

The Role of Women in Hopedale, a Nineteenth-Century Universalist-Unitarian Utopian Community in South-Central Massachusetts

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Abstract

In the communal Massachusetts society known as Hopedale, existing formally from 1841 to 1856, women were granted an extraordinary range of rights comparable to those enjoyed by men, including holding office, owning property, and enjoying civil protection even within marriage. Women played a major role in civic engagement and intellectual life. The progressive role for women's rights took place among a group of people who, unlike inhabitants of contemporary Fruitlands and Brook Farm utopian experiments, were described by Hopedale Community head Adin Ballou as "poor, and comparatively unlearned."¹ Vestiges of community values were perceptible a century later long after the original Hopedale Community had morphed into a paternalistic village whose economy until about 1960 was centered upon the Draper Corporation, successful manufacturer of textile looms, an enterprise that ended with the collapse of the northern textile industry.

It is often said that every research endeavor, regardless of its claims of objectivity, is to some degree autobiographical. This one is frankly so. My teenage years were spent in Hopedale, Massachusetts, where vestiges and values of the historical community were still in evidence a century after the flourishing of that mid-nineteenth-century social experiment. In looking today at the role of women in that historical community, I am irresistibly searching for an understanding of my own coming-of-age experience more than a century later. Much of this inquiry centers on the long-term effects in latter-day Hopedale, and beyond, of Adin Ballou's reforms of family life, and most particularly of the role of women, in this socialist settlement

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in the Blackstone Valley near the Rhode Island border.

To understand women's roles in Ballou's Hopedale it is necessary, of course, to consider the roles of both genders. The very concept of role involves social relationships. It is also necessary to describe the setting in which this progressive experimentation took place, the Hopedale Community. Although well known in the social, religious, and political spheres of its day, the 1840s and 1850s, it is largely unknown today even among communitarian historians. Why that should be so is a question we will reconsider in closing remarks. At this point, we need to paint a picture of the settlement in its heyday.

After two years of planning for the optimistically numbered "Fraternal Community, No. 1," in 1841 founder Adin Ballou (1803-1890) and confederates formally founded "Hope Dale," a name later contracted



Fig. 1. The Old House, first home of the Community beginning in 1842. Built ca. 1700, razed in 1874.

to “Hopedale.” In that year, Community members bought the 258-acre “Jones Farm” near the Mill River in Milford. Their plan was to share this dwelling and the first family to settle into the “Old House” in 1841 were the Lillies whose daughter was born only weeks after the move. Five other families soon crowded into the modest and somewhat dilapidated “Old House” which sheltered twenty-eight people (thirteen men and twelve women) by April 1, 1842. “Boarded as one general family,” each nuclear family had one private room, primarily for sleeping, and access to shared communal spaces. By 1846, the Community had grown to seventy people. By 1851, the Community owned about five hundred acres, thirty dwellings, a few mechanics’ shops, a church used also for education, and a few barns and outbuildings.² Small, privately owned businesses dotted the landscape. At its peak, there were two hundred Community members, all living in Hopedale proper since the anticipated satellite settlements never materialized. By 1855, just before the collapse, the population inhabited forty-one “pretty dwellings,” according to the *Woonsocket Patriot*, including three octagons, and conducted sixteen community businesses.³

In its unified, utopian form, the Community lasted for fourteen years, dissolving formally in 1856 with the transformation of its economic base from a joint participatory stock company (regarded by Ballou as socialist but never communist), where each was credited according to his contribution upon entering the community and subsequently to his or her contributed labor. After the formal end of the community, the enterprises became a privately owned company held by erstwhile Community members and major stockholders Ebenezer and George Draper. Elements of the original contract remained in place until 1868 when the Community morphed into the Hopedale Parish, a religious congregation led by Adin Ballou, at this time a Unitarian minister.

After the breakup, the town prospered as a loom-making industry, thanks largely to the success of the Northrup loom, under Draper leadership until the later 1950s. At that time, a combination of decline in northern cloth manufacturing and related union issues brought to an end the unified and paternalistic nature of the town under Draper stewardship. The solid, attractive Draper-owned housing was then sold to residents and a trickle of outsiders entered the community. It was shortly before the final breakup of the Draper Corporation that my own Hopedale experience took place. Although the prosperity of the town began to decline in those and later years, the essential social values remained in place, clearly derived

from the founding principles of the Hopedale Community. It was a decent and comfortable place in which to grow up but somewhat confusing to a young person whose early years were spent in a more heterogeneous and competitive milieu.

The basic principles of the Hopedale Community as described by Adin Ballou in 1851 were these.⁴ We begin with what the Community was *for*: a belief in Jesus Christ and his teachings; peace and harmony; a democratic and socialist republic where neither caste, color, sex, nor age is proscribed; mutual criticism and public remonstrance; chastity; full sharing of liberty, equality, and fraternity; sharing of goods and gifts to benefit both possessors and the needy; equal and excellent education for all; and constant striving toward improvement. Just as important was what the Community was *against*. The list, drawn loosely from Ballou's prose, is a little complex because of the prevalence in Community documents of double negatives, both grammatically and conceptually. In essence, the Community forbade and/or discouraged these actions: outlawing specific theological dogmas, ordinances or ceremonies; ill behavior or feeling to friend or foe; swearing; intoxicating beverages; taking oaths; slave holding and pro-slavery compromises; war and preparations for war; violence against government, society, family or individuals; and interference from the outside government (although it was recognized that taxes to the state must be paid).

Rights were extended to all adults, men and women. These rights included: worship according to dictates of conscience (although women did not function as preachers), free inquiry and free speech, holding elected office, assuming a chosen vocation, owning property and assets, forming friendships with kindred minds, contracting marriage and sustaining family relationships, joining or leaving the Hopedale Association, and the right to "seek happiness in all rightful ways and by all innocent means."⁵ These were the foundational beliefs of the Community, and their extension to women marked Hopedale as markedly different from most other intentional communities of its time.

These basic rights were in place in the Hopedale that I knew firsthand with one significant exception, and that was a single but significant limitation on free inquiry. The dominant ethos in town was Unitarian, reflecting the last days of the early Community and the ongoing religious preference of the dominant Draper family. By the twentieth century, the Draper Corporation, in effect, owned the town (with very little exception)

and therefore, in a sense, operated and controlled its schools. It would not be overstating the case to say that Unitarian values permeated the system. While technically public, the largely Draper-financed school system functioned like a private educational enterprise with a high degree of control assumed, and a considerable degree of uniformity of outlook among students and teachers. It was assumed that most students would ultimately become part of the Draper workforce. One school-mate remarked to me recently that he knows of no other school where all boys were required to master drafting.

As to the proscription on free inquiry, as I recall it, we high school students were forbidden to raise the issue in school of whether Unitarians were Christians. Some townspeople thought they, as Unitarians, were Christian; others thought not. There were some Catholics, whose church was then in the old high school on the edge of town by the railroad bridge, and a few members of the Union Evangelical Church in the town center, and these adherents too had mixed views, though less investment, in this subject of Unitarian beliefs that had vexed New England polity and religion for over a century. Our patient and gentle high school social studies teacher explained to us that the question could, in the extreme, lead to fist-fights, an unimaginable situation in this community where the desire for peace and harmony generally trumped individualism.

The Hopedale Community in its heyday, 1842 to 1856, pursued many passing enthusiasms, representing enlightenment at the time, that turned up also in other contemporary utopian societies. These included spiritualism (which by advocating the recognition of special affinities challenged assumptions of life-long monogamy), the “water cure” or hydrotherapy (which provided women relief from marital duties, occasions for intimacy with other women, and in some instances information about contraception),⁶ vegetarianism, homeopathy, the forbidding of games of chance, the forbidding of tobacco, adoption of the bloomer costume for women (a reform that was shared by the Oneida Community and by James J. Strang’s polygamous version of Mormonism in ca. 1851), musical performance and dancing, millennialism, non-shaving (probably following the example of abolitionist Charles Burleigh who refused to shave until slaves were free), and the adoption of simplified women’s clothing that discouraged women from wearing jewelry or adding floral decorations to their hats.

These social and personal enthusiasms were pursued erratically, with

some sense of tolerance and even amusement. Wrote one-time community member Sarah Bradbury, “The fads, which were almost as dear to the hearts of their owners as the principles, were often discussed in public, and the free play of the various natures, grave and gay, matter of fact and mischievously humorous, made these meetings a ‘continuous performance’ of vast entertainment. The argument was earnest on either side, and usually closed by each with the same emphatic utterance, ‘So it seems to me and I cannot see it otherwise!’ Neither party convinced the other, but the war of words afforded a certain relief to strenuous natures who, as good non-resistants could indulge in no other form of warfare.”⁷ Ballou himself was tolerant of exploring many novel beliefs, but drew the line at “irrational faith, terrorism, spasmodic emotionality, superstitious pietism, and sanctimonious cant.”⁸ (It seems to me that Ballou’s cool skepticism toward extremists was in the Hopedale soil and air as late as the 1950s and affected me deeply in ways I only later came to appreciate.)

What happened when Community norms were violated in Hopedale’s communitarian heyday? Sensing some relaxation of initial commitment to a shared moral vision after a decade of Community life, Ballou instigated a kind of “moral police” in 1850.⁹ Some who disagreed with this move, or were found in violation of norms, left the Community either by choice or by request. The most celebrated example of transgression had to do, not surprisingly, with sex. It should be noted that experimentation with traditional marital roles and arrangements was being pursued actively in contemporary society, from the Oneida community to Mormons to Shakers, and variations from Hopedale’s basically middle-class norms were not unimaginable at the time. Ballou characterized the Hopedale problem as a “free love” incident although it hardly qualifies as such. In the early 1850s, Henry Fish, community auditor and nurseryman, took into his home the troubled Mrs. Seaver, a new Community member. Mrs. Fish took exception to the relationship between her husband and Mrs. Seaver, and complained to the Council of Religion, Conciliation and Justice, which investigated the matter. The pair was guilty of a sexual alliance, as charged, but claimed that they were acting according to the contemporary doctrine of free-love. They were ejected from the Community.¹⁰ The situation shook the community for several reasons, in one case because the Council found fault with prominent leader Abbey Price who was criticized for not reporting the suspicious situation early on. An uncharacteristically specific and harsh set of rules was put into place at this time to control vice,

with “unchastity” receiving overwhelming attention.

While some women in the Community explored ideas and lives that were unusual for their sex, and despite theoretical equality as Community members, most Hopedale women lived fairly traditional lives, centered on house and home. Given the realities of frequent pregnancies and the demands of infant care and child rearing, this situation is not surprising. And yet, their domestic contributions were not unappreciated. A prime example was the nursing of infants, an activity recognized as a contribution to the Community as a whole. Nursing women were credited with eight hours of donated labor per week for this activity, the equivalent of the norm expected for manual labor from other Community members.¹¹ Women’s welfare was protected and respected in other ways as well. One example is the attention to adequate pre-natal care.¹² Another is the allowing of divorce in exceptional circumstances. Sarah Baker Holbrook, for example, was allowed to divorce her husband who was a drunkard, and to resume her former name.¹³ Further, Ballou cautioned against “unbridled sexuality” even within marriage, and advocated for sex education before marriage.¹⁴

Although often at home, Hopedale woman were by no means housebound. Opportunities for intellectual life and community service abounded in the Hopedale Sewing Circle and Tract Society,¹⁵ the Industrial Army which held “bees” to provide needed labor to the Community, weekday meetings where visiting reformers delivered their impassioned messages, the Lyceum, and Sunday services led by Adin Ballou, who was both governing and spiritual leader.

The founder of the Hopedale Community, Adin Ballou, came to his socio-religious beliefs through a tortuous spiritual journey. While an account of his evolving religious beliefs might seem tedious to us today, in his time the issues that obsessed him were white-hot among the religiously inclined. They were critical to his shaping of the Community and deserve attention on that account.

As Ballou’s theology evolved, he moved from sect to sect, becoming a Unitarian in his and the formal Community’s last years. Thus the post-Community adherence to that sect. In Ballou’s youth, the principle issue for him seems to have centered on the responsibility of individuals for their sins, and the probability of punishment in the afterlife for their transgressions. Early in life he took a harsh view of the issue, insisting upon individuals’ “paying” for their sins after death, but wavered, as did contemporary religious circles, on the nature, duration, and even

probability of punishment in the afterlife. Later in life, his theological concerns were more this-worldly in nature, and his energies were devoted primarily to the reform of society. From age nineteen onward, with each of his conversions, he almost immediately became a preacher in his new sectarian home. Yet far from dogmatic in his sectarian affiliations, he regarded himself primarily as a “practical Christian” throughout his theological journey.

The following summary of Ballou’s connections to religious communities attempts to harmonize sometimes conflicting sources. Dates are approximate since it is often difficult to determine exactly the beginning and end of a person’s beliefs or engagement with a religious community. Whether Ballou’s changing institutional connections represented affiliations or conversions is a subtlety that we leave to theologians to elucidate.

- Ages birth-10 (1803-1813): Adin Ballou and his family in Rhode Island belonged to the Six-Principle Baptists, a Calvinist offshoot that held the view that Christ’s atonement of sins and eternal salvation were available to all persons and not only to an elect.
- Ages 10-21 (1813-1822, preached at age 19): The Ballou family converted to the Christian Connexion in Rhode Island, which rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, returned to Primitive Church values, and believed in the doctrine of destruction of the sinners’ souls at death.
- Ages 19-28? (1822-1831?): Ballou converted to Universalism which believed in universal salvation of all souls after death. He was ordained in 1823. Ballou served serially in Massachusetts congregations of Bellingham, Boston, and Milford. He also led a church in New York City. In this period, Adin Ballou was influenced by his distant cousin and Universalist Hosea Ballou.
- (Overlapping the last days of Ballou’s Universalism, ca. 1831-35, was a brief heretical period where he adopted a belief in a limited period of punishment for sinners after death before their ultimate salvation. This view, known as Restorationism, led to his ejection from the Universalists.)
- Ages 28-41 (1831-1844): Ballou converted to Congregational Unitarianism which emphasized earthly social causes such as

temperance, women's rights, and abolition. He preached in Mendon, a town adjacent to Hopedale.

- Age 34 (1837): Conversion to Perfectionism—the belief system (but not a formal denomination) favored by Oneida founder John Humphrey Noyes as well—that contended that the Second Coming of Christ had already occurred and that earthly government was irrelevant and need not be obeyed in matters of social organization and personal behavior. This represented a split for Ballou from the Restorationists. He turned to non-resistance in 1839, rejecting hatred and war.
- Ages 37-52 (1840-1855): In the Hopedale Community period, Ballou espoused an amalgam of beliefs centered upon the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. The “Fraternal Community Number One” explicitly forbade the rejection of any specific belief system (but assumed a Christian orientation).
- Ages 52-63 (1855-1867): After Hopedale Community's formal ending, the town residents continued the association as a loose social/religious organization, led by Ballou, that was characterized as a Liberal Christian Parish.
- Age 63-77 (1867-1880): Ballou and his Liberal Christian Parish joined the Unitarians, then non-Trinitarians with waning emphasis upon the Bible as the singular source of theological truth, and with a liberal theology that emphasized intellect, ethics, science, individualism, and social reform. Ballou retired from active ministry in 1880, ten years before his death.
- In 1961, long after Ballou's death, the Unitarians joined with the Universalists to form a joint Association representing a liberal theology of religious diversity. Ballou would have been entirely comfortable with this sectarian union.

While religion was central to Ballou's consciousness and employment, his plans for the Hopedale Community were drawn as much from social theorists as from religious thinkers. Paramount in the theory underlying the Hopedale Community, similar to the more famous Oneida Community, was the work of French social theorist (and commercial traveler) Charles Fourier whose work was widely known in the U.S. from about 1800 to 1837,

just prior to the establishment of the Hopedale Community.¹⁶ In contrast to the social thought of other contemporary utopian theorists, who posited that the revision of social institutions would lead to an improved society, Fourier advised that philosophers “should watch how people actually behave and try to make some use of conduct they are unable to prevent.”¹⁷ Ballou echoes these ideas in his own writings.¹⁸

Fourier’s approach was empirical in nature, and may have had particular appeal to American reformers who, since the Revolution, had lost their grounding in divine revelation as interpreted by an official church, and were turning to science, and its dependence upon observation, to uncover fundamental religious and social truths. Although Ballou found fault with some of Fourier’s theory, he nonetheless seems to have found much that was consonant with his own thinking.¹⁹ Fourier’s humane and realistic, if unsystematic and inconsistent, speculations can be seen in Ballou’s wide-ranging and somewhat anecdotal approach to the creation of a social contract for Hopedale. It may be significant that both Fourier and Ballou were basically self-educated, and both were acquainted with the mindset and potential of ordinary working people, mostly farmers



Fig. 2. Adin and Lucy Ballou’s House, built in 1843, originally at the corner of Peace and Hopedale Streets, moved in 1900 to 64 Dutcher Street.

and craftsmen, whose understanding of the world was rooted in practical experience.

Let us consider one example of a Fourier principle with implications for women's roles that took form in the Hopedale Community. Fourier advocated the building of a single "mansion house"²⁰ as a common dwelling for all inhabitants of his utopia. Ballou, taken by the notion of a shared dwelling (as was John Humphrey Noyes of Oneida just a few years later), began his colony in that way in the old Jones farmhouse, but gave up the idea after six months of complaints from residents. Ballou was always cognizant of the tug between the common good, which he favored, and individual needs for privacy and control. When the realities of human nature and circumstances required adjustments from conformity to individuality, Ballou, ever flexible and realistic, acquiesced, although his autobiography indicates that he often lamented the tilt over time in Hopedale toward individualism above communitarianism.

Both Fourier and Ballou had much to say about women's roles. Their positions on many issues are what would be called "progressive" in today's parlance. Fourier recognized the importance of the passions in social relations, and especially of love in all of its forms. He frankly advocated the liberation of women from their traditional role in society primarily as faithful wife and helpmate. "Too many restraints," Fourier observed, "have been imposed on the passion of love." He went on to explain the "degradation of women in civilization." The prevailing system of monogamy in his time (1772-1837), he contends, "is simply a continuation of the oppressive customs that reigned in the dark ages, customs which are becoming ridiculous in an age when people brag about their reason and their respect for the designs of nature." After speculating on historical trends, including homosexuality common in antiquity that he thought led men to undervalue and suppress women in society, Fourier wrote "I am justified in saying ... that women in a state of liberty will surpass man in all the mental and bodily functions which are not related to physical strength."²¹ Fourier had a great deal more to say about love, which he called "The Divine Passion," and dwelt specifically on its physical expression.

It should be noted that Fourier's writings on love, as on almost every other subject he tackled, were internally inconsistent, fragmentary, and variously articulated in his many writings. Followers of Fourier could apply his ideas in very different ways. Using physical expression of sex as an example particularly pertinent to the role of women in community,

one finds Ballou advocating monogamous relations of mutual respect and consideration. Another Fourier enthusiast of the same period, John Humphrey Noyes of the Oneida Community in New York State, set up a system of “complex marriage” where every adult female was in some sense “married” to every adult male. At Oneida sex was a consensual activity that could be pursued for either recreation or procreation, or though not necessarily for both purposes at once. The latter arrangement was sometimes erroneously labeled as “free love,” but that description underplays the strong skein of social obligations tying together the community participants. Both Hopedale and Oneida represent unique applications of Fourier’s principles on sex and other matters.

Fourier himself envisioned a network of utopian communities built on shared principles, which he called Phalanxes, where repressive and unrealistic rules would be eliminated, leading to a society where inhabitants could fully develop the better and more natural parts of their natures. The Hopedale Community was strongly influenced by Fourier’s vision and anticipated developing satellite communities where its social reforms would be replicated. Hopedale tried unsuccessfully to set up a Phalanx in Minnesota in 1855, but money problems, terrible weather, and hostile Indians undermined their efforts.²² It reached out to some “sister” communities, such as the Northampton Community in Florence, Massachusetts, but Hopedale cannot be said to have spawned independent and imitative Phalanx communities in the sense anticipated by Fourier.

Consistent with Fourier’s vision, the Hopedale Community was intentionally agrarian in a period that began to see the urban-industrial model emerge as a dominant economic paradigm. The implications for women’s roles in this economic model were significant. In nearby New England mill towns, young women provided much of the unskilled, cheap labor for the textile industry. While there were certainly labor abuses affecting women, recent scholarship suggests that many young women working in mill towns like nearby Lowell welcomed the opportunity for independence, and were glad to leave home for a few years, boarding with other workers in supervised situations, in order to earn wages for spending money, or education, or subsequent marriage expenses.²³ Adin Ballou had a very different notion of the proper economic basis for social organization.

Ballou envisioned the ideal society as a relatively small-scale unit with members living in close domestic relation to one another in a rural setting. Both Ballou, and later John Humphrey Noyes at Oneida, used “family”

as their dominant metaphor, perhaps reflecting contemporary Victorian idealization of that social unit. In Hopedale, adult Community members addressed one another as “Brother” and “Sister.” Both Ballou and Noyes concerned themselves deeply with family and household matters that were at the time usually considered the feminine domain. These included marital relations, child care, domestic architecture, women’s clothing, diet and cookery, cultural activity, and the education of the young.

As for necessary manufacturing activities, Fourier,²⁴ and later both Ballou and Noyes, relegated this function to a secondary role, as necessary but somewhat inconvenient in their utopian communities, and rejected altogether the idea of factory concentrations. Manufacturing should be pursued only when and where it was consonant with the agrarian activities of the community, and then in the Hopedale case it should be developed as “attractive industry.” In this spirit, Hopedale initially fostered only individually owned, small-scale, essential enterprises such as a sawmill, a loom-making shop, a book bindery, a cobbler’s shop, machine shops, a water-cure business, a boarding school, and printing businesses. The Hopedale community members thus rejected the values in nearby New England towns where competition and the myth of the “self-made man” were celebrated. Hopedale “utopians” favored the creation of a settlement with close to kinship ties and commitment of all to the material prosperity and spiritual health of the whole. Ballou, Noyes, and other Fourier followers were arguably successful for a time in what they were attempting, but in most cases their economic approaches were not sufficient to ensure survival in a rapidly industrializing and capitalist nation.

The Hopedale agrarian ideal gave way with the ending of the Community proper in 1856, followed by the dominance in the local economy of the Draper family which developed several large-scale, mechanized enterprises, focusing finally on the construction of looms and manufacture of related bobbins. Hopedale in my day took some pride in the “high-tech” nature of its manufacturing enterprise and never considered itself a “mill town” in the sense that the term was applied to nearby low-wage cloth-manufacturing centers. In recent years, an historic plaque bearing the term “mill town” was put in place near one of Hopedale’s borders and the terminology gave rise to considerable criticism from some town residents.

Hopedale always regarded itself, and was seen by others, as exceptional among New England towns for its strong traditions of social reform

and open-mindedness. It was recognized as such in the middle of the nineteenth-century. A list of the reformers who were welcomed to speak to the Community in its years of prosperity attests to these values.

While many popular reformers of the day, both men and women, were welcomed as speakers to the Hopedale Community, it was always understood that Adin Ballou retained the right to refute their positions if he wished to do so. Among such visiting orators were former slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, lawyer and abolitionist Wendell Phillips, Quaker feminist and abolitionist Abbey Kelley Foster, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass, abolitionist Charles Burleigh, abolitionist and women's rights advocate Parker Pillsbury, English socialist Robert Owen, free-love advocate Henry G. Wright, prison reformer and abolitionist Samuel May, Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker, food and health reformer Reverend Sylvester Graham, escaped slave Henry "Box" Brown, women's rights advocate and homeopath Lucy Stone Blackwell, spellbinding orator and abolitionist Anna Dickenson, and an anonymous spiritualist from Michigan. The tradition of public oration established in Hopedale's earliest days continued even into the 1950s where the annual high school rhetorical contest enjoyed as much public attention then as school sporting events typically do in American schools today.

We might pause for a moment to reflect on the commitment to abolition in the Hopedale Community that is suggested by this list of reformers. In fact, former slaves were familiar figures in Hopedale as at least short-term residents and visitors, although formal participation in the "underground railroad" has not been irrefutably documented. One Community child, Anna Thwing Field, recalled in much later years²⁵ that "many an escaped slave lived in the families of Hopedale. My father had a colored man called John who did some work about the place.... In the opposite house a man, woman and two children, all black, dwelt one winter in the cellar kitchen and one summer in the attic. The oldest girl went to school and learned to read and write.... Several others there were who lived among us for weeks or months. They were fed, clothed and sheltered."²⁶ The close relationship between the women's rights movement and the emancipation struggle is a story that is well known. The issues were certainly known in Hopedale, but the debate was only distantly echoed in Community discourse because of Hopedale's rejection of violence for any cause and its general disengagement from the politics of the outside world, including women's

suffrage. Hopedale was similarly detached from the national political fray before and during the years of the Civil War. While the cause, and especially abolition of slavery, was seen as just, the abhorrence of violence, more positively described by Ballou as Christian non-resistance, was the more important principle.²⁷ Reforms in general seemed for most Hopedale Community members to be a largely domestic and local matter.

A close look at the lives of some individual women of the Hopedale Community indicates how Community principles of equal gender rights played out. We shall meet three here who were prominent for their activities outside the home sphere: Abbey Price, Emily Gay, and Harriet Greene. Our choice is determined in part by the simple fact that more is known about these pioneers than about those whose lives were more conventional and home-centered. It may be significant that two of the three were childless.

Abbey Price (1814-1873) was the most prominent woman to hold Community office and the leading spokeswoman for feminism in Hopedale.²⁸ Joining the community in 1842, and a member of New England's Non-Resistance Society and author of many hymns and verses, she was elected in 1843 at age twenty-eight as the Community's secretary. She was the only woman to hold major Community office in the early 1840s. Price was a major speaker in nearby Worcester early in 1850 at the Woman's Rights Convention, calling for equal rights to men, with the vote central to her demands. The mother of four, Price unsuccessfully advocated for the setting up in Hopedale of a multi-family household with nursery for child care and other domestic duties so that women could be freed to pursue their "nobler powers unfettered." Ballou was unsympathetic to some aspects of Price's ideas on women's suffrage, mainly because of his non-resistance convictions, but he did make room in the *Practical Christian* for her writings on equal rights and work compensation for women.²⁹ Ballou had more enthusiasm for another of Abbey Price's reforms, the adoption of the physically liberating bloomer costume for the women of Hopedale.³⁰ Abbey Price left the Hopedale Community after 1853 when she was criticized for not reporting the so-called "free love" sexual transgression committed by Henry Fish and Daphne Seaver. After leaving Hopedale, Price moved to another Fourier-inspired community in Redhook, New Jersey. In later years, Price became a friend and correspondent of Walt Whitman.³¹

Harriet Greene, our second example, was a feminist and spiritualist

well known beyond the geographical confines of Hopedale.³² In 1858 she married the younger spiritualist and eccentric Bryan J. Butts, a New Yorker who had joined the community in 1852, and who had initially boarded with Greene while pursuing a career as orator for progressive causes, especially spiritualism. Greene's aunts, one a Quaker preacher and another a writer, very probably set an example of independence for her. At the time of her marriage, Greene protested to the Community against the "annihilation of [a women's] personality" that was represented by marriage and insisted upon keeping her maiden name.³³ (The alternative was to assume the surname of Butts and one wonders whether principle alone was her motivation.) The couple began a widely circulated periodical, first called *Radical Spiritualist*, then named the *Spiritual Reformer*, then renamed *Progressive Age* (supporting labor reform), and finally called *Modern Age*. This publication helped to sustain Hopedale's image even after its formal demise as a progressive Community hospitable to spiritualism, natural science, individualism, true freedom in love, and allied reforms. After Ballou gave up publishing the *Practical Christian* in 1860, Greene and Butts bought his press and printing equipment for use in their publishing ventures. They ended their publication activity in Hopedale in 1866 with the explanation that the "demand for rest—mental and physical—is imperative."³⁴ Subsequently the pair undertook a variety



Fig. 3. Emily Gay, homeopathic physician, b. 1818.

of ventures for income, including manuscript preparation and the teaching of “vocal gymnastics” that included the treatment of stammering.

About homeopath Emily Gay (1818-1883), our last example, less is known. Born in Dedham, Massachusetts, Gay joined the Hopedale Community in 1842 and withdrew in 1862, but remained a resident of Hopedale until her death due to accident in 1883 in neighboring Milford.³⁵ She never married and was listed in census records as head of her household. During the 1850s Gay taught herself the rudiments of homeopathic medicine. It was said of her that she had a “naturally intuitive perception of maladies....Through sympathetic magnetism, and often a fund of volubility and cheerfulness, as well as through the ‘little pills,’ she commanded the increasing gratitude of many in Hopedale and vicinity.” “Dr. Emily Gay ... was a familiar Figure on the Street ... carrying her little medicine chest, hurrying along with her swinging arms and gait.” After 1855 Gay was joined by her business partner Phila O. Wilmarth, widow of a water-cure advocate who had been drowned in an accident in 1853. Wilmarth was subsequently trained at the Female Medical College in Philadelphia and advertised her services in Hopedale in 1856.³⁶ In 1860, shortly after the Community breakup, Gay seems to have adopted an entrepreneurial business model, advertising in a local newspaper that she had ink, and, later, homeopathic medicines for sale.³⁷ Gay’s contributions as healer were recognized by women’s right advocate and fellow homeopath, Lucy Stone Blackwell, sister-in-law of the famous early woman physician Elizabeth Blackwell.³⁸

Our portraits of Hopedale women during or shortly after the Community period might include a number of other personalities who appear in reminiscences of townspeople. We might, for example, add Aunt Johnson, a “colored” woman;³⁹ Rosetta Hall, a former slave brought to town by Frederick Douglass; psychic Cora Scott;⁴⁰ melodeon player Amanda Albee;⁴¹ notorious medium Fanny Davis Smith; mail-carriers Susan and Anna Thwing;⁴² spiritualist Elizabeth Alice Reed; Community leader Anna Thwing Draper; teacher and Ballou’s daughter, Abbie Ballou Heywood; and Ballou’s first and second wives, Abigail and then Lucy Hunt Ballou. Creative and feisty women, all.

Whether the rights enjoyed by Hopedale women were significantly greater than those assumed by women in other intentional communities of the period is a difficult question to answer. The very definition of “right” is troublesome. Was the relinquishing of sexual activity for Shaker

women a “right” or an “onerous requirement of membership”? Was the independence of Brook Farm women a “right” or simply a recognized “privilege of the upper middle class, educated Bostonian”? Also troublesome is determining the relationship between the stated right and the actual practice of an intentional community. The list of difficulties in such a comparison goes on. Suffice it to say that records of the Hopedale Community, including diaries and memoirs, suggest that stated rights of women were in effect. Further, these rights were consistent with the demands made by those considered the more progressive reformers of the day. Those rights, embodied in egalitarian roles, became the norm in Hopedale, both during Ballou’s reign and in later years during the town’s Draper Company period. They were still in evidence in the Hopedale that I knew in the 1950s.

After the demise of the Community as a legal entity in 1856, Hopedale became the Draper Corporation’s “company town,” a term that imprecisely links together distinctly different kinds of business-related towns and hamlets. Hopedale was of the benign paternalistic variety,



Fig. 4. A typical attached house for the managerial class, 1913 or later, Lake Street. Architects: Fred Swasey and Robert Allen Cook; landscape designers: Warren Henry Manning and Arthur A. Shurcliff.

somewhat like Pullman, Illinois, or indeed, the Oneida Community itself in its later days when Oneida Limited dominated the local economy.

The communitarian traditions that survived in Draper's Hopedale were manifested in its handsome architecture that was set within a pleasant town plan developed in ca. 1886 by professional landscape architects, Warren H. Manning and Arthur A. Shurcliff, associates of Frederick Law Olmsted. The design incorporated a system of curved roads and recreational facilities with a partially wooded pond as centerpiece. All residents in Draper houses could easily walk to the main Draper factory, known as The Shop, and to the town center. Most houses were semi-detached arts and crafts structures in the shingle style, ranging from modest dwellings nearest to The Shop to commodious houses for the many engineers and managers employed by the company. All residents working in The Shop enjoyed residences of similar basic style, with some differentiation among them manifest in decorative detail and landscaping. Status was thus correlated with housing, but within a narrow range of difference. Although these graceful structures were covered with a synthetic shingle in the 1940s and 50s, the basic Hopedale architectural elements, with pleasant porches and landscaping, are still in evidence today.⁴³

The Draper Corporation, anticipating changes in its industry and fortunes, sold the houses to residents in the early 1950s and it was then that my family moved into the town. Hopedale as I knew it was an attractive planned community, proud of its progressive heritage, socially conformist but hospitable to skeptics (as might be expected of its Unitarian base), peaceful and safe, sentimental in its artistic tastes, well mannered, and religiously tolerant. It was remarkably unmaterialistic. All of its activities were free and open to all residents, and participation was wholehearted. The town's free and wholesome entertainment and recreation included skiing, summer band concerts, bowling, movies, dances, rhetorical contests, ice skating, swimming, lectures, concerts, school plays, hunting, fishing, tennis, basketball, library visits, and holiday parades. Apart from The Shop, a candy and newspaper store, and a drugstore with the requisite "Our Town" soda fountain, I recall virtually no commercial activity within the town's central area. It was very-small-town America at its best, with a graduating high school class of about thirty students in the late 1950s. Its subsequent decline due to the failure of its principle industry was certainly life-altering and probably even spirit-breaking to most of its residents. Today it is trying to find its footing as a distant commuting residential



Fig. 5. The original Community chapel, store, and school on Hopedale Street. Demolished in 1950.

town just beyond the usual ring of very high priced real estate surrounding Boston.

Quite predictably for any seventeen-year old, I found the town rather stifling in its uniformity and insularity as I prepared to leave it for college, but realized later that the experience of intense community made me receptive to other such communal situations as I found in Vermont in the 1960s, in Wisconsin in the 1970s, and to a modified degree in upstate New York in recent years, exemplified in the museum-cum-residence of the Oneida Community Mansion House. These are of course very personal reflections of a woman in the current day, probably distorted by time and experience. They matter to me, but not—I readily acknowledge—to a larger audience. What *does* matter in terms of women's rights in the Hopedale Community experience?

What, in short, was Hopedale's long-term significance? Stepping back from the details, we see that early in America's history, Adin Ballou and confederates set up a fairly radical social order where men and women enjoyed equal rights and were in harmony with one another on this issue.

And yet, in Ballou's vision, individual needs were always subordinated ultimately to the good of the community. In time, of course, it became obvious that Ballou's principles did not strike the perfect balance between individualism and community, most especially in the economic sphere, and the Community failed as a formal organization. Ballou should not be faulted for failing to solve the conundrum of individual versus community needs. This issue continues to confront us today. It is probably inherent in American political and social life.

Although its formal life lasted only fourteen years, the Hopedale Community did not, however, fail as a living example of progressive thinking, especially in the area of women's rights. It is obvious that many of the reforms advocated by the Community, and made known through Ballou's publications, subsequently took hold over time in the wider society, although it is admittedly difficult to gauge Ballou's precise influence on this development.

Why is the town not better known as a bastion of women's rights, communitarian ideals in action, and other progressive achievements? This is another unanswerable question. My best guess is that the progressive values of the Community entered town life, and later spread to the larger society, so fully that they did not seem extraordinary to residents. Residents could not, I imagine, think why they should make a fuss over a situation that seemed entirely normal to them. It was only in the 1950s, as the old structures weakened, that the town established a historical society to document and explore its unique American heritage. Its significance is still, I believe, under-recognized.

The great Russian social reformer and writer Leo Tolstoy had no doubts, however, about Ballou's significance in American history. Tolstoy knew Ballou's work well from both publications and correspondence conducted over many years. Tolstoy described Ballou as "a foremost American writer" who, he predicted, would be "acknowledged as one of the great benefactors of mankind."⁴⁴ While Ballou has not received the recognition that Tolstoy anticipated, he, and Oneida's John Humphrey Noyes for similar reasons, are recognized in progressive communitarian circles as both prophetic visionaries and useful fanatics. Their stories and those of their communities help us appreciate that progress in women's rights, indeed in human rights, is often advanced by the radical visions and dogged determination of a few driven, peculiar, and gifted leaders.

Notes

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