

THE SKANEATELES  
COMMUNAL EXPERIMENT

1843-1846

By

LESTER GROSVENOR WELLS



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Mr. Wells' study of the Skaneateles Community is an important addition to our knowledge of the development of Onondaga County. The Association is grateful to Mr. Wester W. Baker and The Skaneateles Press for the co-operation which makes this publication possible.

Richard N. Wright, President.



# THE SKANEATELES COMMUNAL EXPERIMENT

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When Frederick Douglass, colored agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, came to Syracuse in the Summer of 1843 to speak on abolition he faced two problems.

His first problem was to secure a place of meeting where he might deliver lectures the last two days of July and the first day of August. Due to "apathy, indifference, aversion and a mobocratic spirit" (1) he was at first unable to secure a building. He held his first meetings in what is now termed Fayette Park; after his audiences increased in size his listeners were accommodated in the abandoned Congregational chapel on the site now occupied by a parking lot on East Genesee Street, just east of the State Tower Building.

Douglass's second problem probably caused him more worry than his first. This involved a person and was directly connected with establishment of the community at Mottville, near Skaneateles, Onondaga County, later in the same year.

With Douglass at Syracuse as co-worker in promotion of the abolition cause was John Anderson Collins. He was general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and with Douglass was charged with promotion of the One Hundred Conventions at which the abolitionists hoped to increase their membership in the "western

states." Although Collins was a salaried abolition agent, his first interests were other reforms—chiefly the so-called "no-property" movement which denied the right of an individual to hold property, Utopian socialism, and certain phases of Fourier's social doctrines which were attracting much attention in these middle nineteenth-century years in the United States. Collins made effective use of his abolition audiences to advance the cause of other reforms. After doing lip service to abolition, he would lecture his auditors on the need of reform in all aspects of the social structure, not solely on the need for the abolition of chattel slavery. As an English sociologist said of Collins and of his associates: "A perfect-orgy of political, social, and theoretical discussion was carried into almost every state". (2) One abolitionist wrote to a friend: "Collins is horsed on the property question and galloping along at a great rate". (3) Even William Lloyd Garrison saw that abolition was not the primary interest of his anti-slavery agent and wrote a friend in Ireland that Collins was "almost entirely absorbed in his 'community project' . . . he goes for a community of interest, and against all individual possessions, whether of land or its fruits—of labor or its products . . . he holds with Robert Owen that man is the

creature of circumstances and, therefore, not deserving of praise or blame for what he does . . . " (4)

Douglass objected to Collins's disloyalty to the abolition cause and wrote his superiors at the Boston office of the Anti-Slavery Society that Collins "took little part in the convention (at Syracuse)" and that he used the meetings as "a mere stepping stone to his own private theory of the right of property holding" and that if the Board of Managers of the Society gave sanction to Collins's practices, he (Douglass) would feel it to be his duty to resign his agency in promoting the One Hundred Conventions plan.(5)

However it was Collins who resigned, refusing to accept any salary for the year and to his credit we should note that the Society, in writing, paid high tribute to his work and extended its best wishes for his new project.(6) John Humphrey Noyes of the Putney (Vermont) community said that instead of receiving a salary, Collins should have paid the Society a bonus "for the privilege of making his conventions the entering wedge of communism and infidelity".(7)

As a result of the meetings in Syracuse and the resulting separation of Collins from the abolition movement, Syracuse might be considered the scene of Collins's apostasy and the scene of his entrance upon the task of establishing a socialist community near Skaneateles.

Collins was a Vermonter by birth and had spent some time at Middlebury College and at Andover Seminary before being installed general agent of the Anti-Slavery Society in which capacity he, evidently, served to the satisfaction of his employers up to the time of his resignation. Garrison referred to him as "my esteemed friend and coadjutor . . . a lover of universal reform . . ."(8)

The year 1843 was one during which there was much interest expressed in Utopian communities. Several such experiments had actually been initiated by this date. Collins's scheme was not solitary. Of some forty-five such experiments in various stages of development in the United States during the early 1840's, the most famous were: Brook Farm and Hopedale in Massachusetts; the Fourier phalanx in New Jersey; and in New York State, the Ebenezer Community, the Jefferson County Industrial Association, the Ontario Phalanx, the Sodus Bay Phalanx, and the Morehouse Union, Piseco Lake.

Collins probably became interested in Skaneateles as the site of his community because he had visited the village several times as an anti-slavery lecturer at "grove meetings."

During the Spring of 1843 several preliminary association or community meetings were held in Syracuse and Skaneateles at which general plans for a community were discussed. Storrs Barrow of Skaneateles and from Syracuse Stephen Abbott and Marcellus Farmer, editor of the "Onondaga Standard," were among those taking an active part in the deliberations. The "Standard" was more sympathetic to the community idea than was the Skaneateles "Columbian"; however, both papers included in their issues full accounts of a succession of reform meetings.

In reading the newspaper accounts of these preliminary meetings it is interesting to observe that seldom does the name of John A. Collins appear as the chief protagonist of the cause. No references were made in the newspaper accounts to any kind of community or association except an "industrial community"; specific references to religious and marriage practices were omitted; typical

Fourieristic associations were indicated.

Both the Syracuse and Skaneateles newspapers published the proposed constitution for the community, the essential elements of which are now sketchily summarized.(9)

The organization was to be a joint-stock association with capital stock of \$50,000 divided into \$50 transferable shares. Interest would be paid after two years of operation of the community. A member would have to hold at least one share and be of high moral character, eschewing the use of liquor, and be approved by three-fourths of the total membership. All members would vote on the expenditure of money and the executive officers would be a president, a secretary, a treasurer, and a council of four. The property when acquired would be committed to trustees elected by the members. After completion of the subscription list an organization meeting would be held at which subscribers would vote upon the reception of members. From the members accepted, officers would be chosen. Any person who would be refused membership would have his subscription refunded. In the phrasing of this proposal for organization there are evidences of Collins's influence. With the passage of the weeks printed references to the community became more definite and specific as regards policies and beliefs.

In May, Collins spoke at a meeting at Syracuse and the "Standard" referred to him as "a thorough-going radical, whose views will be far from pleasing all; still Mr. C. is a man of talents and will impart much information to almost any person whose preconceived notions have not led him to think that the whole world lies in the narrow circle in which HE moves . . . "(10)

By June solicitation of subscriptions had been initiated and prospective members interviewed. Persons interested were asked to apply to Spencer Hinman of Skaneateles; H. Delano of Mottville; R. T. Buss of Syracuse; B. F. Greene of Salina; Dr. H. Joslyn (or Joslin) of Cicero; and at the Agricultural Warehouse, Syracuse.(11) In August, Dr. Joslyn and I. A. Hopkins of Syracuse visited Fourier communities in Massachusetts and reported in detail in the columns of the "Standard"(12). In reporting an association meeting held at Skaneateles on August 9th, the "Columbian" editorially remarked that the doctrines advanced hit "the foundation of all law and order and, if carried out in the present condition of human nature, would reduce society to a state of anarchy . . . "; the reformers were urged to turn their attention to some useful avocation, "than thus be agitating for community with a pretended panacea for our social life, so utterly impracticable (sic) and absurd . . . "(13).

A social reform meeting on August 17 at the Unitarian Chapel, Syracuse, definitely proposed Skaneateles as a site for the community; several prospective members were announced; findings of a committee to select a site were presented. Collins gave a verbal report for this committee and then read a supplementary written statement signed by his associates Joseph and Lydia P. Savage of Syracuse, and Stephen Shear, George and Margaret Pryor, Charles White, and Charles Hart of Waterloo. They stated in their report that at the request of friends of social reform they had inspected sites at Oak's Corners, Unionville, and at Vienna in Ontario County and at Skaneateles in Onondaga County. The site at Skaneateles which interested the

committee was then known as the Elijah Cole farm at "Long Bridge," Mottville. The "Standard" said that the farm, situated on the outlet to Skaneateles Lake combined "the useful and the beautiful in admirable proportions".(14). The farm, approximately two miles north of the village of Skaneateles is reached by driving north out of the village on Jordan Road and proceeding northward through Mottville. At the juncture of Jordan Road and Sheldon Road, so marked by highway sign, one turns west and crosses the Outlet. The property is situated approximately one-quarter mile from the juncture of these two roads. It may be easily identified by the stone dwelling house. The farm is still known as the "community farm" and is now (1952) owned by Adelbert Sheldon.

After the reading of the committee report it was announced that the property could be purchased for \$15,000. Proceeding with the meeting, Collins urged that an organization be perfected and the following officers were elected: Quincy A. Johnson of Syracuse, president; Joseph Savage, treasurer; and U. H. Van Seest, secretary. A financial committee was elected comprising Alanson Thorpe, David Cogswell, Silas Bliss, Joel Owen, Stephen Abbott, Maria Loomis, Mrs. Mary Cogswell, and Mrs. J. Josephine Johnson. This committee was charged with the task of raising \$5000 by "subscription, donations, and loans."

The editor of the Skaneateles paper said that the location was perfect; that if 300 families could live there in harmony one might look for "a blooming Eden stretching down the Outlet, containing not two only but fifteen hundred joyous, happy beings!" However, he added that "the great deal of human natur (sic) in man would

prevent him from becoming an angel herebelow (sic)"; that he did not believe that all existing evil should be swept away at one time "law, government, and all"; that if the principles of the Gospels were not made the true foundation of society, any other method of reform would prove an "ignis fatuus to dazzle the public gaze for a brief space and then leave it still more dense and obscure".(15).

By September promoters of the community began to discuss publicly the ways and means of giving efficiency and success to the enterprise. On September 18 notice was given that a general convention would meet on October 14 and 15. This "call" was addressed "to the friends of a re-organization of the social system by a community of property and interest throughout the country". It was signed by Collins, John Orvis, N. H. Whiting, and John O. Wattles and was issued from "Community Place," the geographical designation of the Mottville farm. The object was stated to be the removal of "the source of all our discord"; friends from the East, West, North and South were urged to join in the deliberations; friends from central and western New York State were expected to arrive "abundantly furnished with provisions"; prospective visitors were informed that the farm was accessible by Erie Canal to the Village of Jordan—"five miles from the community"—and by the Skaneateles Branch Railroad which united the domain with the Great Western Railroad.(16).

The attendance at the convention was large and the meetings were held in the barn, the largest structure on the farm. At the opening meeting Collins spoke of the evils existing in the world which could not be eliminated by the organization of society as it



then existed. Other speakers well known in the field of reform were Ernestine Rose, Poland-born feminist; Nathaniel Peabody Rogers, editor of the reform journal, "The Herald of Freedom"; and Arnold Buffum, world traveler and abolition lecturer.

On the second day, there was discussion of the advisability of taking a deed to the farm; there were differences of opinion; some favored and some opposed, doubtless due to the community's aversion to the holding of property as expressed in its public declaration of principles. Solicitation of funds took place in the afternoon. The "Standard" said that the barn was "literally crammed and the audience was made up entirely of the thinking, intelligent portion of the persons in the locality who have been redeemed and saved to community." Maria Loomis, later to become editor of the community paper, "The Communitist," wrote in the "Standard" that the convention was "a novel affair", being held on "the only parcel of earth which belongs to the human race with its object the complete redemption of the race."

Approximately \$18,000 was raised "in personal property and real estate, and in cash". While the editor of the Syracuse newspaper said he did not agree with all the principles enunciated, he believed that all those in attendance were "intelligent and sincere men . . . actuated by the noblest impulses, and laboring earnestly for a reform which they believe will result, if not in good to themselves, certainly in great good to their race."

With this convention held in October of 1843, the real life of the community began.

On November 1 deed (17) to the property was taken in the name of Collins and Quincy A. Johnson of Syracuse. The deed

indicated that the property was originally owned by Philip Hart who sold it in 1814 to Elijah Cole. Collins and Johnson paid \$15,000 for "some 300 acres"; the deed was recorded December 1 at the office of the Clerk of Onondaga County (18). An initial payment of \$5,000 was made and mortgage given for the balance.

On the same day on which Collins and Johnson purchased the farm from the Ccles they conveyed it to seven individuals who were to act as trustees of the community. They were: David Cogswell and Joseph Savage of the village of Syracuse; Darius R. Stone of Sennett, Cayuga County; Nathaniel Randall of Woodstock, Vermont. and Patten Davis of East Bethel, Vermont; Samuel J. May of Lexington, Massachusetts; and Sarah Pugh of Philadelphia. This deed (19) indicated that the property was "to be enjoyed in common henceforth and forever" by 17 named individuals "now actual residents upon and occupants" of the property and by 19 named individuals who were stated to be "at work for and upon" it. In addition, conveyance was magnanimously made "to all other persons upon the globe" who might wish to join! All persons named in the deed were to repudiate all "exclusive and individual property holding"; to avow that sectarianism and "party spirit" were evil; that all governments based upon the use of force were "destructive in their tendency and can never remove the cause that gave them birth"; and that "all buying and selling is wrong."

On November 19 Collins made a startling public statement which shocked persons who did not approve of the community enterprise and which incensed some of those who had indicated an interest to participate. It was a declaration of principles and was

termed "Articles of Belief and Disbelief and Creed" (20). Up to this date his pronouncements had been general and palliative in nature, emphasizing broad rather than specific reforms. Up to now, few direct statements had been made on the questions of marriage, civil obedience, et cetera, but with a veritable "battle axe" declaration he now made himself clear as to what he believed to be a proper program for the communists. Inasmuch as these specific beliefs and practices will be discussed later in this paper, they will be but briefly summarized at this point:

1. Denial of revealed religion and of the authority of the church and the Bible.
2. Denial of the right of any government to use force to enforce its laws; hence, members would not vote, pay taxes, petition, serve on juries, do military duty, or testify in courts.
3. All goods would be held in common; the right of individual property-holding was denied.
4. As marriage was designed for happiness, same should be dissolved when members had "outlived their affections" and "new alliances" should then be made.
5. Use of meat, narcotics, and alcohol was prohibited.

The "Columbian" thought it incredible that any such views could be announced in the nineteenth century and "the atheistical creed" was being published to show "upon what these reformers are rearing their social system . . ." (21).

Five of the members dissented from these principles including Quincy A. Johnson and his wife, Josephine, of Syracuse. It will be recalled that Johnson had joined with Collins in purchase of the

farm. He was to be a thorn in Collins's side and many altercations between them followed. It gradually became clear that Johnson was at divergence with many of Collins's radical theories, yet he approved of the community's general social practices and principles.

After publication of these "Articles" Collins back-tracked a bit by issuing a statement of "diluted" principles which read: "We repudiate all creeds, sects, and parties in whatever shape and form they present themselves . . . our principles are as broad as the universe, and as liberal as the elements that surround us. We estimate a man by his acts rather than by his peculiar belief, and say to all, 'Believe what you may, but act as well as you can'." (22).

Practical operations on a full scale appear to have started in January of 1844. In the summer of this year a visitor reported that the location was excellent: seventy of the acres were covered with fine timber and the entire property well fenced and cultivated; forty acres were given over to wheat, one hundred and thirty to corn, and there were other well-growing crops. There was a large apple orchard and a nursery of fruit stock. The two-story stone house with a thirty-foot extension was in good repair; there was a rough two-story frame building, a log house, two small barns, and a forty-foot storage shed. There was a "never failing stream of water" and ample water power "for the utilization of which the communists have erected a two-story saw mill" wherein were buzzsaws in operation and lathes for turning iron and wood. The organization contemplated the erection of a mill for cutting stone for door and window sills, a lime kiln, a tannery, and an iron foundry. There were about ninety

members and all were "usefully employed" and appeared to be "satisfied and contented." The visitor added: "Their numerous difficulties and discouragements have been successfully encountered, their wants supplied, their crops put in, a mill erected, engagements promptly met, \$4000 paid on the property, and all this at the outset and within the range of eight months. Is it too much to expect that they will soon prove to the world that their efforts will be crowned with entire success?" (23).

As the history of any social experiment is largely an account of what its proponents believed as well as did, let us consider briefly some of the Skaneateles community's beliefs and practices—especially those matters which were included in the "Articles of Belief and Disbelief and Creed".

### 1. Religion

The beliefs enunciated in the "Articles" were clearly non-Christian. All forms of worship were to cease; while "the precepts attributed to Jesus of Nazareth" were declared to be admirable, they were not binding nor authoritative because uttered by Him; the Sabbath would be observed as other days; the organized church promoted strife and contention; the clergy were stated to be "an imposition" and the Bible "non-authoritative"; miracles were "unphilosophical".(24).

A writer in the public columns of the "Columbian" said that he was sorry to behold "a Babel springing up in the neighborhood of the beautiful Skaneateles to pollute its pure air and to mar its fair prospects . . ." (25). Collins admitted that the members were "calumniated and proscribed by the religious who insisted that purity and integrity could not exist without the arbitrary restraints of religion." (26).

The community was commonly

called "No God"; it had a reputation for expressing itself aggressively against organized Christianity and was severely criticized for its atheistical views. The communists actually believed that members of organized churches were inferiors; an "ex-member" who had left the community because of "family reasons" wrote the "Communitist" that if those at the community could but "take a tramp out in the world to see the evils" they would return contented, "especially if they had lived among the Methodists!" (27). Even the leaders of other socialistic experiments did not approve of Collins's ideas on religion; John Humphrey Noyes severely criticized Collins on this score (28).

As time went on, the religious articles in the Communitist became milder in tone; there was a diminution of articles of a controversial nature as the community's economic problems became more serious.

### 2. Marriage

The statement on marriage as given in the "Articles" is a model of ambiguity; however, from a careful reading of it and of the printed accounts of weddings, it is clear that free love was advocated. If we accept Robert Briffault's definition of free love (29), there is little doubt of what Collins stood for. While he did not appear to repudiate overtly all legal, religious, and social sanctions to sexual unions, it is quite evident that he advanced the idea of dispensing with such sanctions. In view of the fact that the community members did live in a state of sexual union which had not been officially recognized by a civil official or a clergyman, it is significant that Collins told A. J. MacDonald, of whom we shall hear more later, that there were no cases of adultery or fornication at the community.

His statement indicates that although no clergyman or magistrate performed any ceremony to join the members in wedlock, there was an avoidance of promiscuous sexual relationships. A man and a woman would make a public statement that they considered themselves "married" and it is likely that such a couple did remain true to this unconventional bond and forsook "all others."

A correspondent of the "Standard" defended the community's stand on this marriage practice. He said that as "about three-fourths of all marriages that now take place are brought about on the part of the female 'to get a good home' and on that of the man 'to get the stockings mended', and that the remaining one-fourth are induced by animal propensities, he believed that, as the community will give a permanent home, mend all the stockings and cultivate the mind . . . the fretfulness, indifference, infidelity and separations which now exist will not occur . . ." (30). However, nearly all the newspapers of central New York expressed disapproval of the community's ideas on this subject.

The first public announcement of a marriage at Mottville was, made in October 1844 and read:

"Married. Community Place, Oct. 28, 1844. We, the undersigned acknowledging neither the authority of church or state officers, or any other power above or beyond ourselves as essential but this act, have by mutual agreement united in this relation and do now regard ourselves as Husband and Wife. Signed James Smith. Mary L. Robbins." (31).

A most detailed account was given of the marriage of Maria Loomis and Thomas Varney on New Year's Day, 1846. After a full description of the refreshments

and singing at the wedding, the "Communitist" stated that the wedding was conducted "in the most philosophical and pleasing manner and with great glee and satisfaction to all parties . . ." (32). It is amusing to observe that this lengthy account of the wedding was signed "Airam"—the first name of the bride, Maria, with inverted spelling!

It was largely because of their ideas on marriage and religion that strong prejudices were built up in the minds of residents of central New York against the community members. This prejudice is evident in accounts contemporary with the existence of the community and has persisted throughout the succeeding generations. Today, when an elderly resident of Skaneateles is asked what he remembers as having heard from his forebears, he will quite invariably answer: "Oh, those Community people were free-lovers and atheists!" Seldom do they recall any other aspect or practice of the group. It is difficult to locate source materials on the history of this community because of the beliefs held; persons who had any member of their family connected with the group were inclined to destroy letters and documents relating to it. W. F. Galpin, in writing of the various New York State communal societies, said that "a deliberate policy of concealment and possible destruction" is apparent, all of which adds to the difficulties of the historian. (33).

In respect to these curious beliefs and practices one is reminded of a story told by Edith Sitwell. An elderly sea-captain friend of hers had been listening to an account of the activities of certain fanatical Utopian socialists, whereupon he replied: "Look at yon stars if you will. If it's the same to you, I think I'll stick to the bacon and eggs!"

### 3. Property Holding

The "Articles" declared for "no individual property" and stated: "All goods shall be held in common; the idea of 'mine and thine' as regards the earth and its products is to be disregarded and set aside; therefore, when we unite we will throw into the common treasury all the property which is regarded as belonging to us and forever after yield up our individual claim and ownership in it; no compensation shall be demanded for our labor if we should leave . . ."

There is a dearth of records which might reveal just how much members turned over to the common treasury upon their initiation into the community and by what formula wages were converted into common ownership. Although the farm property may theoretically have been held by all members in common, it will be recalled that it was originally in the hands of two individuals—Collins and Johnson—by the terms of the deed of November 1, 1843.

### 4. Labor, Industry and Crafts

Late in 1843 the community advertised that they would engage in blacksmithing, shoemaking, saddle and harness making, carpentering masonry, printing and sawing. Reasonable terms were assured to the public and in payment of work cash, wool, or provisions would be accepted.(34).

The first issue of the "Communitist" announced that "all labor will be free and voluntary, but systematized and diversified, so as to accommodate the capability, taste, and genius of all and supply the wants of the community with as little traffic with the world as may be expedient . . ."(35) Industry was divided into five general divisions: agricultural, mechanical, domestic, educational, and publishing. Over each division was a foreman; the

five foremen constituted a supervisory committee to negotiate all business.

In the summer of 1845 the community was visited by John Finch of Liverpool, England. He was a prosperous iron merchant and reformer; as an associate and disciple of Robert Owen he was one time governor of the Harmony Community in Hampshire. He visited many of the American socialistic communities and his accounts of them are definitely favorable. His report on the Skaneateles community (36) includes many data on the activities of the farm as well as the financial situation for the year 1845. According to his estimate for this year, the farm would yield, together with the sawmill, \$8,855 and the total expenditure would be \$3,765, leaving a balance of profit of \$5090.

In the Fall of 1845 the "Communitist" said that the sawmill was being operated day and night and that it was planned to manufacture tubs, pails, chairs, and other wooden-ware. Fifteen men in addition to members were employed. Collins urged members "to work diligently so that additional buildings could be erected, new machinery purchased, and a school-house with philosophical equipment constructed." They were warned that "constant and unwearied toil" would be necessary.(37).

### 5. Cultural and Recreational Pursuits

At an early date members were urged to improve all opportunities for the acquisition of useful knowledge. Children were instructed in the usual elementary subjects and in astronomy, drawing, sketching, botany, philosophy and geography. Adult education was advanced by lyceums, lectures, and "grove meetings". John Finch wrote that weekly Sunday lectures were a regular event.

These were held in the reading room and persons of all ages participated. At one time there was a reserve list of thirteen who wished to take part.(38). Discussions ranged from literary to scientific subjects with emphasis on the practical arts, chiefly farming. Non-members frequently sent in communications to be read; one wonders how many of these were rejected. Some composed essays and poems which found their way into the columns of the "Communitist". In addition, evening lectures and "picnics" were held; at these, general social reform appeared to be the preferred subject and the public was invited to attend. On July 6, 1845 such a gathering was held at Port Byron in conjunction with a State convention of the Liberty Party. Amusements comprised music, both vocal and instrumental. Dancing parties terminated not later than 9:30 p.m., but Collins cautioned that such activities remain "subordinate to the great end".(39).

Inasmuch as many references have already been made in this paper to the newspaper of the community, a short history of the "Communitist" might be of interest at this point.

When Collins proclaimed his "Beliefs and Disbeliefs" he said that the community would publish a newspaper and that it would be "free" in every sense. No charge would be made for subscriptions and there would be great freedom on the part of the editor in respect to what the paper printed. The New York "Daily Tribune" commented editorially: "Nothing a year is about as cheap as newspapers have yet been issued—does it not go 'the whole hog'?"(40).

The first issue was dated January, 1844, with Maria Loomis designated as editor and the first is-

sue bore at the mast-head: "Unity in love—One in spirit and aim—Brotherhood of the universal race—Reform in all things". It was a four-page sheet measuring approximately 7x9 inches. At first it was printed at the community, but due to the physical inadequacy of the printing press it was subsequently printed at Skaneateles and at Syracuse. After being supplied gratis, a rate of one dollar the year was soon established; publication was then made each two weeks. In the fall of 1844 the subscription price was raised to \$2 per year and it was issued "each Thursday."

The variety of subjects in the paper was remarkable—phrenology, magnetism, political reform, diet reform, Fourierism, etc. Frequently criticisms of the community by outsiders were made and their arguments refuted. Sometimes naive, curious, and humorous articles intruded. An open column was headed: "Pick-Nicks, or a Few Words from the Mouths of Many." "Jessie" was reminded that the stove which he had promised had not arrived. The last issue of the paper was published on March 5, 1846.

Copies of the "Communitist" constitute the chief primary source of information which this writer has been able to turn up. He has had access to fifty of the sixty issues which were published.(41). An interesting account could be written of this newspaper; it would bring forth many historical facts about the enterprise chiefly concerning the multiplicity of interests in which the communitists were involved.

The question arises—"What were the public relations of the dwellers in this Eden-on-the-Outlet?"

As has already been indicated, many protests against the marriage and religious principles at Mottville were made by the commun-

ity's neighbors, notably in the newspapers of Central New York State. "Hector", writing a letter to the "Columbian," said that the community folk were all infidels, "despising the unseen hand that feeds them . . . (they) are great arguers, a half-learned lot . . ." (42). Even Collins admitted, in the columns of his paper, that the members were regarded by their neighbors as "fools and fanatics, knaves and hypocrites, and proscribed by the religious"; that the "Capitalists" threw obstacles in the way of the members.(43).

A favorable opinion was expressed in a Nantucket paper by the statement that "the success of the community, upon the whole, is flattering beyond their most sanguine expectations . . . they cannot at once come into a true and harmonious condition. This must be the work of years . . ." (44). A correspondent of the "Columbian" said that while he did not approve of all that went on, he could not help but think "that these socialists are wise above all that is written in sacred as well as profane history . . ." (45). Another writer to the columns of the same paper said that he wondered if Collins thought his community could endure and added "So thought Robert Owen, but he soon found his New Harmony was but Old Discord and his peaceful community but 'confusion worse confounded' . . ." (46).

The "Communitist" frequently printed notices of meetings held in the vicinity of the village of Skaneateles in which the editors, apparently, desired to arouse interest. It is significant that little attention was called to abolition meetings. Maria Loomis attended a Quaker meeting and wrote that "Quakerism is much the best religion in the world, because it has the least religion in it".(47). A meeting to be held in Syracuse in

the interest of improving the condition of boys working on canal boats was called to the attention of the newspaper's readers. (48).

A separate paper could well be exclusively devoted to an account of the members of the community and to exploration of what kind of folk they were and to an analysis of the motives which impelled them to join. Many of the personal names which appeared in the columns of the newspaper are those of substantial citizens of various portions of New York State; several of them are well-known names to anyone acquainted with residents of New York State and New England. As was the case at Brook Farm, established in 1841, many of the persons who submitted themselves to the discipline of community life were far from being flighty and superficial experimenters. Many of them were imbued with a sense of the seriousness of their task to reform society and while, from time to time, "floaters" appeared, it was the serious, spiritual-minded individual who persisted and remained. Hawthorne, in his novel of Brook Farm—"The Blithedale Romance"—has his chief character say that "persons of marked individuality—crooked sticks—are not exactly the easiest to bind up into a fagot . . .".

A few of the family names well-known to Yorkers which appeared in the annals of this community are: Allen, Barron, Chapman, Duval, Hopkins, Jackson, Johnson, Joslyn, Randall, Rector, Stone, Tuttle, and Whiting. Any extensive account of individuals who were members is being intentionally omitted from this paper, as the purpose of the writer is rather to give a brief, general history of the experiment and not permit his antiquarian interest in families to lead him astray.

The most celebrated visitor re-



ceived at Community Place was Robert Owen, the English reformer, whose community experiment at New Harmony, Indiana, lasted from 1825 to 1828. He spent four days at Skaneateles in May of 1845; in addition to exploring the community he visited the village and the neighborhood. On a Sunday evening he addressed a large meeting at the community consisting of members, friends, neighbors, and citizens of the surrounding villages and, as the "Communitist" declared—"the cream thereof".(49). At his final lecture the communists sang their "Community Hymn"; he said that they had a perfect location; that he was much more favorably impressed than he had expected to be; that he envisaged success for the project if the members persevered in their efforts; and that nothing would have pleased him more than to have been able to "end his days" with them.

Reference has already been made to the visit in the summer of 1845 of John Finch of Liverpool, England. His accounts of visits to various American communities were printed in the Owenite periodical "New Moral World". Arthur E. Bestor, historian of American social experiments, says that these accounts constitute "the first comprehensive work on the American communities".(50). We have already referred to his report on the industrial and farming projects at Skaneateles and to the financial situation of the community. Finch added that Collins was adamant in his stand against resorting to the prerogatives of organized government, the law, to expel "imposters, unruly members, and intruders"; that many "worthless characters" had joined; referring to Quincy Johnson as belonging to the "selfish class", he said that he "got half the estate into his own hands and well-nigh

ruined the concern" but that Collins had recovered the property from the lawyer after having abandoned many of his "new-fangled Yankee notions"; that Collins had ousted many dissatisfied members and restored the society to "peace and harmony."

Finch reported that at the time of his visit the number of members was small as it was but a short time after the purge when many had either been dismissed or had voluntarily withdrawn. He said that within two or three years the community would be able to pay off its debts and be free of financial encumbrances. He found the members highly industrious and while "attending diligently to their labor" were stimulated by a reading room which contained more than forty newspapers and periodicals. The community observed a strict non-meat diet; as a result, Finch said that the cost of their food and clothing was "less than one dollar per week each." He believed that the excellent condition of their health was due to daily bathing. They were "frugal and hard-working for the purpose of paying their debts. When this is done they will increase their comforts, lessen their hours of labor, and improve their mode of living in every way. They will labor to enjoy and not to accumulate useless wealth." After his departure he continued to write the editor, extending his continued best wishes. It is evident that he believed the community to be a serious one and worthy of his attention.

Another visitor whose aim was to collect data on American communities was A. J. Macdonald, a Scotch printer who had been a follower of Robert Owen and who had migrated to the United States in 1842. His manuscript accounts are in the library of Yale College and the portion relating to the



Skaneateles community has been made available to the writer.

He said that the members were "as good specimens of human nature as can ordinarily be found"; that Collins told him that he had never heard an oath from their lips and that there had been no cases of adultery or fornication; that their education appeared good and when faults appeared, they were due to ignorance; they appeared to be neglectful of property, doubtless due to the fact that they owned no individual property and, hence, had little knowledge of its monetary value. He referred to Collins's trouble with Quincy A. Johnson and added that the problem had been solved by the time of his visit. He reported that the dark clouds which had hung over the community had lifted, that many of the trouble-makers had been "routed" from membership, and that the members were optimistic about the future.

At the time of the visit of Macdonald, the community was entering upon the last period of its existence. We shall now, very superficially, cover this last period, especially taking into consideration the economic, legal, and social forces which played parts in the break-up.

Opinions differ as to the reason for the break-up. Probably the cause was a combination of several forces working against this Utopian project. It is quite apparent that dissension within the membership was the most potent reason for failure. From a serious study made in 1905 of the causes of failure of fifty-four American communal experiments, it is revealed that over half of them disintegrated because of disharmony within.(51). This seems to be true of the Skaneateles group; a common zeal for reform was not strong enough to overcome personal jealousies and

rival ambitions. Furthermore, there is indication that a serious personal desire for perfection resulted in an over-bearing kind of tyranny—an over-virtuous desire of each member to be a striking example of abstemiousness to his fellow members. This is illustrated by the case of Quincy A. Johnson. Collins was so determined not to resort to the law that he suffered Johnson's opposition. One authority on American social movements has said that "it was not pioneer conditions that ruined this experiment in radical freedom, but the proximity of Syracuse to Skaneateles".(52).

None of John Stuart Mills's reasons for the failure of communities apply to Skaneateles: there is no indication of evasion of work by the members; there was no excessive population increase; and there appeared to be few serious difficulties in the apportionment of work. Financial troubles do not seem to have been the prime cause of failure. Macdonald informs us that the value of the property had doubled by 1846 and that the final sale of the property netted more than an amount sufficient to pay all the debts. A superficial view is that the pressure of public opinion against the beliefs and practices caused the break-up. However, no evidence has been turned up to indicate this as the chief cause.

It is not within the province of this paper to deal with the falsity of the principles on which we may believe this community to have been erected. It was a period of vigorous prosecution of many social reforms and one's opinion of their falsity varies with one's social philosophy and the extent to which one believes reformers should over-shoot the mark with a view to achieve a "blitz krieg" of social revolution. While one may not condone any or all of the

community's principles, practices, and beliefs, he should remember that the mid 1800's was a time of social experiments of varied hues. As Father Knox has said: "It is not surprising if those who are most sensitive to the needs of the age find their way, sometimes, on to the wrong side of the calendar. Fine instruments are easily spoiled . . . "(53).

After removal of Johnson, "the tonguey lawyer from Syracuse," the Fourieristic periodical "Harbinger" said that the "Skaneateles concern" had been undergoing reorganization; that much of the chaff had been removed from the wheat; and "from a very mild republic, it appears verging toward a sober monarchy—toward the unresisted sway of a single mind" (54) Collins appears to have been vindicated. As a result of his trouble with Johnson, community rules were revised to permit members desiring to withdraw to recover the amount of money which they had brought into the organization.

Profiting by their experience, the community relaxed its opposition to appeals to law and prepared to apply to the Legislature of the State of New York for incorporation. The first notice of application was printed in the "Communitist" of November 20, 1845. Under the laws of the State of New York in existence at this date the members could not hold property as a community. Hence, their motive in seeking incorporation was to secure a charter which would permit them to hold and protect their property as a legal corporation; by so doing they believed that they would be able to avoid the kind of trouble which they had experienced with Johnson. Collins said that while incorporation appeared to be inconsistent with the "no-property" principles of the community, it

seemed to be expedient. He summarized the community's principles at this time thus: non-resistance, vegetable diet, and "opposition to religious mystery and philosophical necessity." It will be noted that this succinct declaration of principles is quite different from the principles which he had proclaimed two years earlier. The troubles which they had experienced forced them to modify some of their declared beliefs, especially those which had so startled society at the time of the founding of the community. Later, Collins even went so far as to say that "Perfect Freedom" was allowed in regard to these principles, as "we have to avoid difficulties by a circumlocutory process . . ."(55).

A bill was introduced in the January, 1846, session of the New York State Legislature by several residents of Wayne and Onondaga counties praying for the incorporation of the community. After the bill had been kicked about from committee to committee, a vote was taken and was defeated by a vote of 62 "no" and 35 "yes." Opponents claimed that it "conferred privileges prejudicial to the best interests of society"(56). Analysing the vote geographically, it is interesting to observe that all of Onondaga's neighbor counties, except Oneida and Wayne, voted against incorporation. The New York "Daily Tribune" commenting upon the defeat of the bill said that it was due to the cry of "infidel" and "Fanny Wright" being raised against the community folk.

May of 1846 was the time of the swan-song of the community. By this date Collins was convinced that his plan could not be practicably executed and that the community idea for the regeneration of society was premature. An English writer said that the reason for the termination of the Skaneateles

les experiment was unique in that Collins apparently tired of the scheme. (57). He added that there existed a conflict between Collins's principles of non-resistance and the need to exercise force to oust undesirable members.

Macdonald's manuscript tells of the last days. Collins resolved to abandon the project and, calling the members together, expressed his feeling on the subject. He resigned his portion of ownership of the property to the members and soon after left Skaneateles, "like one who had lost his nearest and dearest friend." Thus, Macdonald said, the community did not fail because of "pecuniary embarrassment." In the public press Collins announced his abandonment of plans for philanthropy and social betterment and returned, as a socialistic paper expressed it, "to the decencies and respectabilities of Whiggery." A Syracusan visiting California in 1865 said that he had seen Collins there and that he was engaged as a mine promoter and auctioneer of lands.

In commenting upon the dissolution of the community, the Skaneateles "Columbian" said that it had been proven that "the bonds of infidelity are not suited to hold men together in social harmony . . . "(58). As has been stated, the last issue of the "Communitist" was dated March 5, 1846. Therein no reference was made to the abandonment of the enterprise, but it was stated that members were greatly disappointed at the action of the Legislature in not favorably heeding the com-

munity's prayer for incorporation.

After Collins's departure, most of the members left and the property was sold by them to Samuel Sellers, from whom it passed to the Earll family about 1850 and to the Sheldons in 1875.

"So, quick bright things come to confusion."

One is inclined to smile and lift his eyebrows at the program and principles of the Skaneateles community and at other similar social experiments. However, it should be recalled that to many thousands the social and doctrinal conventions of America in the middle of the nineteenth century were oppressive. These radical social experiments were an indication of a kind of intellectual hunger. Pathetic expressions they may have been, but they were sincere attempts to contribute to the reform of thought and action. Anatole France wrote that if no attempts had been made to establish Utopias, men would still live in caves, miserable and naked.

Although it is apparent that many of the protagonists of these various socialistic communities were unfitted and ill-equipped for their tasks, yet these very people saw the need of a New World and did what they thought was right to bring about a reformation of society. Only when one recalls that this little community in a remote section of the northeastern United States was part of a larger, universal scheme, can one sense the importance and significance of this attempt to establish an Eden.

## Notes

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- 2 Strachey, Ray (Mrs. Rachel Conn Strachey) *Group movements of the past . . .* London, 1935, p. 75

- 3 Garrison, Wendell Phillips. **William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879; the story of his life told by his children.** 4.v.Boston, 1894, v.3, p. 89. Edmund Quincy to R. D. Webb, Jan. 29, 1843
- 4 Ibid. v.3, p.94-95. Footnote 1. W. L. G. to H. C. Wright
- 5 ALS. Douglass to Maria Chapman, Sept. 10, 1843. Boston Public Library. "Anti-slavery letters to Garrison" Collection.
- 6 Noyes, John Humphrey. **History of American socialisms.** Philadelphia 1870. p.163.
- 7 **The Perfectionist.** Putney, Vt. v.3, no.23. Jan. 15, 1844
- 8 Garrison, op. cit. v.2, p.416.
- 9 **Onondaga Standard,** Syracuse, N. Y. April 12, 1843; **Skaneateles Columbian,** Skaneateles, N. Y., April 27, 1843.
- 10 **Onondaga Standard.** May 3, 1843.
- 11 Ibid. June 7, 1843.
- 12 Ibid. Aug. 9, 1843; Aug. 16, 1843
- 13 **Skaneateles Columbian.** Aug. 10, 1843. Editorial
- 14 **Onondaga Standard.** Aug. 23, 1843.
- 15 **Skaneateles Columbian.** Aug. 31, 1843
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- 21 **Skaneateles Columbian.** Dec. 21, 1843.
- 22 Hinds. op.cit. p.295
- 23 Ibid. p.296
- 24 **The Perfectionist.** Jan. 15, 1844
- 25 **Skaneateles Columbian.** Dec. 28, 1843. Communication signed "T".
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- 27 **The Communitist,** June 18, 1845.
- 28 **The Perfectionist,** Jan. 15, 1844
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- 37 The Communitist, Dec. 4, 1845
- 38 Ibid. Apr. 9, 1845
- 39 Ibid. Sep. 18, 1844
- 40 New York Daily Tribune, Dec. 6, 1843
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