," 179. Sometimes called "prairie dress."

individuals and by communities. Mormon quilts first emerged out of necessity, protection against the cold of the desert winters. Woven from any scrap material, from torn trousers to feed sacks, these were utilitarian objects coupled with artistic expression and a sense of heritage.⁴³⁴ Patches of personal significance, often reminders of family members who had died, emerged among the arbitrary material on crazy quilts. One quilt, created by Elvira Pamela Mills Cox, contains twill squares from her husband's pants, as well as other scraps, all backed by the precious red and blue plaid cloth her beloved Uncle Sylvester had woven and brought with him through the trek west.⁴³⁵ Quilts like the one sewn by Elvira Cox became family heirlooms, passed down through female relatives, each charged with protecting and preserving the quilt, such as one assembled by Eveline Allen Cottam, who preserved the quilt "as a memory or friendship quilt because her family, friends, and neighbors had joined in the quilting of it."⁴³⁶ Quilts also served as tools of sociability, as women in wards or neighborhoods would get together to assemble album quilts, featuring a different maker for each square. Album quilts in particular were a nationwide phenomenon, which also gave Utah woman a way to feel connected to the domestic patterns of the East. Not only a way of uniting women, these community quilts also allowed each women to individually showcase her own skills, featuring unique stitches and symbols.⁴³⁷ These community-made quilts were often crafted to honor a community leader, typically—in the case of Mormon women—a ward bishop or similar

⁴³⁴ Covington, *Utah Quilts and Their Makers*, ix.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁴³⁷ Carol Holindrake Nielson, *The Salt Lake City 14th Ward Album Quilt, 1857: Stories of the Relief Society Women and Their Quilt* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2004), 33.

figure. One quilt (fig. 34), made for Francis Cannon Melville, the barber of Fillmore, Utah, is composed of squares with local symbols for the town, sewn by the women, but featuring the names of the men who had benefitted from Melville's services.⁴³⁸

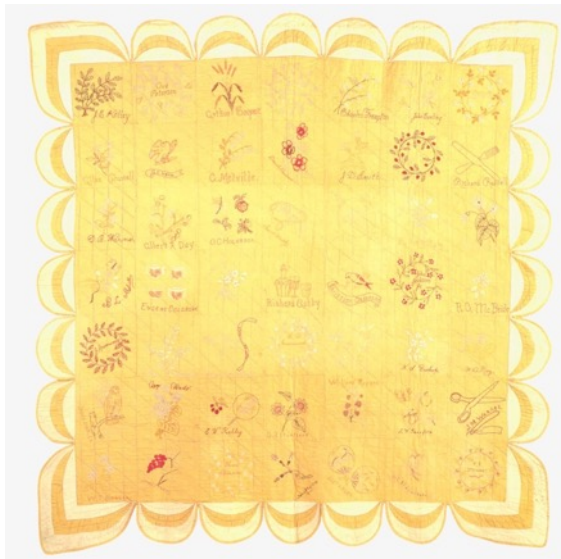


Figure 34. Francis Cannon Melville quilt. Unknown makers. 1901. Cotton. Fillmore Museum, Fillmore, UT. Photo credit of *Utah Quilts and Their Makers* by Kae Covington.

Traditions of quilting operated without interference from Church leadership, which allowed the practice to flourish as a distinctly feminine mode of expression.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁸ Covington, *Utah Quilts and Their Makers*, 54. Covington's book is the best collection of published examples, but one poignant example exists in Nielson, *The Salt Lake City 14th Ward Album Quilt, 1857*.

Women gave quilts as gifts at milestone moments, such as marriages, births, or deaths, markers of new life stages, symbolizing female unity and support for an individual or family. As the society grew economically and materially, quilting became an art form, featuring distinctive patterns of varying difficulties, all decorated with elaborate stitching to honor the maker and the recipient.⁴⁴⁰ Because the form was specifically theirs, women took great pride in their handiwork quilting, making it a distinctive part of their legacies. Ann Etta Eckersley Draper, for example, is remembered as an accomplished seamstress as well as a local midwife and doctor; one description of her includes the sentiment “there were few places Ann Etta Draper went without a needle, thread, and thimble in her pocket, whether it was to visit with a neighbor, deliver a baby, or care for the sick or dying.”⁴⁴¹ This description reveals how deeply women intertwined quilting with female epitomes of service. Quilts given away as gifts embodied the model of Mormon femininity as gentle nurturing and generosity. Quilts became symbols of the divine potentials of women. Yet, they also captured the ideals of Zion, a land populated by humble, simple people who impart of their substances and dedicate their skills to service. Quilts, as community objects and conscious gifts, thus encapsulate the virtues of a Zion people, and so became and remain a center of Mormon material culture.

⁴³⁹ For more on the practice of quilting, see: Elaine Hedges, et. al, *Hearts and Hands: Women, Quilts and American Society* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge, 1987); Jennifer Reeder, “‘To Do Something Extraordinary’: Mormon Women and the Creation of a Usable Past,” ch. 2, “‘Clasped in the hand of fellowship’: Quilts, Charity, and a Textile Usable Past,” 84-159 (PhD diss., George Mason University, 2013).

⁴⁴⁰ Covington, *Utah Quilts and Their Makers*, ix.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

Textiles in the Mormon community include more than merely clothing and quilts. Rugs were also woven in the communities, made on homemade looms by individuals like Elise and Peter Forsgren, a couple responsible for weaving 300 yards of carpet for the floors of the Logan Temple.⁴⁴² Other women wove simple quilts, such as the one in figure 35, which appeared in the homes of early Saints, typically covering dirt floors or rough board floors, to the “great rejoicing [of] the pioneer mother.”⁴⁴³



Figure 35. Homemade rug fragment. Sarah Ann Whitney Kimball. Circa 1860-1880. Unknown materials. Pioneer Memorial Museum, Salt Lake City, UT. Photo by author.

⁴⁴² Carter, “Silk Industry in Utah,” 80.

⁴⁴³ Carter, “Woolen and Cotton Mills,” 435.

Remnants of simple carpets remain among Mormon collections today.⁴⁴⁴ Young girls were involved in knitting a variety of goods, including some clothing (especially stockings), and lace-making emerged as the valleys became more refined. Among the collections of materials in the Pioneer Memorial Museum reside also pillow tops, table covers, embroidered shawls, and countless other textiles handmade by Saints. These remnants echo the same patterns and conflicts as do the fashionable wear and handmade quilts: simplicity versus refinement, distinctiveness versus assimilation, and worldliness versus godliness.

Saleable Goods

Mormon industry is characterized throughout the nineteenth century by local manufacture, called “home production.” Home production meant industry by Saints, for Saints. It included homes, wards, communities, and cooperatives producing every needful good.⁴⁴⁵ Some of the philosophy behind this economic principle originated in scripture; Mormon contemporary revelation preached “let all thy garments be plain, and their beauty the beauty of the work of thine own hands.”⁴⁴⁶ Yet, as with their furniture and textiles, Church leaders’ ultimate economic goal was self-sufficiency. George A. Smith, First Presidency member until 1875, argued

Why send abroad for our cloth when we have the necessary means and skill to manufacture it for ourselves? Why not let these mountains produce fine wool? And why not let the low valleys produce silk, flax, and all other articles that are necessary which it is possible to produce

⁴⁴⁴ No published examples exist of these artifacts, as far as the author has determined.

⁴⁴⁵ Ronald S. Hanson, *The Relief Society: its meeting halls, granaries, cooperate stores & its impact on Nineteenth Century Utah* (Salt Lake City: DMT, 2007).

⁴⁴⁶ Doctrine & Covenants 42:40.

within the range of our climate, and thus secure to ourselves independence?⁴⁴⁷

Independence was the Saints' dream, and they believed home industry would help them achieve it. As a practical tool and a means of demonstrating spiritual superiority and worldly success, the production of a variety of quality goods comprised a high priority for the Saints. Ethan Yorgason, a historian on Mormon culture, writes "self-sufficiency was as important to Brigham Young as any economic objective. Nineteenth-century Saints regarded the church not simply as a new religious organization but also as the agent to bring about a new society."⁴⁴⁸ Producing their own goods constituted a step in the direction of heavenly legitimacy, a demonstration of the power of true unity for Latter-day Saints.⁴⁴⁹ Convinced that the rest of Protestant American society would eventually be replaced with their Zion, the success of the Mormon economy marked progress toward this goal. It also, helpfully, kept the Saints from the clutches of "Babylon," the wicked world outside the enclave of Mormonism. Brigham Young used this term extensively to illustrate the necessity of separating their transactions with the world. In an 1875 speech, he directed the people that they needed to "stop purchasing from Babylon and...go to and sustain ourselves."⁴⁵⁰ Do not, he warned, support the

⁴⁴⁷ George A. Smith, "Home Manufactures—Union in Business Matters," May 6, 1870, in *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 14 (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1854-1886), 12-15, accessed online: <http://jod.mrm.org/14/12>.

⁴⁴⁸ Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region*, 99.

⁴⁴⁹ Utah Stake, Provo Cooperative Mercantile Institution minute books, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, 8.

⁴⁵⁰ Minutes of the Meeting of the United Order.

institutions of wickedness by upholding outside trade but rather preserve your covenants with God by dealing righteously in your own communities.⁴⁵¹

Church leaders spent much of the nineteenth century encouraging individual and institutional adherence to the principles of self-sufficiency, despite the fact that they also advocated, in word and example, the acquisition of wealth. Home industry complicates their production of goods for outside the community, particularly as the railroad made Mormons grow increasingly wary of outside interference. Whereas the Shakers and Oneidans sold goods to improve their relationship with the outsiders, Mormons fought against such interactions, only eventually conceding to the pressures of the changing landscape. Though outside sales certainly occurred—and at a rate more frequent than the leaders liked to admit—a narrative of local protectionism better explains the material environment of trade in LDS territory.

Upon their initial entrance to Utah, Mormon pioneers did not trade with the outside out of mere circumstance. Barely able to provide for their own communities, they lacked surplus goods, and their geographic isolation limited their pool of customers. Yet, with the start of the California Gold Rush during the 1850s and the completion of the Transcontinental railroad in 1869, travel west became more possible and popular. Facing escalating exposure to the non-Mormon world, Church leaders pushed for isolation and trade embargo with “Gentile” merchants. Brigham Young fretted over not only the corrupting influence of the worldly culture, but the economic repercussions of trade. He believed gentile merchants overcharged the Saints, making “excessive profits

⁴⁵¹ Minutes of the Meeting of the United Order.

on the merchandise they sold, and that much of the very scarce ‘hard money’ was leaving the Territory, leaving very little to make essential purchases in the east that would promote the building up of the Kingdom.”⁴⁵² As the community grew successful, more money left Utah to import “foreign” goods transported across the plains, draining the area of its own resources.⁴⁵³ Time and again, leaders spoke out against buying non-local goods. Mormon Apostle Orson Pratt once vehemently declared, “I would rather go and kill wolves in the forests and mountains, and skin them and tan their skins and wear wolf pantaloons, and wolfskin coats and vests, and have everything I wear the skin of beasts, than spend one dime with one outsider in the Territory of Utah.”⁴⁵⁴ Though surely not all Mormon leaders, let alone all Mormons, felt this way, sentiment against the “Gentiles” resonated. During the Utah War of 1857-1858, this tension only increased.⁴⁵⁵ Some Church leaders suspected collusion between the warring troops and non-Mormon merchants, alleging that they were collaborating to “crush out Mormonism entirely.”⁴⁵⁶ In response, leaders pronounced a boycott against non-Mormon firms, and all were invited to enforce it.⁴⁵⁷ Contact with non-Mormons both in and outside the territory was minimized, poor converts and immigrants received assistance to maintain economic self-sufficiency, and speeches against fashion and worldliness surged, creating an

⁴⁵² Hanson, *The Relief Society*, 9.

⁴⁵³ “Textile Making Figures in History of Utah.”

⁴⁵⁴ Qtd in Main, “Pursuing ‘The Things of This World’,” 9.

⁴⁵⁵ Martha Sonntag Bradley, *ZCMI: America’s First Department Store* (Salt Lake City: ZCMI, 1991), 10.

⁴⁵⁶ Gardner, “Cooperation Among the Mormons,” 477.

⁴⁵⁷ Arden B. Olsen, “Mormon Mercantile Cooperation in Utah,” *Journal of Marketing* 6, no. 2 (Oct 1941): 137, doi: 10.2307/1245931. Women in the LDS Relief Society were also mobilized to organize against purchasing goods from “gentile” merchants. Hanson, *The Relief Society*, 9.

environment toxic for “Gentile” businesses.⁴⁵⁸ Simultaneously, the leaders undertook a multi-pronged approach to reiterate the value of home industry, this time in the form of cooperative businesses (co-ops). The cooperative movement of the late 1860s extended throughout the rest of the century, epitomizing the Mormon impulse to protect their Zion. The late, eminent Mormon historian Leonard J. Arrington asserted the significance of this moment in the Mormon economy: “The cooperative movement of the 1870s, in short, was simply another expression of the typical—by now, traditional—Mormon adherence to early ideals in seeking through collectivistic institutions to build and perpetuate the religio-economic Kingdom.”⁴⁵⁹ Arrington’s quote here addresses not only the nascent theme that the kingdom of Zion was as much economic as religious, he also highlights the communalism of the effort. Despite that the Mormon social order—i.e. the persistence of a traditional family unit—prevented a socialistic effort equivalent to the Shakers or Oneidans, the co-op movement constitutes a primary manifestation of the unique Latter-day Saint communalism, one distinct from other nineteenth-century “Utopias.”⁴⁶⁰

Seeking an answer to the pressure of outside commerce, Church leaders looked to two initial co-ops in Brigham City and Provo. Witnessing the success of these ventures,

⁴⁵⁸ Bradley, *ZCMI*, 11.

⁴⁵⁹ Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 321.

⁴⁶⁰ I refer here mostly to the single-family model, which did not exist in either the Shaker or Oneida communities. Though the Mormon practice of polygamy disrupted many aspects of Victorian home life, the LDS family model still prioritized a biological family unit as sacred and independent, and financial support for the family still fell to the patriarch of each family, unlike the other groups, where care and financial support was a joint effort.

these leaders quickly labored to establish more businesses like those.⁴⁶¹ Their flagship effort was the Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution (ZCMI) (fig. 36).



Figure 36. Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution. Unknown photographer. Circa 1880s. Photo credit of LDS.org.

ZCMI opened on May 1, 1869, conceived as “a great leveler, an institution capitalized by the people.”⁴⁶² In *Building Zion: The Material World of Mormon Settlement*, Thomas Carter describes how the cooperative would function: “ZCMI would bring consumer goods into the territory and then sell them to the Saints through a network of sanctioned local outlets, thereby keeping Mormon capital ‘in-house.’”⁴⁶³ Distilled, the idea behind ZCMI was that the shares would be cheap enough that church members could all own at least one; big investors were discouraged. These shares would finance construction, like

⁴⁶¹ Bradley, *ZCMI*, 20.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁶³ Carter, *Building Zion*, 201.

in a joint-stock venture, and dividends would be commensurate to the financial investment.⁴⁶⁴ The cooperative model allowed the enterprise to be owned and operated by the Saints, which reduced their dependence on outside goods and thereby fostered economic self-sufficiency.

ZCMI, as a parent institution, saw such success in its first months that soon co-ops popped up all over Utah.⁴⁶⁵ Each co-op sold homemade goods, stocking the shelves with cloth, food, tools, and other items which represented the finest craftsmanship in the territory.⁴⁶⁶ Women contributed to the success of the enterprise; having long been making items in their own homes and selling them to other women for an income, they now had a central seller and could reach markets beyond their own towns.⁴⁶⁷ Women's leadership also told the Sisters to shop exclusively at the cooperative stores, including the Commission House they built to market household goods, like baby stockings.⁴⁶⁸ One edition of the *Women's Exponent*, a paper published by and for Mormon women, expounded the sentiment that the Commission House "ought to receive the patronage of every person who has the best interest of Zion at heart," so tied were the co-ops to the religious kingdom.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁴ Carter, *Building Zion*, 201.

⁴⁶⁵ Hanson, *The Relief Society*; Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution, *The 100th Year, 1868-1968*; ZCMI, *America's First Department Store*; *The Centennial Series: Great Moments in Utah and ZCMI History* (1968). There were as many as 150 co-ops by the time the movement ended about twenty years later.

⁴⁶⁶ Bradley, *ZCMI*, 25-26.

⁴⁶⁷ Hanson, *The Relief Society*, 12-13.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

ZCMI and its partner institutions grew so profitable that they began to manufacture their own goods, in addition to selling LDS merchants' imports. Stockholders funded a tannery, a shoe and boot department, a large clothing store and, eventually, a luxury goods division.⁴⁷⁰ As Utah expanded economically, ZCMI added departments for carpet, patent medicines, and "fancy notions," to supplement their everyday goods.⁴⁷¹ They still imported goods, but without a markup, and marketed their domestic goods right alongside the imports from the Eastern U.S. to emphasize that domestic products were comparable to outside goods. Indeed, they provided so much competition to non-Mormon businesses that ZCMI and its associated local co-ops succeeded in driving out a major proportion of "Gentile" merchants. In addition to securing spiritual safety (according to community leaders), the co-ops' success also helped establish the economic footing of the Utah territory. According to scholar Arden Olsen, the cooperative system drove the success of the settlements, leading her to conclude, "without [the cooperative system] the people would not have been able to survive and to achieve the things that they have accomplished and at the same time retain their religion. After they had established their economic independence they were able to withstand outside competition."⁴⁷² The co-op movement broadly closed off the Mormon economy, at least temporarily, providing a distinctive material divide from the outside

⁴⁷⁰ Main, "Pursuing 'The Things of This World'," 13. "Big Boot," the shoe factory, churned out 83,000 pairs of footwear by 1879. The Provo Woolen Mill provided much of the raw material for the clothing factory, established in 1872, which grew to be the largest west of Chicago for a number of years. (Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution, *The 100th Year, 1868-1968*; Bradley, *ZCMI*, 44.)

⁴⁷¹ Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution, *The 100th Year, 1868-1968*.

⁴⁷² Olsen, "Mormon Mercantile Cooperation in Utah," 142.

world. Thus, despite the importation of foreign goods, Mormons found their best market among each other, rather than in the outside world.

However, even at the height of the cooperative movement, vehement Church leaders could not altogether restrict Mormon vendors from selling to outsiders. In some cases, they even pursued markets for Utah's competitive goods. For example, during Utah's silk days, a man named George Watt sent samples of raw silk to the East via two Mormon missionaries. According to the missionaries, they showed the samples to silk merchants who decided it was "very good but rather coarse."⁴⁷³ The silk was never widely sold outside of Utah.⁴⁷⁴ Silkworm eggs raised in the territory were sometimes sold abroad, though usually at a loss, and never provided a reliable source of income for the Saints.⁴⁷⁵ Rather than trying to sell all the way to the East, some industrious Saints found markets among the gold seekers and those hangers-on who accompanied them West, including some of President Buchanan's soldiers.⁴⁷⁶ Shops in towns close to outposts, such as Brigham City, hesitant to cut off any source of income, often sold to outsiders as well as Saints. Because there was no visible distinction between Mormon goods or non-Mormon goods, stores like these could sell the same goods—homemade products and Eastern imports from New York, Chicago, or St. Louis—to both crowds.⁴⁷⁷ Mormon material culture differed from the standard Victorian capitalism in production

⁴⁷³ Arrington, "The Finest of Fabrics," 385.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 385.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 377.

⁴⁷⁶ Olsen, "Mormon Mercantile Cooperation in Utah," 136.

⁴⁷⁷ Main, "Pursuing 'The Things of This World,'" 29. No published sources provide examples of these artifacts, as far as the author has determined.

only; the goods themselves still utilized Victorian notions of luxury and comfort to establish their public perception.⁴⁷⁸

Mormon emphasis on isolation and home industry eventually died. Shifting demographics took away the Mormons' vast majority in the region, reducing them from four-fifths of the population to two-thirds in about a decade.⁴⁷⁹ Additionally, the Church's third president, John Taylor, who led the church in the 1880s, was more open to trade with "Gentiles," and ended the boycott of their goods. He created Zion's Central Board of Trade, focused on "creating regional economic growth instead of local self-sufficiency," and openly proclaimed the moderate embrace of capitalism.⁴⁸⁰ Ethan Yorgason marks this ideological shift as the significant turning-point for Mormon communal efforts. He writes, "The major turn-of-the-century change was *not* that Mormons suddenly became capitalists. Many church members had already successfully embraced such principles. Rather, the key transformation was further acceptance of capitalist cultural logic. The normative responsibilities economic actors had toward one another shifted."⁴⁸¹ In other words, the end of the cooperative movement signaled the end of material Mormon communitarianism. They had slowly but surely distanced themselves from their communistic origins. By 1896, Utah's economy had largely joined

⁴⁷⁸ For more information on Victorian luxury and consumption, see: Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); Elizabeth White Nelson, *Market Sentiments: Middle-Class Market Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004); Ellen M. Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian Society: A Social History* (New York: Facts on File, 1997).

⁴⁷⁹ Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region*, 82.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

the national economy, and though Mormons retained some institutions for building up the kingdom together, the community was no longer tied by one economy.⁴⁸²

Overwhelmingly, this is the material evidence of Mormon history. Despite the thriving local production, the presence of extensive and fashionable goods which remain from the early days in Utah contradicted the persistent rhetoric warning the Saints against fashion. Modern and luxurious goods describe that, rather than follow the counsel towards simplicity, Mormons adhered to the practices which encouraged the acquisition of wealth and worldly success. Their artifacts evidence the conflicting message of refinement and simplicity which originated in the words and lives of their church leaders. Their lack of distinctive outside goods is the exception which proves that rule.

⁴⁸² Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region*, 128. The Church still has a strict tithing program, that is essentially a requirement for temple-attending members. These funds go to church construction, subsidizing (but not fully funding) missionary work, and other sources. In addition, other offerings may be given for local distribution to the needy in the congregation.

CONCLUSION

Edward Rothstein, a twentieth-century critic, once wrote about Utopian attempts, “The closer one looks, the more ambiguity there is. Moreover, what is in question is not only utopia’s virtue but also the procedures required to reach it.”⁴⁸³ Rothstein captures the world of struggle implicit in these Utopian communities. Among the Shakers, Oneida Perfectionists, and Latter-day Saints, the question of virtue was answered religiously. Each community created its own mode of heaven, a place of perfection and unity that everyone must work to *obtain* and *maintain*. Despite ideological differences, each group characterized this heaven with shared purpose, collective ownership, and material equality. Yet, as Rothstein states, the sticking point was execution. How could such an ideal world, never before extant in a selfish world, possibly come to existence?

Shakers answered the question with simplicity and regulation. If there were no luxuries to tempt them, there could neither be temptation. Their material culture exemplifies their belief in this principle; furniture and textiles were handcrafted, done without needless embellishments, dictated by practicality. They took great pride in their work, transforming their objects with dedication and worship, imbuing them with otherworldly ideals. To spread their message as well as sustain their communities, they sold their precious goods, necessarily assigning them a monetary value that superseded

⁴⁸³ Carter, *Building Zion*, 274.

any symbolic value they had in the outside world. Though at first the community could stave off this worldly intrusion by strictly maintaining the religious order in their communal lives, they could not eternally stem the flow of demand or the dwindling of their numbers. Self-sufficiency and isolation fell victim to necessity.

For the Oneidans, the pleasures of the world were welcome, though they shunned selfishness and vanity. They believed an ideal world could be as comfortable as the world which existed, so long as people's hearts were pure, turned away from anything that discouraged unity. Thus, the Perfectionists pursued the material comforts of the world—fancy furnishings for their communal parlors, toys for their children, a grand home. Only the women's dress hinted at a divergent ideology. Though their material culture lacks stylistic distinction from the surrounding world, it is characterized by its shared nature. The sparse furniture of the bedroom compared to the grandness of the collective spaces, the uniformity of female costume, the community stamp on manufactured goods, these speak to Perfectionists' devotion to their ultimate cause: unity. Yet, never barring worldly comforts, Oneidans struggled to resist their divisive effects. Production provided their means to achieve wealth, an outward manifestation of the community's rightness and offered them slow but sure prosperity, but they claimed the wealth unevenly. Ultimately, they situated themselves as capitalists above their workforce, profiting off of the work of others and dividing themselves from their sustenance. This precarious position left them vulnerable to losing their communal connection. Once that purpose became lost, so did the Perfectionists, ultimately unable to resolve their imperfections.

More than any other community profiled here, Mormons had the opportunity for a new start. Not only fully geographically isolated in Utah, their journey there had forced them to abandon many worldly goods out of necessity. Yet, in truly building an entire society from the ground up, they struggled to match their ideals to material markers, perhaps feeling that their geography rendered outward distinction unnecessary. Additionally, Latter-day Saints got caught in the rhetoric of worldly blessings bestowed upon the righteous, and prophecy that the desert would “blossom like the rose,” materially as well as literally. Refinement accompanied righteousness. Eager to show off that refinement to the world which had physically exiled them, thereby proving their perfection all along, the Saints adopted worldly status markers which undermined their proclaimed goals. Soon, their industrious inheritance provided for them all the luxuries they had left behind. Their objects are unique because they are not stylistically distinctive from their Victorian counterparts, a fact evidenced by the extensive remnants of their material—their furniture lacks cohesion and their clothing mimics national trends. Only their homemade material artifacts and their lack of goods marketed specifically to the outside world hints at their reactionary protectionism. The Latter-day Saints certainly established a comfortable and prosperous life in the West, but at the expense of their material identity. Once isolation was no longer possible, Mormons opened their doors to realize that, by all appearances, they blended in.

The groups represented in this thesis embody a spectrum of Utopian material cultures, from ascetic and distinctive to adoptive and assimilative. Their shared ideals manifest in varieties, each successful and unsuccessful in its turn. The lesson of these

communities is thus not to firmly establish what an ideal community looks like, but rather to assert its variability. Despite a common goal—a perfect community—the distinct material cultures of the Shakers, Oneida Perfectionists, and Latter-day Saints reveal important differences in their view not only of what utopia is and how to arrive there, but how the physical world and spiritual world should meet within it. Materializing their lofty goals exposed the nuances and tensions of their beliefs, the pressures both internal and external to abandon the heavenly for the earthly. Though the latter was never attained, what was earned was a greater understanding of the role of material culture in affecting the course of everyday life.

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BIOGRAPHY

Kelsey Kim first fell into material culture as an undergraduate at Brigham Young University, where she wrote her Honors Thesis and Senior Capstone projects on Modernist Churches and Mormon kitsch, respectively. Fueled by this passion, she took advantage of more opportunities to immerse herself in material, both at the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, LDS Church History Museum, and at the Mayowood Historic Mansion in Rochester, Minnesota. After completing her Bachelor's, Kelsey knew she wanted to continue and earn her M.A., so she enrolled in the Smithsonian-Mason History of Decorative Arts program in 2014. She continued to develop her interest in the material culture of religion, and there developed this thesis. She graduated from the program in 2016.