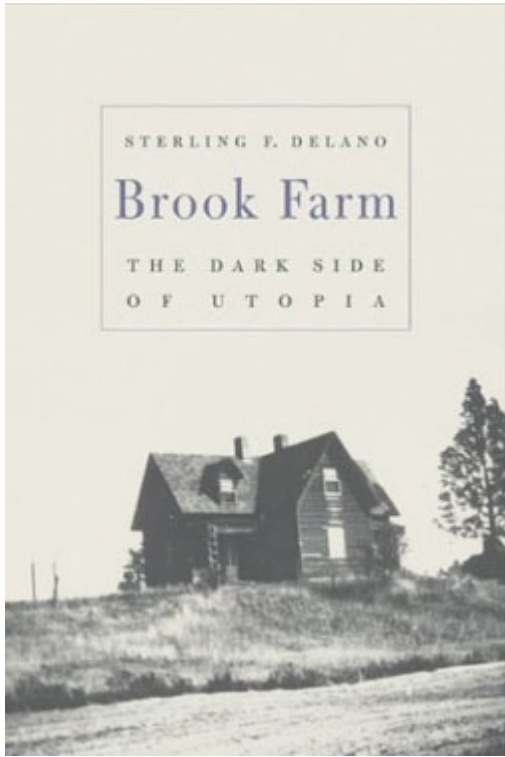


The Simple Life?



Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia

Sterling F. Delano's *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* is, surprisingly, the first attempt since Lindsay Swift's *Brook Farm: Its Members, Scholars, and Visitors* (1900) to provide a comprehensive overview of the most frequently recounted communitarian adventure in American history. Delano's review of the episode illustrates some of the perils and possibilities of a narrative synthesis. Although based on exhaustive original research and thorough command of the secondary literature, Delano's survey adds relatively little to the rich specialized scholarship on the most familiar elements of the story, such as founder George Ripley's estrangement from the Unitarian establishment of Boston or Ralph Waldo Emerson's decision not to join the community. On broad structural matters like the relationship between the Transcendentalist and Fourierist phases of Brook Farm, the connections between Fourierist theory and practice, and the place of Brook Farm in the national Association movement, Delano's analysis similarly pales alongside Carl Guarneri's outstanding *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, 1991). The strength of Delano's work is that it integrates these interpretive issues into the description of a social texture that was charming enough to draw even Nathaniel Hawthorne into a pillow-fight with two young ladies but also frustrating enough to inspire *The Blithedale Romance*. This emphasis on the lived experience of the community nicely demonstrates the idea of the community at the heart of Brook Farm and provides a valuable perspective on its successes and failures.

Melodramatic subtitle notwithstanding, Delano's portrait of Brook Farm is mostly roseate. He strongly admires Ripley and his wife, Sophia Dana Willard Ripley, as well as key lieutenants Charles A. Dana and John Sullivan Dwight for their vision of egalitarian cooperation and their readiness to work diligently in harmony with others while maintaining equanimity in difficult situations. The central theme in the study of Brook Farm, he emphasizes, should not be explanation for its collapse but appreciation of its achievements. He concludes that foremost among these was a substantial realization of the social equality for which the venture strived. Brook Farm recognized the dignity of all forms of labor, no matter who performed it, and afforded educational opportunities to all members of the community. Another definition of equality might have produced a less favorable judgment. Delano acknowledges that Ripley and his handpicked supporters controlled almost all authority at Brook Farm (413 n.10). The topic of gender relations, which Delano examines closely, provides another good example of his leanings. Unlike Guarneri and Anne Rose, who have argued that the freedom enjoyed by single women at Brook Farm contrasted with the more constricted and difficult lives of the married women, Delano describes little difference between the experiences of the two groups and devotes considerably more attention to the unmarried women and to Sophia Ripley. Although he reports that in the only year for which records survive nine of the ten residents who logged the most hours of labor were women (164), he denies that the community was responsible for channeling women into time-consuming traditional jobs.

Delano is more comfortable and expansive in addressing another achievement of Brook Farm: its exploration of the ways in which community life might foster individual development amid the Industrial Revolution. He reports that many Brook Farmers took up the Fourierist invitation to engage in a wide range of work toward which they felt a "passional attraction," and he sketches numerous feasts, dances, theatricals, tableaux, masquerades, and other gatherings that brought the community together. The degree to which these activities constituted a substantial art of living is illustrated by the connection between the importance of music in the life of Brook Farm and the pioneering career in music criticism that John Sullivan Dwight launched during the years that the community produced the Association journal *The Harbinger*, on which Delano has previously written at greater length. A different fruition of the evanescent Brook Farm atmosphere was the fourteen marriages that took place between the approximately two hundred people who lived in the community at some point. Delano effectively depicts the sole wedding celebrated at Brook Farm, in December 1846, as a poignant attempt to revitalize the struggling venture and the decision of residents Charles Dana and Eunice Macdaniel to marry in New York as one of the most devastating indications of its imminent collapse.

Delano presents several converging explanations for that failure. He reviews the advantages and disadvantages of the location for farming operations and assesses the decisions to produce shoes and window sashes, but he recognizes that more decisive and revealing were Ripley's mistakes in capital expenditures and personnel. The overextended building program and ineffective screening of noncontributing residents reflected both excessive optimism and an effort to

accommodate the desires of as many supporters as possible. Particularly striking on the revenue side was the disinclination of Brook Farm leaders to build on the success of its school as a profit center for the community, a reflection of their ambivalence about teaching and also of their commitment to manual labor as a cornerstone of the project. In the latter stages of his story Delano stresses the effort to secure financial support from the national Fourierist movement. He notes that the self-effacing refusal to use *The Harbinger* to promote Brook Farm as a model community contributed to the disappointment of these hopes, but he assigns much of the blame to national leaders based in New York for indifference toward Brook Farm and limited commitment to their own campaign, which he argues that Ripley and Dana naively missed as they shifted priorities from Brook Farm to the broader cause of Association. The contrast between Bostonians and New Yorkers was important, as the women's Association movements in the two cities underscores, though Delano might have discussed its origins more fully and addressed the ways in which the trajectory of Brook Farm, presaging the careers of Ripley and Dana at the *New York Tribune*, pointed toward an increasing overlap of the urban cultures.

Emerson once observed that the Brook Farmers "should have this praise, that they made what all people try to make, an agreeable place to live in." Delano's *Brook Farm* provides a convenient, authoritative survey of this earnest antebellum effort to realize the promise of American life.

This article originally appeared in issue 5.1 (October, 2004).

Thomas J. Brown, associate professor of history at the University of South Carolina, is the author of *Dorothea Dix, New England Reformer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).