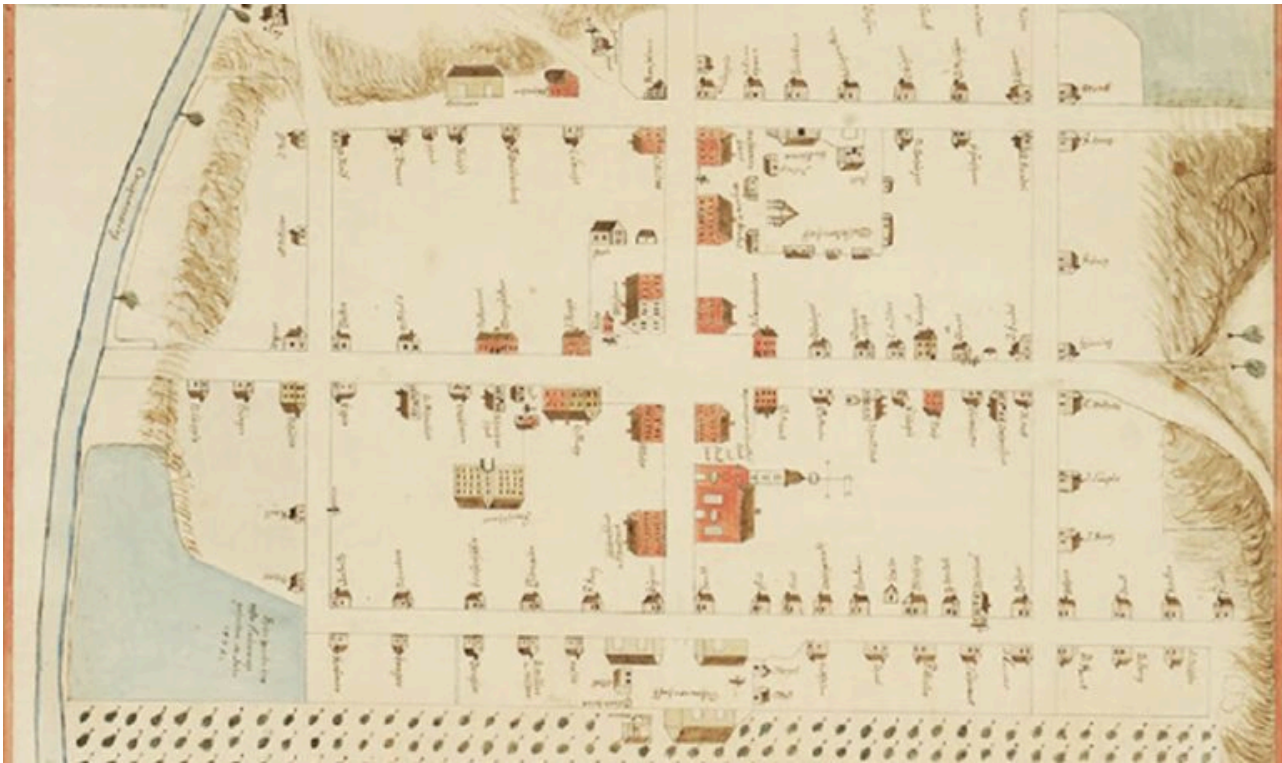


Excerpts From “Kingdom”



Historical Background

George Rapp (1757-1847) was the founder of the Harmony Society, one of nineteenth-century America's better-known and most successful utopian communities. Rapp and his followers emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1804-05, settling successively in Pennsylvania and Indiana before consolidating at Economy village on the Ohio River west of Pittsburgh.



Figure 1: Johann Georg Rapp (1757-1847) painted by Phineas Staunton in 1835. *Phineas Staunton, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

Rapp's philosophy-theology was an eclectic mix of grassroots German Pietism, Jakob Böhme, and nascent German Romanticism. The Harmonists were not "Plain" people, like the Amish or Mennonites. In their German idealism they tended to see the world, and especially the natural world, not as fallen but as intrinsically good, it having been created by God—hence their scientific interests, including Economy's pioneering natural history museum. Music of all kinds was valued, both sacred and secular. The Harmonists were not quite as well-trained instrumentalists as the Moravians, but they were similar in this regard: from the very beginning they considered obtaining musical instruments (and training members to play them) to be a priority. Among other Böhme-derived peculiarities, Rapp also insisted that each community build and maintain a hedge labyrinth with a grotto (an outbuilding built to look rustic on the outside but with a fine classical finish inside) as a spiritual object lesson as well as for meditation purposes.

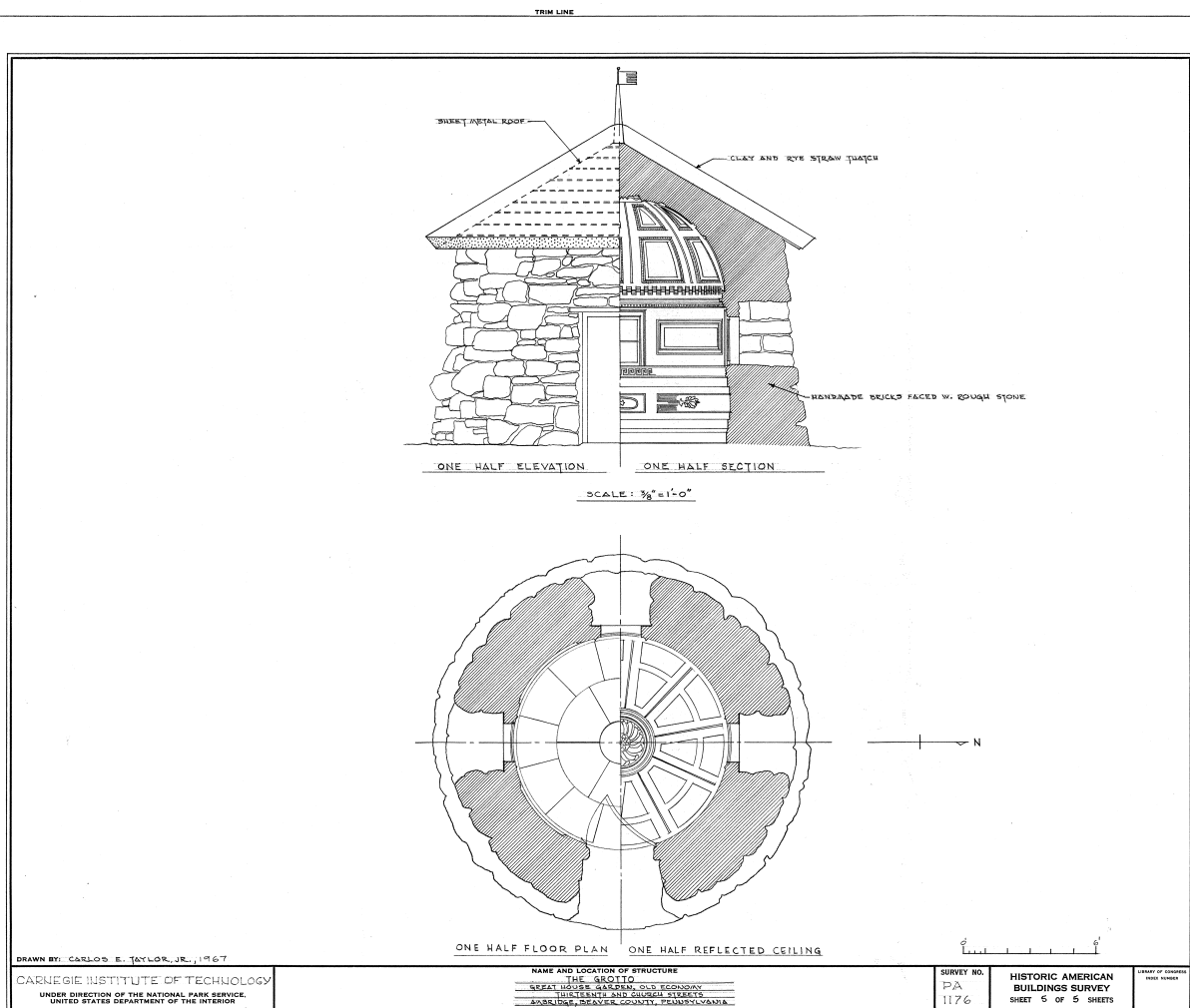


Figure 2: The Grotto from the Economy Town Plan. Historic American Buildings

Survey, Creator, George Rapp, Frederick Rapp, Harmony Society, Charles M Stotz, Paul D Fackler, William Hartlep, and Carlos E Taylor. *Economy Town Plan, Ambridge, Beaver County, PA*. Pennsylvania Ambridge Beaver County Ambridge Borough Beaver, 1933. Documentation Compiled After. Photograph. Retrieved from the [Library of Congress](#).

Rapp's community survived him, gradually declining in part due to defections and in part because of the adoption of celibacy, first as a preferred mode of living and then as a requirement (possibly in imitation of the Shakers, with whom the Harmonists communicated). The Society disbanded in 1905. Part of the village, including the principal communal buildings, was appropriated by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which maintains it as a historic site. The surroundings were redeveloped into the sprawling steel mill and company town of Ambridge by the American Bridge Company, which purchased most of the rest of the land.

My interest in Rapp and his movement originated in my reading on American communal groups during graduate study at Duke University in the early 1990s, then returned after my move to Pennsylvania in 2007—by which time I was, in fact, a member of an unrelated German Pietist group. In January 2020, I spent four days at Old Economy Village (as it is now known) in a restored Harmonist house, walking the former community by day and reviewing its history by night. I was also able to use the community's extensive archive, maintained on-site by the state.

The poems of "Kingdom" are spirit-drawings, [in the tradition of the Harmonists' erstwhile Shaker acquaintances](#). On occasion they quote bits of Harmonist texts. "The knot has partly tightened," "a machine with living wheels," "a larger theater," "time, the secret affirmation," and "Because whatever needs to be done in this world must be done by human beings" are all fragmentary quotes from George Rapp's only published work, *Thoughts on the Destiny of Man*, [in Silvia Anna Rode's modern translation](#). "Through Fallen Church Windows" was one of the Harmonists' better-known hymns, written by the community physician, Johann Christoph Müller, in 1816. Other poems take aspects of Harmonist belief and daily life as points of departure, for instance their Fourth of July celebrations (the Harmonists' pietism was not incompatible with American patriotism), their carefully-documented [kitchen gardens](#), the community's complicated well-and-water system, Rapp's abiding interest in [alchemy](#) (following Böhme), and Rapp's two trials for heresy in Germany. There are also a few nods to Gertrude Stein, who as it turns out was also familiar with Böhme.

Where We Live Now, vs. Where We Live Now

The question of "community" (utopian or otherwise) is a vexed one. My graduate work was animated by a wider investigation into what "community" could mean in an American context—especially when enacted, or attempted, under adverse circumstances. My dissertation, later published as [Southern Workers and the Search for Community](#), involved one such attempt, or loose association of

attempts, that crested in the textile union movement's activities and failures in the American South between the 1930s and 1950s. In the background of this work stood the subsequent narrative of the civil rights movement, which, however partial its victories, however embattled those victories remain, provides something like a positive narrative line. Winners typically tell their stories. Losers typically don't. "Community" always involves risk.



Figure 3: Harmony, Pennsylvania, as drawn by Wallrath Weingärtner in 1833. Wallrath Weingärtner, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The history of American utopian experiments is varied—quixotic, even. And it is almost always told, when it is told, from the point of view of the losers, since most American utopian communities ended sooner or later (usually sooner) in wreckage. I was especially interested in those that lasted awhile—in the Shakers, for instance, or the Black town movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And I was especially interested in the *limitations* of community—the edges of the polis, however beloved: where community fails, where and whom it excludes.

The Harmony Society's history was one of (initially) radical inclusion and economic struggle, and then of substantial economic prosperity, succeeded by an extended period of declension and radical exclusion following a major schism in 1832, after which new members were discouraged. Ironically, what the society lost over time in terms of its spiritual aspect (not to mention its membership) was balanced by the success of its economic investments, which remained lucrative, in particular its investment in coal and oil reserves at the onset of the nation's rapid industrialization. Its sense of itself as a community evolved over time in conjunction with its spiritual and economic bases. Ultimately its fit with American capitalism was perhaps too neat. This arc places it in close parallel with another, more infamous utopian experiment, John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Community, although I suspect Rapp himself would have preferred a comparison with the Shakers, or with Iowa's Amana Society.

It was winter when I was in residence at Old Economy Village, with drifts of dirty snow across the borough of Ambridge. While the core of the Harmonist village remains to some extent fixed in time (by virtue of state preservation), the more outlying bits, including many original Harmonist houses, are now interwoven with early twentieth-century company housing, much of it decaying. The bulk of the abandoned steel mill rises to the immediate north. The Harmonists' church was acquired and repurposed by Lutherans. The cemetery, devoid of markers, is unsignposted; I walked past it repeatedly (thinking it was an empty lot) before someone corrected my misapprehension. The site of the original labyrinth is now Ambridge High School's football field. One could say the tension between devotion and commerce, between visionary aspiration and the marketplace, isn't done yet on this site, although the Harmonists' voices have ceased.

Further Information

Old Economy Village's website is [here](#). Because the Harmony Society's archives survived mostly intact, it has been a favorite among historians, as reflected in the partial bibliography reproduced at the end of its [Wikipedia entry](#).

For those interested in the Harmonist labyrinths, a useful introduction may be found [here](#).

The archives at Old Economy Village are part of the Pennsylvania State Archives. For more information, see its [site](#).

The Harmony Society's dedication to musical culture (of all kinds) is one of its sustained, and sustaining, threads, and the musical archives of the Society are vast—although in the early decades, as with nearly all other materials, they are in German. Some of the intriguing materials I did *not* consult, but wish I had, were the “Cook Book of Philippine Claus” (1880), “Instructions for Dyeing Silk” (ca. 1830), the “Maker's Marks” associated with Economy's handicraft industries, the “Medical Books” (divided into two classes, one enumerating “herbs, plants, and fruits,” the other “recipes and cures”), a play written by a member (dated 1804), various folders of poems and prayers written by Harmonists, various registers of meteorological phenomena (including several “Thermometer Books”), and a folder mysteriously labeled “Survey Questionnaires, 1845-1880.”

From “Kingdom”

GEORGE RAPP (III)

Five gnomons, best

as settlement.

There is no war.
Mercy corresponds.
Sweep the loam
with vigor.
Lambs plot there.
Or the vats twang.
Glow is any glass
the night measures.
Preach it
to the prime loss.
Blend of tendency.
To settle & to mourn.
Great breaths
of them, did you.
Fire has a surface,
yes or no.
Let a wind chasten.
Is not a cloister
sentence represents.
A suit
against water,
every blue triumph,
what will you wear
master citizen.
Will you expose
the animals. Acute

angle. Refusal,
that ministry.
Gather it in you.
Gloss its wreaths.
Is breaking
is broken before.
& after, a hospital.
Austere
in the way of things,
an orchard's worth.
The blond
color of darkness.
Completed, waiting.

GEORGE RAPP (IV)

To tame a merit.
Rapprochement lit
from within.
Wive the apologia
& then
reason adjacent
adjusts accordingly.
Not separate,
balance captivates.
Would you call it

education.

Or, a stamina.

Now the priests

unfasten.

They have heard

together

listening. Whip

measure's

fine stitch. A canon

of empathy borders.

Would you

acclaim (it; others).

Practice

change in turn,

include carpenters.

Together, a touch.

A tone.

Not separate

the future's gap

bright among flies.

& so it lingered.

A wide door

smelling of lilac.

It was not cruel,

never. But smaller.

Fancy

what would

become of that.

Years drenched in

when. Some family.

GEORGE RAPP (X)

An obligation to come

is what we announced,

he must come,

they must come,

there must be coming,

there must be arrival.

Very well

said day, a mistake.

Tomorrow is careful.

A few steps up

& there, you have it.

There beneath

the flying of a silk kite.

We are not

so confused. Only,

we await. They must

come, they must

arrive. We have set

music to watch

for them, their arrival.

We have beaten

every bound. Water

is warmer in summer.

Acquaintance

protects the verb

from its source.

Make a copy

of your country, sir.

In colored inks.

Did they yield, then.

It was October.

Senses were royal.

A blade crept in still.

Only small wars

now. You catch them

with a knotted string,

with a loud brass tray.

We continue

to await. Prepare

to await, yes,

I saw it in Pittsburgh.

Why install

a cross when you can

install a cross.

I don't mean one

alone. I mean many
people on foot
mostly. Or by river
on boats awfully large
or else quite small.

GEORGE RAPP (XI)

Alchemy the rejection
of time
within time. It leads
to a cup. Water inside
the question:
how much water.
You can sacrifice a lot
in Beaver Falls.
Dear girl, dear refugee.
Let us rise
into the English
tongue, fleshy shelter.
Not above
reading in newspapers.
I have received
your announcement.
What might the stage
withhold.

I mean from us.
Or from others, yes.
To be ill or to be burnt.
A lot is like this,
apricot roots
twining. Please
do not return, please
do not make any
unnecessary
& invariably foolish
decisions
such as a change
in your name.
Signed carelessly.
& yet the rich emotion.
How splendid
the performance,
did you find a life
there. Swallows
abusing the eaves
joyfully. A presence.
As a bruise
in an aching sinew.
Would you lave it.
Would you
kindly disabuse

that remedial thorn.

GEORGE RAPP (XII)

If objects attract then

I needs nothing.

A chair. A tumbler.

Grace bewilders,

this much is veritable.

Of course saints

wander. Literature

is the true map

of this. Like all maps

it is dead, but only

just. Pronounce

the faiths of the dead.

In the rye field

an oblation of breath.

Outside vs. inside,

objects in the sense

that senses intromit.

My vest & cap.

My hand against

the frozen, shriveled

figs on their bough.

They are still.

They are still enough.

They are both
higher & lower.

Ruin of purslane
amidst the invisible.

Yes of course
all prepositions
are haunted. One loop
secures another
& in this way
the deep fish marvel.

C/O GEORGE RAPP, ECONOMY, PA.

Recollect choirs.

Distilling a majority.

Recollect choirs
in the vicinity. Type
of choir, vicinity.

Recollect pleasing
moments in which
tones figure. Figure
of a tone, winter
summer spring fall.

We pass in this
as laughter. Or,

something doubtless,
a plan. A brother.
Emigration catches
its breath with one
callused hand.
Where is the other.
Soprano descant
in the blown thicket,
dried apples cast
down a balcony.
Be quiet now & rest.
In the span's umbra.
As befits souls
a lengthening flare.
Taxidermied break.
What do you see.
I see nation, I count
guns in the snow.
All of it as essence.
What then
can rest clasp
to itself, a flange,
what dim academy.
Peace in trenches.
In shops. In arbors.
What news is this.

Break the butcher
down, in catalogues.
A form of speech.
A form speech took
while recollecting.

This article was originally published in February, 2022.

I'm the author of seven full-length poetry collections, most recently *feast gently* (Tupelo, 2018), which won the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, and *The Earliest Witnesses* (Tupelo/Carcenet, 2021). Other recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *APR*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, *The Nation*, *New England Review*, *Yale Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Conjunctions*, *New American Writing*, etc. I live in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania and teach at Bucknell University. As you know, my Ph.D. is in U.S. history, from Duke, and I'm also the author of a historical monograph, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community* (University of Illinois Press, 2000). In 2021 I was a visiting fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge.