

-Overview of Communal Society of Harmonists and their Success in America-

*Compiled for purposes of information to accompany tours of cemeteries and writing lab to write an obituary, offered by **Sandy Ferrainola, Proprietor, Creative Harmony Arts & Books, 317 German Street, Harmony, PA 16037.** November 2017.*

Some who have observed through direct interaction in the community of Harmonists described them as one of “the greatest American communal experiments and at one time became a little empire” (Duss). The Harmony Society was the utopia of the 19th century at the height of its successes (Knoedler).

The original names given to the society changed over time from Harmonites, Rappites and later Economites but are most commonly known for their settlement in Harmony, Pennsylvania as Harmonists.

The word community and commune do not reflect the modern communism as exemplified by the Communist Party; national or international. It is diametrically opposite of the community communism of the Harmonists. They presented a working example of influencing their fellow men to cooperate and were inspired to action by their sense of communal responsibility. There appeared to be incentive to join in the productive activities for the sake of pride of accomplishment and necessity to succeed but without stigma of force or compulsion. One might observe their selfless contributions as quite admirable at a time in history when there were no company perquisites or promise of pensions to retire on like retirees expect today.

Reflecting on what made Harmony the settlement for a group of dissidents from Germany’s Wurtemberg area we need to look at the 16th and 17th centuries. That’s when Martin Luther, a German professor of Theology who rejected many teachings of the Roman Catholic Church wrote his theses of 1517 that started the Reformation for which he was excommunicated from the Catholic Church and specifically the rite of receiving the sacraments. His actions led to others mimicking the disillusionment that was felt from Catholic rhetoric. Although he had an impact on the church and German culture his eventual antagonistic attitude toward Jews was not acceptable to those in later centuries who were not convinced and most Lutheran denominations rejected his teachings going forward. Leading into the 17th century when religious affiliations were still in turmoil between Catholics and Protestants there came the Thirty Year War which ended in 1648 and produced devastated German states and a continuous reign of anarchy in southwestern Germany’s Rhine valley.

The future led to people seeking religious freedoms and fleeing persecution for distancing themselves from the formalized religions of the day. Those wanting to escape the uninspiring wordliness of the established Lutheran or Catholic churches eventually gathered people into a radical separation and some of this was centered in Wuertemberg, Germany. They fled Germany to escape religious persecution. On November 1, 1757 in Iptingen, Wurtemberg, Germany was born Johann Georg Rapp who was the son of Hans Adam Rapp & wife Rosine. Known as George, he married Christina Benzinger and they had two children, John and Rosina. He was to become leader of the Harmonie Society.

Rapp's basis for a practice of religion based on Pietism, which arose from informal meetings to discuss scripture and devotional materials in private settings away from rigid restrictive church rule, came from earlier theologians. These meetings known as, *collegia pietatis* or private conventicles which stressed simple Christian living later led to Pietism as heralded by Johann Arndt, Philipp Spener and August Francke among others. The term often referred to as a spiritualistic retreat into one's own world of mysticism came to lay the foundation of benevolence and caring for others in a community-- even of the poorest. The Lutheran church attempted to suppress these private meetings and practices they considered outside of church authority. Rapp was particularly influenced and impressed by writings of Johann Henrich Jung-Stilling (1740-1817) who had adopted the views of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). Their chief desire was to follow the Bible and its teachings. The repression by the established church caused the Separatist movement which Rapp and a growing group of followers were devoted to, to strengthen. They accepted the label of Separatists and continued to believe the life of a true Christian was one of self-denial and purity. Like the pilgrims they looked to America as a place to worship as they interpreted the Lord's teachings.

Over the next few decades Separatists followed fellow Germans and Dutch and English Quakers like William Penn who had preached of settling in the new world's area of the Delaware Valley near the Philadelphia of today where they could practice religion as they desired. Philadelphia had pledged religious tolerance in the early 1700's. Nearing 1803 Rapp's contacts had heard that President Jefferson was arranging for the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon's France and hoped this would open up new territories where the Iptingen separatists were convinced there would be opportunities free of the tyrannies in old Europe.

In July of 1803 Rapp, at age 46, left Germany with his son John and Dr. Friedrich Haller and Christoph Mueller. They sailed from the Rhine to the new world of Philadelphia on the ship **Canton** arriving in October. After extensive exploration and crossing Pennsylvania Rapp had contracted for 3,000 acres adjacent to Zeligople from Detmar Basse. Rapp sent for his followers and they arrived within months of each other on ships **Aurora**, **Atlantic** and **Margaret**. They came with mechanics and artisans who could do specified jobs to further the success of the society. By February of 1805 they had established the Harmony Society as a communistic unit with a common fund. Frederick Reichert who had conducted the migration of the remaining followers to America became trustee of all external affairs and financial matters of the Society. He was a stone cutter and architect by trade, who is credited with carving the Virgin Sophia in a stone door frame of current Harmony Museum. At the time of signing agreements Frederick was adopted by George and became Frederick Rapp, his son. His philosophy and managerial finesse promoted "the diversification of industries" – believing that every possible industrial talent should be given full opportunity for development. One such industry was the processing of wool, which was appropriate as the first trade George Rapp learned was weaving. The Society is said to have been among the first to introduce the Merino sheep bred for its wool into this country and first in Western Pennsylvania.

Many curious about the group's loyalty to one religious leader and success in commerce can find one reason attributed to the dedication, pronounced in writing, to support one another after travelling to a new "foreign" land; to bring harmony to themselves through community efforts.

The following description comes from *The Harmony Society* (Bole).

The Harmony Society as it was organized under George Rapp and established in America, was an outgrowth of this Separatistic movement and an attempt to put into practice, under favorable circumstances, Separatistic principles. (6)

As leader, Johann George Rapp, known best as George created articles of association for the Society so the members would recognize their common goals to provide for the community. The five articles agreed to in 1805 were signed on February 15th which became the anniversary known as the “Harmoniefest.”

1. To give absolutely all their property to George Rapp and his associates.
2. To obey the rules and regulations of the community and to work for its welfare.
3. If they should desire to withdraw from the Society, not to demand any reward for labor or services.

In exchange George Rapp and associates pledged:

1. To supply the subscribers with all the necessities of life, both in health and sickness, and after their death, to provide for their families.
2. In case of withdrawal, to return them the value of property contributed, without interest, and to give a donation in money, to such as contributed nothing.

The practice of equality [all property belonging to the Society] continued at time of death and no monument of any kind was placed on any of the graves in three cemeteries, Harmony, New Harmony or Old Economy. One exception was made however with Rapp’s son John (Johannes) whose age at his death is recorded at various ages from 29 to 32 but nonetheless it was in 1812. It’s not known when a grave marker stone was prepared but is leans against the interior wall of the cemetery in Harmony and it’s assumed the fellow members did not approve of placing it on a grave. These graves, where 100 Society members are buried were covered with two foot thick slabs to keep them from being disturbed by animals or anyone.



Their funeral services were very simple, consisting of singing and a few remarks. The graveyard was in an orchard. A register was kept to record the number of graves in a row to distinguish the deceased (Bole 56).

The move from Harmony to Indiana surprised many and various reasons are given in found writings. One is in order to accommodate the possible growth of grapes, expanding industrial economic system and access to waterways. Three Harmonists went to scout for a new location and explore western country on a riverboat in 1814. Eventually they found fertile land in Indiana on the Wabash River which became New Harmonie. When they uprooted themselves from Indiana in 1824 to return to Pennsylvania it is said to be because the climate along the Wabash was unhealthy. There are also mentions of friction with neighboring western people who didn’t condone all the Society represented. Harmonist principles kept them consistently leading an industrious, unselfish life that was not always understood. They resettled into Pennsylvania to establish Old Economy in Beaver County where Ambridge is today.



In 1815, back in Harmony, a group of six Mennonites came from Bethlehem, PA and one of them was Abraham Ziegler. He purchased the village of Harmony and adjacent land of present Zelenople for \$100,000. One of the oldest markers in the Mennonite Cemetery on Wise Road belongs to an A. Ziegler, born June 27, 1791, died Sept. 29, 1817.

Reference to Facts

The gate at the Harmonist cemetery inscriptions reads:

“Here rests 100 members of the Harmony Society who died from 1805 to 1815.”

“I know that my Redeemer liveth, and He will hereafter wake me up out of the earth. Job 19: 25. Blessed is he and holy who has part in first resurrection; over such the other death has no power but they will be priests of God and of Christ and shall reign with Him a thousand years. Rev. 20: 6. Remain faithful until death and I will give thee the crown of life. Rev. 2: 10.”

“I am the resurrection and the life, he that believeth on me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. John 11: 25.”

“In a moment, in a twinkling of an eye at the last trump, a trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible and we shall be changed. I Cor. 15: 52.”

Inscription on young John Rapp’s headstone as translated by John Duss:

Here lies and rests in the cool bosom of the earth Johannes Rapp who was born the 19th of September 1783 died the 27th of July 1812. Here lies a clay upon the potter’s wheel, until decay unlock the precious salt to a new body which in the joy of life will then arise.

The doorway of the building that now houses the museum has a carving of Sophia known as the goddess of wisdom. It was carved by Frederick (Reichert) Rapp.

The seat above a vineyard enabling Father Rapp to survey his domain was: “to the northward, facing the community and outlying fields, was a very steep hill which one might ascend by a regular flight of 137 steps” (Duss). It is still accessible from a crude set of wooden steps off of Evergreen Mill in Harmony. The view however, is more southwestward from the stone seat.

Total number of members that had belonged to the Society was 1,050.

George Rapp died in 1847 at age 89 in Old Economy.

The Society was dissolved in 1904 with as few as three members remaining.

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