

Reading the Way to Perfection: An Analysis of Print Culture in the Oneida Community

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Following the establishment of the Oneida Community (OC) in 1848, tourists flocked to Oneida, New York to visit the Community and marvel at its unconventional habits. The OC, headed by a former Protestant minister named John Humphrey Noyes, practiced Bible Communism and complex marriage in an attempt to attain spiritual perfection and trigger the millennium.¹ Influenced by the writings of Saint Paul, Noyes believed that his Community would hasten the coming of a new era in which selfishness, slavery, and sin would cease to exist. Intentional communities like Oneida were not new phenomena in the nineteenth century. Noyes's espousal of complex marriage and stirpiculture, however, placed Oneida in its own special category, since it favored a dramatic reconstruction of social norms.² Many contemporaries vilified the OC and perceived its institutions to be significant threats to the social order. Reverend Hubbard Eastman spoke for many Americans when he accused the Oneida Community of "aim[ing] a deadly blow at the foundations of social and civil fabric."³

Interestingly enough, however, most descriptions of the OC depict it as a successful and well-functioning institution. William Hepworth Dixon's *New America* (1867) frustrated Noyes by spreading inaccurate information about the OC, but did the community a favor by portraying it positively. "Everything at Oneida Creek suggests taste, repose, and wealth," Dixon wrote, enlarging upon this statement with allusions to the OC's prosperous financial status.⁴ Writers more subjective than Dixon devoted entire books to sparring with Noyes's teachings and lambasting OC social norms. Even the most vehement opponents of Noyesism, however, grudgingly acknowledged some of the OC's better features. John Ellis published *Free Love and its Votaries* in 1870 in an attempt to alert the public to the dangers of Free-Love movements in the United States. While denouncing the Oneida Community for its sexual institutions, Ellis hinted at some of its good qualities as well. According to Ellis, the community's Mansion House was impressive, the members were courteous, and the kitchens "would delight the most orderly housekeeper in the land."⁵ He also described the OC library in detail, noting that it "comprise[d] about 3,300 volumes, systematically arranged, and consisting principally of works of science, history, biography, and theology."⁶

Ellis was not alone in his interest in the community's library: both hostile and friendly accounts of the OC referred to the size and composition of its library. OC member William Alfred Hinds stated proudly in his book *American Communities* (1878) that the library held between five and six thousand books, as well as some of the best serial publications in print.⁷ Traveling author Charles Nordhoff included a description of the Mansion House library in his *Communitistic Societies of the United States* (1875), noting that it held periodicals and about four thousand books and publications.⁸ Even A.L. Slawson, author of the scathingly critical *Behind the Scenes: Being an Expose of the Oneida Community* (1878), admitted that the “mother of harlots and abominations” owned four thousand publications, including medical and legal texts.⁹ These references to the OC library and its large collection of books and periodicals suggest that the OC’s consumption of printed material was impressive for its time.

The Oneida Community library was undoubtedly worthy of inclusion in contemporary accounts. In the mid-nineteenth century, booksellers and bookbinders plied their trades in most cities and towns, producing and selling books to interested readers. Although these print-related businesses were flourishing, few Americans owned large quantities of books. Educators, ministers, and professionals tended to have extensive libraries—John Humphrey Noyes personally owned, and in some cases, signed his name in at least thirty-five publications during his lifetime—but most people could not afford this luxury. Those who did own books treasured them as prized possessions and cared for them accordingly. Many books in the OC library collection, for instance, possess detailed ownership inscriptions and show evidence of having been repaired by previous owners. Between 1848 and the OC’s dissolution in 1881, the community library accumulated many volumes from new members and supplemented its collection with purchases and donations. Given that many nineteenth-century Americans owned little more than a Bible, the OC library received contemporary renown and continues to interest scholars today.

For twenty-first century researchers, the OC library still in situ at the Mansion House is significant not only for its size but also for the insight it offers into the inner workings of the OC. The community's library lends itself well to the study of print culture, a field that examines how a specific population consumes and responds to printed media. One can obtain information about print culture by analyzing the composition of a social group’s literary collection and locating allusions to printed material in relevant records and documents. For instance, one might examine

a community's library and publications for information about which genres predominated and which literary topics merited manuscript marginal annotations and ownership inscriptions. This information, in turn, allows researchers to chart literary trends within social groups, identify intellectual forces with profound effects on societies, and obtain additional insight into the lives of individuals within a specified demographic or social group. Such an analysis is particularly useful—indeed even necessary—for understanding the OC. More than a century after the community's dissolution, Noyes's institutions of complex marriage and stirpiculture continue to fascinate, amuse, and—in some cases—horrify scholars, just as they did during the community's active years. An examination of print culture in the OC reminds us, however, that the community was a complex entity shaped by the intellectual and religious forces of its time.

Luckily for scholars, the OC left behind considerable evidence to aid in understanding its relations with the written word. The Oneida Community Mansion House houses approximately 3,129 publications that the community accumulated between its establishment in 1841 and its dissolution in 1881, excluding any that were discarded or destroyed after dissolution. Of these publications, which represent all genres and often relate to specific spiritual or social movements, roughly half contain manuscript annotations and inscriptions written by individuals before and after their admission into the Community. Some annotations provide information about the OC, its beliefs, and its perspectives toward other religious beliefs and practices, while others react to a specific text, author, or writing style. A large number of inscriptions, drawings, and items found inside books serve as windows into the minds of individual members of the community, shedding light on their everyday lives, thoughts, and emotions.

In addition to the information provided by volumes in the library, community attitudes toward literature can be extrapolated from many of its publications and surviving documents. The OC, always cognizant of the power of the written word, maintained throughout the communal period a newspaper known at different times as the *Free Church Circular*, the *Circular*, the *Oneida Circular*, and the *American Socialist*. These newspapers contain frequent references to literature in the context of the community, and often include book reviews, literary criticism, and lists of publications received by the OC. Newspaper sections devoted to everyday life in the community provide information on what books members were reading, as do the Daily Journals of the OC. Although these two publications represent the community as a whole, one can isolate individual perspectives on print culture through personal journals, most notably those

of members Tirzah Miller and Victor Hawley. One can also learn about individuals by reading manuscript inscriptions inside their books.

By assessing what remains of the OC's library at the Mansion House and analyzing references to print culture in OC periodicals and diaries, one can chart the popularity of specific literary genres, topics, and authors within the community. This allows for a greater understanding of the OC, its beliefs, and its preferred means of spending leisure time. The study of print culture in the OC touches upon crucial themes within the community, including intellectual freedom and interaction with the outside world. Printed materials, ownership inscriptions, and references to literature in OC publications also attest to a tension inherent to communal societies: the often uneasy balance between an intentional community and the members it comprises—individuals with interests, needs, and preferences of their own.

In response to a subscriber's request, the Oneida Community profiled its library in the February 8, 1869 issue of the *Circular*. The article, titled "Our Books" and authored by a community member identified only as A.B., disclosed the origins of the library and listed the ways in which the OC had acquired its collection of 4500 volumes.¹⁰ John Humphrey Noyes, his wife Harriet Holton, and a small band of followers set the precedent for future community members by relinquishing all claims to individual property in 1848. Although the Oneida Community did not have a well-organized or official library until 1862, its collection increased from 1848 onwards as new members donated publications upon joining the community. The resulting library was an "accidental" rather than "premeditated" amalgamation of different themes and genres. Since many individuals contributed publications to the collection, the composition of the library significantly depended on the professions, interests, and literary tastes of community members. Records of which incoming members supplied which books have not been located, but one can make assumptions about prior ownership of some volumes based on ownership inscriptions within the texts.

In addition to incorporating personal collections into the library, the OC purchased worthwhile books and periodicals for its members. Writing to the editor of the *Democratic Union*, R.W.H. noted that in the early years of the community, "books and periodicals were

purchased, and every member had opportunities to inform himself.”¹¹ In “Our Books,” A.B. indicated that the OC made purchases designed to “suit emergencies in the Community.” The meaning of the word “emergencies” is unclear. One can assume, however, that the OC took it upon itself to buy books from genres underrepresented in the community library. A.B. also stated in his article that the community occasionally catered to the needs and wants of individual members by buying books relating to their special interests. This may explain how one copy of *The Self-Instructor in Musical Composition* arrived at the library. Noyes presented the book to member Harriet Worden on December 21, 1861, undoubtedly intending to aid her in her endeavors as a music teacher, singer, guitarist, and piccolo player.¹² While the community dissuaded its members from owning personal property, no one objected to Worden developing the God-given talents she possessed. The musical textbook would have enriched the entire community as well as its individual owner, making it a useful addition to the library.

The Oneida Community also increased the size of its collection by accepting donations from non-members. Some members received books as gifts from relatives and friends before and after they joined the community. Other non-members chose to address gifts to the OC and its satellite in Wallingford, Connecticut instead of to individual members. C.J. Irvine, for instance, inscribed a copy of Unitarian minister Robert Collyer’s *Nature and Life: Sermons* (1867) with “Presented to the O.C. Library” before donating it to the community. In some cases, non-members donated books to the community after visiting or spending extended periods of time with its members. Having taught classes at Wallingford and Oneida respectively, Thomas Cogswell Upham and Joseph Edward Frobisher endowed each branch with copies of their published works. As authors and academics, Upham and Frobisher were not alone in sharing their own publications with the OC—many authors, publishers, and translators presented their literary works to the community in attempts to increase readership and encourage business. A desire to increase the popularity of *Effectual Reform in Man and Society* (1875) may explain why its author, Travis Henry, explicitly presented a copy to Harriet Worden, the editor of the *American Socialist* in 1875. Given the extent to which the community’s library grew each year from donations and purchases, it is hardly surprising to find an eclectic mix of genres sharing the shelves today.

In “Our Books,” A.B. stated that serial publications and literature were the largest genres represented in the library. The library did expand after A.B. published his article in 1869, but its

composition remained surprisingly consistent with his comments. The remaining library possesses more than one hundred different serial publications relating to literature, horticulture, science, spiritualism, and art.

A.B. also correctly identified literature as a top genre: fiction and poetry comprise an estimated one-fourth of the library. In addition to reading literature, community members also read travel memoirs and biographies of famous politicians and religious leaders. Many of the books in the library reflect an interest in learning about other countries and belief systems. For instance, the community owned Daniel Clark Eddy's *Walter's Tour in the East*, a series of novels following a man named Walter and his experiences in Egypt, Jerusalem, Damascus, Samaria, Constantinople, and Athens. Reference materials, histories, musical anthologies, and science texts further diversified the library, as did books written or translated into different languages; the OC owned books in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Old English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese. To ensure that the library appealed to all tastes, the community also responded to contemporary trends towards phrenology, shorthand, and social movements, occasionally delving into controversial topics like capital punishment.

Despite the OC's religious identity, theological texts followed serial publications and literature as the third most represented genre in the library. That is not to say, of course, that the community did not own books relating to religion and spirituality—the OC library holds a large and diverse collection of theological works.. In addition to ten complete Bibles and a host of Old, New, and apocryphal Testaments, members consulted companions to the Bible, including scriptural interpretations, biblical dictionaries, and concordances. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the community studied the Bible more than any other book and frequently used it as a textbook for young children. In addition to collecting bibles and biblical aids, the OC acquired theological texts from authors like Emmanuel Swedenborg, Charles Finney, and Jonathan Edwards. It obtained significant, often holy, books from other Christian sects, such as the Shaker's *Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom*, *The Book of Mormon*, and the Moravian *Exposition of Christian Doctrine, as Taught in the Protestant Church of the United Brethren, or, Unitas Fratrum*. Later in the community's history, members began exploring spiritualism as well, leading to the acquisition of seventy-eight spiritualist texts. The presence of such diverse theological works in the library suggests that members were open to learning about different

religious perspectives. Manuscript annotations within books further demonstrate that members tolerated and, indeed, seriously investigated other religious beliefs.

Manuscript markings and annotations provide important information about the ways in which the OC responded to printed media. Of the 1913 books, periodicals, and multivolume sets in the library today, 1212 contain marginal markings, manuscript annotations, or ownership inscriptions. Many of the inscriptions include neither dates nor information about ownership, thus complicating attempts to determine whether or not a book was annotated by a member. Although it is difficult to determine whether a reader annotated a book before or after joining the community—if indeed the reader had anything to do with the OC at all—one can assume that members tolerated, if not contributed to, the large number of inscriptions and commentaries within their books. Members did not criticize or correct the majority of theological texts in their possession; surprisingly, many denominational religious texts, such as *The Book of Mormon* and the Shaker *Divine Roll*, were not annotated at all. The comments that do exist in religious texts reflect the members' desire to learn rather than to reinforce their own beliefs. A sheet of paper found inside volume six of Robert Owen's *New Moral World* serial, for instance, contains numerous page numbers and allusions to Owen's failed utopian community in New Harmony, Indiana. While the list of allusions speaks to an interest in New Harmony and its institutions, there are no comments in the *New Moral World* criticizing Owen for his secularism or for his failures. Similarly, a member summarized Fourier's teachings on a flyleaf in *The Phalanx, or, Journal of Social Science* without any evident biases attached.

Oneida Community members were not, however, averse to criticizing an author's doctrine, theory, or writing style when the occasion demanded it. In 1873, John Humphrey Noyes annotated *The Journal of John Woolman*, describing the Quaker preacher's memoir as "childish" and "laughable" in its extreme denunciations of materialism and commerce. He did, however, note that the OC could profit by reading the book and taking its message to heart. Other readers offered light criticism and corrections to right perceived errors on the part of the author. An unknown individual with the initials J.W. criticized Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, noting passages in which Malthus's doctrine conflicted with that of the community. J.W. offered Noyes's practice of male continence as a response to Malthus's fear of overpopulation and stated confidently that this form of birth control would "modify many of this authors [sic] conclusions" if practiced widely. George Washington Noyes, John's younger

brother, also paired criticism and advice when he responded to Charles Eliot Norton's *Considerations on Some Recent Social Theories*: "he judges the cause of Associationism and Communism by the past-by French failures; forgetting that God can do a new thing, and that this country is the foremost theatre of all attainment...He needs more faith." Although the responses to Malthus and Norton are critical, neither comes across as particularly scathing. In fact, Oneida Community members writing in books reserved their harshest criticism for books they deemed boring, silly, badly-written, or otherwise unworthy of their time. As one reader wrote on page 116 of Margaret Fuller Ossoli's *At Home and Abroad; or, Things and Thoughts in America and Europe*, "Oh Margaret, dear! How could you write so much nonsense; On having written, how could you publish it!"

In addition to displaying personal reactions to printed material, manuscript annotations and inscriptions provide important, often amusing information about individual community members. For instance, some books in the library contain manuscript annotations that portray founder John Humphrey Noyes in a somewhat unconventional way. The collection suggests that Noyes was a prolific writer in comparison to other members of the community, particular as a young man. Noyes's college textbooks demonstrate that the future leader of the OC practiced signatures and drew pictures inside of his books as a young man. Cicero's *Fratrum Dialogi Tres*, passed down to Noyes from his older brother Horatio, contains extensive marginalia, including signatures, rows of dollar signs, drawings, and the words "Prof. Adams is a buster." Noyes appears to have shared the book with other students, and it is impossible to link him to every instance of marginalia. It is, however, likely that Noyes was responsible for much of it given the condition of his other college textbooks. In *Roman Antiquities*, another book bearing Noyes's signature, Noyes drew two men, a soldier, a teapot, columns, and a large man labeled as Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus. The same book features a drawing of an animal resembling a bear or a pig, as well as a drawing of a bird trailing a banner. Even as the adult leader of the Oneida Community, Noyes wrote extensively in books; as mentioned above, he prefixed *the Journey of John Woolman* with two pages of commentary. Just as Noyes's comments in *Woolman* add to our understandings of his religious beliefs, his annotated schoolbooks demonstrate that he was a man like any other with idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, and inclinations.

The Oneida Community library also contains books with inscriptions that offer insight into the lives, thoughts, and feelings of anonymous members. For instance, an unknown member

wrote “I love you” on page 10 of the fourth volume of the *Cultivator* journal. The writer, possibly a member of the Noyes family, may have showed the inscription to another member, providing a possible instance of forbidden special love within the OC.¹³ Since Oneida children had access to the library as well, many books feature drawings on flyleaves and childish comments in margins. Peter Bullions’s *The Principles of English Grammar* (1854), a textbook signed and annotated by seven community girls, provides a perfect example of childish humor. One girl emended Bullions’s definition of the word “Bear, to carry” with “a baby,” causing her friend to comment beneath “Shame on you!” The marginalia inside Oneida Community books does not always provide ground-breaking information about community life. Still, it reminds us that members were human beings with individual preferences, stories, and histories—who just happened to live in a radical religious community.

Many nineteenth-century religious societies discouraged their members from interacting with the outside world, using new technologies, and reading potentially subversive material. Some societies prevented members from reading anything other than the Bible and the publications issued by the society itself. Members could not enjoy literature for fear of experiencing ideological contamination nor read theological works that contained messages contrary to those upheld by community elders. Reading was simply intended to reinforce religious dogma. The Oneida Community differed from societies of this nature in that it carried on a relationship with the outside world and allowed members to read different genres of books and periodicals. Because Noyes valued entertainment and pleasure, members could read most literature without condemnation. As one might expect given the diverse collection of books in the library, members had more incentives to read than simply furthering their spiritual development. OC members flocked to the library for entertainment, practical knowledge, and information about the outside world as part of their quest for spiritual enrichment.

Upon establishing the Oneida Community, John Humphrey Noyes encouraged his new congregation to read for entertainment. To set this trend in motion, he permitted members to read aloud entertaining literature and newspaper articles at evening meetings. Most of the texts read at meetings were histories, geographies, or biographies—publications designed to inform rather

than to entertain—but members clearly enjoyed listening to them. A *Circular* article titled “An Oneida Journal” noted on July 29, 1858 that “the assembling together every day and listening to the reading of some interesting book, is pleasant as well as improving.” Over time, the community incorporated fiction into its evening meetings as well, reading novels from authors such as Sir Walter Scott and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Community diaries also reveal that members read alone or in small groups during leisure time. Tirzah Miller, Noyes’s niece, kept a journal from 1867 to 1879 that repeatedly mentioned the novels she was reading alone or in the company of friends. For instance, Tirzah wrote on July 4, 1879 that she was reading *Signor Monaldini’s Niece* with her sister Helen and future husband, James B. Herrick.¹⁴ Victor Hawley, another member, indicated in his diary that he read Frank Leslie’s *Monthly* in his free time and articles from *The Galaxy* to his special love interest, Mary Jones.¹⁵ Clearly, the pursuit of literature and entertaining reading flourished within the OC.

Reading also aided Oneida Community members in completing necessary chores for the communal good. Throughout the year, the community relied on the assistance of work bees to survive, encouraging members to gather together and complete large tasks like bag making, berry picking, and food processing. Many of these initiatives, especially bag making, forced participants to sit for long periods of time and perform repetitive work. To make participation more enjoyable, members enlisted individuals in reading aloud to them while they worked. Since much of the work was tedious, members preferred to listen to novels and entertaining monthly magazines. One issue of the *Circular* stated that the community read novels by Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Charles Reade during bag bees.¹⁶ In other instances, readers recited from Shakespeare and read stories from the *Atlantic* and *Harper’s* monthlies.¹⁷ The exciting readings transformed otherwise-tedious chores into “attractive labor” and encouraged members to voluntarily participate in bees for the entertainment value.¹⁸ In addition to mobilizing and entertaining a labor force for chores, the readings also succeeded in creating comfortable work environments: readings helped boost morale and ensure that workers performed their tasks happily. Moreover, in many cases, the bees acted as “school[s] of intellectual improvement as well as of industry,” since individuals were able to exercise their minds and accumulate knowledge while performing the most menial of tasks.¹⁹ Although members enjoyed reading and listening to literature, the community’s opinion of fiction and novels grew increasingly negative with the passing of time.

OC members began to distance themselves from reading literature during the late 1860s and early 1870s. In 1857, some members first expressed concerns that their readings, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels, were entertaining, but not instructive enough. They requested more serious materials for evening meetings, such as agricultural articles and Noyes's "Home Talks." Despite these suggestions, a majority of members preferred to listen to novels, and the criticisms stopped.²⁰ Years later, however, members clamored for a return to reading practical books with greater potential for education. Members at the Willow Place branch started independently switching the style of their evening meetings; they abandoned novels in favor of "conversations on various intellectual and instructive subjects, short, informal lectures, reports from one another of the results of their reading, impromptu geography and spelling classes, etc."²¹ In January of 1876, members of the Wallingford Community held a meeting and unanimously agreed to phase out reading novels in favor of providing instruction through educational readings and lectures. Following the Wallingford meeting, some members continued to read novels, but generally with aims to criticize rather than mindlessly entertain. Although the OC never issued any "severe philippic" against reading novels and other forms of literature, its members gravitated toward reading more practical works designed to inform and to enlighten.²²

Throughout its functional years, the Oneida Community consulted books and periodicals relating to horticulture, agriculture, trades, and sciences in order to ensure the community's comfort and economic well-being. The earliest members learned to construct buildings, practice agriculture, and develop successful enterprises in order to create the self-sufficient, prosperous community depicted in contemporary accounts. The presence of practical serials in the community library, such as the *American Agriculturist*, *The Cultivator*, *Gleanings in Bee Culture*, the *American Artisan*, and *The Manufacturer and Builder*, attests to the importance of periodicals in shaping community-wide economic initiatives. Serial publications also helped members learn a number of new trades. One former lawyer worked as a "cook, baker, farm-hand, shop-hand, laundryman, fruit-hand, book-keeper, stoker, pipe-fitter, lamp-cleaner, proof-reader, and editor" during his time in the OC.²³ Many of these positions required only training, but some may have required prior research on the part of members, such as the fields of medicine and dentistry.

Community members also consulted books and periodicals in order to solve practical problems with maintaining the community structures. According to "Heating and Ventilation," a

Circular article published on January 6, 1859, members designed the Mansion House's ventilation system after reading an article about schoolhouse ventilation in *the Illinois Teacher*. Years later, the OC performed a cost-benefit analysis on the *American Chemist*, noting that few members read the periodical due to its jargon. While the "common folks" rarely read the journal, the *Circular* concluded that the *American Chemist* was worth the cost of its subscription because information it contained allowed members to save money while removing lime deposits from the boilers.²⁴

In addition to seeking practical information about the nuts and bolts of running a successful community, members may have attempted to learn more about life outside the OC by reading government publications, records, and public documents. Some of these documents pre-date the community and appear to have been utilized by individuals prior to their admission into the OC. Noyes owned a copy of *Vermont State Papers* for 1823, a compilation of documents that may have piqued his interest as a native of Brattleboro, Vermont. Other books in the library, such as *Dominican Republic: Report of the Commission of Inquiry to Santo Domingo* (1871) and *Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction* (1866) appear to have been completely irrelevant to the community. Since few of these books contain marginalia or ownership inscriptions, it is likely that most were gifted or donated to the Community. J.A. Roland, for instance, sent the community three public documents: *Smithsonian Reports for 1862-3*, *Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for 1863*, and *Diplomatic Correspondence for 1864*.²⁵ The *Circular* referred to the records and public documents received by the community, but rarely discussed or reviewed them. Since members read almanacs, followed current events, and enjoyed reading about contemporary social movements and controversies, however, it is possible that members did consult outside records to learn more about the outside world.

Although the Oneida Community did not meticulously document its reasons for owning and reading government publications and reports, its members did express interest in learning about current events and social controversies. Every *Circular* issue devoted a small section to relaying important developments and events outside of the Oneida Community to its readers. When a subscriber criticized the *Circular* for not featuring the Civil War prominently, the editor replied that members did read newspapers about wartime events and did "share in the excitement of the North."²⁶ Noyes and the rest of the members did not, however, actively support the war effort. There is evidence that OC members kept themselves informed about the abolition

movement. The community owned Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave* (1853), Philo Tower's *Slavery Unmasked* (1856), and multiple copies of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), as well as numerous books written by famed abolitionist Gerrit Smith. Community members also read temperance publications, such as *Humpy Dumpy, or, The Corner Grocery* (1874) and *The Marvelous Doings of Prince Alcohol: An Allegory* (1844).²⁷ Since the community did not officially subscribe to the abolition and temperance movements, it is likely that its members read about them in order to obtain information and inspiration for their own practices and perspectives.

Oneida Community members also kept themselves up-to-date with the latest scientific theories and discoveries. To ensure that members could access the most recent scholarship, the community subscribed to scientific journals like the *American Chemist*, *Nature*, *Popular Science Monthly*, and *American Popular Journal of Microscopy and Popular Science*. As mentioned above, members consulted scientific journals like the *American Chemist* for solutions to practical problems within the community's infrastructure. The community also obtained copies of revolutionary nineteenth-century scientific texts, including Charles Darwin's *On the Origins of Species* (1868) and Lyell's *The Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man* (1863). Members read the most recent scientific theories and discussed the extent to which science threatened Christianity. The OC approached new doctrines—namely evolution, natural selection, and uniformitarianism—with interest and acknowledged that certain theories trumped the biblical narrative. After reading Lyell's *The Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man*, members cast doubt upon the Adam and Eve story and noted that Lyell's theory of an ancient Earth did not exclude the existence of a creator God.²⁸ There is also evidence that Noyes adapted his doctrine of stirpiculture from books and periodicals on artificial selection and breeding. A *Circular* article titled "Scientific Propagation" published on March 27, 1865 linked Darwin's *Natural Selection* to scientific propagation and revealed that members had been reading articles on sheep breeding from the *Rural New Yorker*.

As suggested by the origins of stirpiculture, the Oneida Community's passion for reading directly related to its perceived role in triggering the Millennium. Spencer Klaw, a historian of the OC, states in *Without Sin* that community members "explained their passion for study on the ground that it better equipped them for the tasks that God had set them—that is, to bring the world around to Bible Communism and thereby prepare the way for the rapid expansion of

God's kingdom on Earth."²⁹ J.B.H. confirmed Klaw's statement in "Why Study Greek?," an article published on October 23, 1865 in the *OC Circular*. Although members acknowledged the importance of Greek literature, they mainly studied Greek in order to locate allusions to Perfectionism and Communism in the Greek Testaments.³⁰ The knowledge of Greek was thus necessary for defending Noyesism and legitimizing the OC's beliefs. Members also attached spiritual significance to some books that did not contain explicit religious material. In another *Circular* article, an unknown member discussed learning about the histories of England and the Roman Empire, stating that the study of history had led him or her to "appreciate the knowledge of the Second Coming, and realize what superior knowledge we have, through our knowledge of the truth."³¹ Since the histories of England and the Roman Empire do not particularly relate to the Second Coming, except possibly in the context of Adventist interpretations of prophecy, one can assume that the writer found religious value in the study of history itself. Community members also recognized that literature contained spiritual messages, both conspicuous and subtle, that had potential to influence readers. At one point, Noyes asked Tirzah Miller to help him "find out how this infernal German atheism got sifted into so much of our literature" by critically reading magazines and other works of literature.³²

Oneida Community members lived their lives as quests for personal enrichment and self-improvement. They enjoyed discovering new ways to improve their minds and cultivate their best traits. The OC library attests to the importance of this effort to perfect the individual. It contains a large collection of self-improvement texts relating to rhetoric, elocution, memory, grammar, languages, parenting, shorthand, sermonizing, and physical exercise. When choosing books for evening meetings or individual perusal, members opted for books that could potentially instruct and inform as well as entertain. The *Circular* described Professor Alexander Bain's *English Composition and Rhetoric* as an ideal choice of reading: "This is a fascinating as well as improving study, and our ambition is stimulated to give it further attention."³³ As evidenced by the title of Bain's book, the OC sought to achieve perfection through education. Members took classes at all ages and were determined to learn about subjects ranging from algebra and Latin to counterfeiting money.³⁴ Most members exhibited great dedication to their studies. As one issue of the *O.C. Daily* claimed, "One cannot look in any direction, and scarcely at any hour of the day, but they will see persons hastening with books, slates, &c., to find their place in some class..."³⁵ The community also channeled its desire for inward perfection into the

Bible Game, an entertainment in which players had to test their memories and spiritual knowledge by matching biblical quotes with their respective books.³⁶ Community members did not view self-improvement as untowardly individualistic, choosing instead to associate self-improvement with spiritual and communal development.

Oneida Community members believed that their constant effort to improve themselves would eventually hasten the coming of the Millennium. Robert Fogarty, a leading historian on the OC, noted that members enjoyed attending classes because classes provided “practical spiritual uplift” and “individual regeneration” through knowledge and improvement.³⁷ The community did believe that certain educational subjects had the potential to change a person’s mentality and behavior. One issue of the *O.C. Daily* associated algebra with “arous[ing] persons from their apathy, and awaken[ing] their dormant faculties.”³⁸ Member Martin Kinsley also commented upon the importance of mathematics in influencing community attitudes when he wrote: “The Bible and Geometry. Good weapons with which to fight the wicked one” inside *Elements of Geometry and Trigonometry*.³⁹ While perhaps tongue in cheek, this quote suggests that members perceived educational studies to be improving for both an individual’s abilities and spiritual state. In a Home Talk titled “The Art of Glancing,” Noyes defined the perfection of the human mind, explaining that it was not caused by the perfection of an individual’s abilities. Instead, he argued that reading and study provided members with the chance to seek perfection through selective attention. Noyes hoped that his constituents would achieve perfection by attuning themselves to the word of God and disregarding all materialistic, sinful, and other inappropriate influences.⁴⁰ Books thus allowed community members to learn about the world, distinguish between what was godly and what was not, and develop selective attention—in short, to become perfect.

Despite attempting to attain perfection through self-improvement and study, Oneida Community members recognized that reading did not always lead to spiritual enrichment. In a critical review of the *Autobiography of Elder Jacob Knapp* published in the *Circular* on July 6, 1868, Erastus H. Hamilton stated that the community preferred books that were well-written, educational, and “calculated to do good and to help the world on in true wisdom.” Numerous *Circular* articles suggest that the community perceived reading as a quest for the truth. Unlike

other religious societies, the OC found redeeming value in all sorts of texts, including non-religious ones. A.B. attributed the community's willingness to explore "great social, spiritual, religious, and scientific questions" to Noyes's open-mindedness. The OC thus owned dissenting theological texts, controversial social publications, and non-religious literature. Community publications suggest that Noyes and his followers considered such books to be instructive and useful. Still, the community did not condone or approve of all messages in their readings. In many cases, members formalized opinions on a book based on its spiritual or moral undertones, as well as the spiritual state of its author.

Although the community did critique literary devices and writing ability, its members primarily judged books by the extent to which their authors' religious and social views corresponded with those held by the Oneida Community. The community sampled books from all genres, but took special delight in reading books that promoted spirituality, moral behavior, and simplicity. In a review published on June 23, 1873 in the *Circular* titled "A Book Sweet in the Mouth: And Sweet in the Belly," a member identified only as "G" proclaimed *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* to be ideal reading because "it ha[d] the love of God in it." Such praise indicates that the OC attached great importance to the spiritual and moral themes present in literature. Book reviews printed in the *Circular* and *O.C. Daily* also reveal that the community evaluated books based on the ways in which its doctrines were represented. In particular, members were attuned to the ways in which books depicted marriage and monogamy. Such doctrinal themes appear, for instance, in a review of Anne Moncure Seemüller's *Emily Chester* (1838) published in a January 23, 1865 issue of the *Circular*. The unknown author described *Emily Chester* as "tedious and didactic," but worthwhile for its depiction of monogamous relationships as "marriage slavery." Similarly, a review published in the *O.C. Daily* on January 27, 1866 complimented *Dr. Kane's Love Life* because it manifested respect for women as opposed to degradation.

On the other hand, community publications critiqued books and authors for failing to endorse the community's spiritual and moral beliefs. Book reviews in the *Circular* and *O.C. Daily* demonstrate that members found fault with authors that differed from them in matters of spirituality. In multiple reviews, members complimented J.R. Seeley's *Ecce Homo* (1866) for its radical conceptualization of Christ. Each review, however, criticized Seeley's spiritual mindset for falling within traditional notions of religious millennialism.⁴¹ The community reacted

similarly to Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*, commenting that Noyes's doctrine of mutual criticism made her medical advice obsolete.⁴² The community reserved more scathing criticism for authors it deemed atheistic and immoral. Such clear animosity is apparent in the community's repeated attacks on the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, an author opposed to religious communalism and disenchanted with organized religion. In an eponymously-named review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* published on July 4, 1864 in the *Circular*, an unknown author commented that: "this book is quite unpleasant to read. The principal characters which appeared so noble at first, exhibit in the course of the narrative the selfish and ignoble qualities which belong to unregenerate human nature..." Although the author criticized the characters for their immorality, he or she made it clear that Hawthorne himself was to blame for "[throwing] the gloom and unbelief of his own spirit over all." Despite denouncing Nathaniel Hawthorne as unpleasant, cynical, and atheistic, the community owned multiple copies of his works in its library.

In other cases, however, the Oneida Community prevented members from reading certain books and authors. Community leaders recognized that children were impressionable and liable to be influenced by ideas and morals embedded in their readings. The community thus regulated children's access to books in order to ensure that young people modeled their behaviors on virtuous characters. When situations required it, members prevented children from reading inappropriate stories. Mary Cragin, for instance, confiscated a book from a boy named George because it contained "a great long story about wicked folks, thieves, and liars and wicked men and women."⁴³ Since the OC raised its children apart from the secular world, members like Cragin took seriously their duty to ensure that outside publications did not corrupt community children. Other books written by Goethe incited similar reactions from the community. In "Faust," an article published in the *Circular* on October 15, 1866, author D.J.B. reserved Goethe's *Faust* for older members, stating that only mature individuals could distinguish between the book's "seductive smile and laxity of morals" and the Oneida Community's way of life.⁴⁴ Similarly, historian Robert Fogarty noted that members attributed Victor Noyes's bouts of insanity to reading inappropriate books like Goethe's *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister*.⁴⁵ Once members matured enough to understand which attitudes were correct or not, they could read without literary restrictions attached.

Scholars that wish to pursue specific aspects of the Oneida Community's relation to printed media will find the Oneida Community Mansion House library collection to be useful in many ways. First, the volumes offer insight into the community's religious beliefs, as well as its attitudes toward contemporary religious sects and secular society. From the collection alone, scholars can learn about what types of printed materials the community prioritized and what material influenced members and their understanding of the world around them. The subject matter found in community library books also aids scholars in comparing members to their worldly contemporaries. Like educated people in the secular world, OC members pored over books to gain practical knowledge, learn trades, and keep up-to-date with current events and scientific discoveries. Such information allowed the OC to establish its communal infrastructure apart—but not isolated from—the outside world. Scholars of reading patterns and entertainment will be interested in the community's collection of novels and light reading as well—especially since many of these books might be found in modern bookshelves today. Lastly, the manuscript inscriptions within the collection remind scholars that the OC was, at heart, a collection of individuals with different preferences, thoughts, and feelings. Analyses of the library collection, when combined with references to reading in Oneida Community publications, do the unprecedented feat of letting scholars see the community as a collection of individual people rather than a collective body.

Because the Oneida Community Mansion House library collection provides so much insight into the lives and beliefs of Oneida Community members, it is natural to assume that reading was a particularly special part of community life. This essay may reinforce that impression, but the community itself did not see its reading as something worthy of great interest. Indeed, A.B. cautioned against perceiving the community library as an institution, stating in "Our Books" that "these remarks may give the impression that our library is more important than it really is." A.B. admitted that books had been useful for establishing the OC, integrating it into a successful economy, and entertaining members. Despite attempting to interest readers with library descriptions, A.B. stressed the fact the library was not important in and of itself, but as a means of an end: a tool which members could utilize on their journey to perfect their souls. He wanted readers to recognize the importance of the library not for its contents but for the ability of its contents to transform members and facilitate spiritual experiences. In the very last line of his article, A.B. wrote that members "tr[ie]d to keep close to

God and realities; the signs of things are secondary.” The study of print culture would not have interested the Oneida Community, since such matters were of secondary importance to its theological goals. But for historians, whose very work revolves around recognizing the “signs of things,” the richness of the community’s library approaches perfection.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Noyes published a pamphlet in 1849, defining Bible Communism as the abolition of private property and relationships. New members of the Oneida Community surrendered all private property to the Community prior to benefiting from its shared labor and resources. The abolition of “property in persons” could only be achieved through “Complex Marriage,” a system in which individuals abandoned special love toward family members and romantic interests in favor of carrying on sexual relationships with any Community members as desired. The ideal relationship was based on amateness, pleasure, and spiritual improvement rather than propagation—Noyes favored “Male Continence,” otherwise known as coitus reservatus, as a form of birth control within the Community. See “First Annual Report of the Oneida Association: Exhibiting its History, Principles, and Transactions to Jan. 1, 1849.”

² Although Noyes initially discouraged propagation, he grew increasingly fascinated with the possibility of producing a generation of spiritually superior Community children. Heavily influenced by the writings of Darwin, Noyes instituted stirpiculture in the late 1860s, a form of eugenics in which only the most spiritual Community members were allowed to have children.

³ Reverend Hubbard Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled: A History of the Perfectionists; With a Summary View of their Leading Doctrines* (Brattleboro: Published by the author, 1849), 16.

⁴ Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States; From Personal Visit and Observation: Including Detailed Accounts of the Economists, Icarian, and Other Existing Societies, Their Religious Creeds, Social Practices, Numbers, Industries, and Present Condition* (New York: Hillary House Publishers, Ltd., 1960. Reprint. 1875), 214.

⁵ Dr. John B. Ellis, *Free Love and its Votaries; Or, American Socialism Unmasked. Being an Historical and Descriptive Account of the Rise and Progress of the Various Free Love Associations in the United States and of the*

Effects of their Vicious Teachings Upon American Society (New York, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis: United States Publishing Company; San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft & Co., 1870), 89.

⁶ Ellis, *Free Love and its Votaries*, 91.

⁷ William Alfred Hinds, *American Communities: Brief Sketches of Economy, Zoar, Bethel, Aurora, Amana, Icaria, The Shakers, Oneida, Wallingford, and the Brotherhood of the New Life* (Oneida: Office of the American Socialist, 1878), 133.

⁸ Nordhoff, *Communitistic Societies of the United States*, 277.

⁹ A.L. Slawson, *Behind the Scenes, or An Expose of the Oneida Community. Embracing their Social and Sexual Relations, Spiritual Controls, Origin, and A Brief Sketch of its Founder* (Oneida: A.L. Slawson, Publisher, 1875), 6.

¹⁰ Oneida Community publications frequently identified writers by their initials. Since the *Circular* refers to A.B. with masculine pronouns in other articles, it is possible that A.B. was Alfred Barron, a former editor of the *Circular*. Barron did, however, publish other articles as “Q,” calling into question his identity as A.B.

¹¹ Circular article, “Oneida Community,” March 21, 1864. It is impossible to determine at present the identity of R.W.H.

¹² Ref ID 909, Scan 909a, “H.M. Worden | from J.H. Noyes. | Dec. 21st 1861”

¹³ The tiny, compact handwriting resembles that of John Humphrey Noyes himself. The Oneida Community Mansion House staff note, however, that similar variants of this handwriting run in the Noyes family and its descendants.

¹⁴ Robert Fogarty, ed. *Desire and Duty at Oneida: Tirzah Miller's Intimate Memoir* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 175.

¹⁵ Robert Fogarty, ed. *Special Love/ Special Sex: An Oneida Community Diary* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 102, 152-3.

¹⁶ *Circular* article, “Community Journal.: Oneida. Willow Place. Wallingford,” November 14, 1870.

¹⁷ *Circular* article, “Oneida Items,” December 25, 1865.

¹⁸ *O.C. Daily*, January 17, 1866, 13.

¹⁹ *O.C. Daily*, January 17, 1866, 13.

²⁰ *Circular* article, “Our Home School. Education in the Bosom of the Community,” April 23, 1857.

²¹ *Circular* article, “Home Items.: Oneida. Evening Meeting, at W.C. Dec. 15. Evening Meeting at W.C. Dec. 27 1875”, January 13, 1876.

²² *Circular* article, *ibid.*

²³ Allan Estlake, *The Oneida Community: A Record of an Attempt to Carry Out the Principles of Christian Unselfishness and Scientific Race Improvement* (London: George Redway, 1900), 68. The main male editors of the *Circular* seem to have been John H. Noyes, George W. Noyes, Alfred Barron, and Theodore Pitt. This may be referring to Alfred Barron.

²⁴ Circular article, “Removing Boiler Incrustations: The Value of Scientific Journals,” G.E.C. (George E. Cragin), February 10, 1873.

²⁵ *O.C. Daily*, January 15, 1866, 7.

²⁶ *Circular* article, “About the War,” March 21, 1864. The Oneida Community sympathized with the northern cause and the anti-slavery movement, but did not actively support the war effort. Noyes preferred to advocate in favor of Perfectionism rather than involve the Community in the Civil War. He believed that if the entire country converted to Perfectionist Christianity, the war and its related issues would cease to exist.

²⁷ Ref ID 1968. Scan 1968a. John M. Burdick, a Community member and former owner of *The Marvelous Doings of Prince Alcohol: An Allegory* wrote on a rear flyleaf: “A very silly story. A very disgusting one.”

²⁸ *Circular* article, “The Antiquity of Man,” C.S.J. (Charles S. Joslyn), May 16, 1864.

²⁹ Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 98.

³⁰ J.B.H.'s most likely refers to Community member James B. Herrick. Herrick did not join the community until 1868, but was closely affiliated prior to his matriculation. He did own a Greek Testament.

³¹ *Circular* article, “Community Journal.: Oneida,” October 26, 1868.

³² Fogarty, *Desire and Duty at Oneida*, 59-60.

³³ *Circular* article, “Community Gossip.: From O.C. Wallingford,” March 2, 1868. This OC library no longer holds this book and no date of publication was provided in the *Circular* article.

³⁴ *O.C. Daily*, January 19, 1866, 22.

³⁵ *O.C. Daily*, September 3, 1866, 533.

³⁶ *Circular* article, “A New Game for the Family Circle. Bible Game,” May 18, 1864.

³⁷ Fogarty, *Desire and Duty at Oneida*, 10.

³⁸ O.C. Daily, November 16, 1866. 472-3.

³⁹ Ref ID 1361. Scan 1361a.

⁴⁰ John Humphrey Noyes, *Home Talks, Volume 1* (Oneida: Published by the Community, 1875), 96.

⁴¹ Multiple reviews, all from *Circular*.

⁴² *Circular* article, "A New Book," May 3, 1860.

⁴³ *Circular* article, "The Mother of Our Children's House," October 5, 1868.

⁴⁴ It is impossible at present to identify D.J.B.

⁴⁵ Fogarty, *Special Love/Special Sex*, 4.