

American Communal Societies Quarterly

Volume 13 | Number 4

Pages 121-131

10-1-2019

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A Short History of the Columbian Phalanx

Julieanna Frost

The place where I grew up has beautiful vistas, yet also has a very conservative, provincial climate. As soon as I graduated from high school in south Zanesville, I left and rarely visit still. I recently discovered, however, that for a brief moment in time, a progressive group of individuals attempted to form a utopian socialist community in Zanesville, Ohio, called the Columbian Phalanx. This paper explores what can be known about its fleeting history.

This initial idea of a phalanx was proposed by French philosopher, Charles Fourier (1722-1837). Fourier primarily worked as a traveling merchant, spending his free time writing down his social theories, though he had little academic training. He published three books: *Theory of the Four Movements and the General Destinies* (1808), *Treatise on Domestic Agricultural Association* (1822), and *The New Industrial World* (1829). Fourier made various controversial claims, such as in the future, seas would be made of lemonade¹ and heaven does not exist,² which made him a laughingstock among many; yet his vision of a bucolic community where people could live in harmony resonated with some people displaced with the upheavals in a capitalist economy. He described the phalanx thusly:

If I announce with so much confidence the near approach of Universal Harmony, it is because the organization of the Combined Order might be affected within two years after a given Association had prepared the necessary edifices and lands. If these preparations were already made, if the lands and edifices suitable for a Phalanx could be procured now, this fine social Order might be inaugurated at once.³

Some were inspired by such words to bring this social utopia into reality. In the United States, between the years of 1842 and 1858, at least twenty-eight phalanxes were created in ten states.⁴ Sources conflict on the exact number of phalanxes, which may be due to the brief existence of many of these experimental communities. The proliferation of the Fourier type of utopian group in the United States was due to several factors.

A major factor was the shift in the U.S. economy from an agrarian base to an industrial base. The growth in industrialization for many meant a displacement in their traditional roles, which could be disorienting. Fourier envisioned harmony between manufacturing and agriculture. He wrote:

It is in accordance with this principle that factories, instead of being, as today, concentrated in cities where swarms of wretched people are huddled together, will be scattered over all the fields and phalanxes of the globe, in order that man, while applying himself to factory labor, should never deviate from the paths of attraction, which tends to make use of factories as accessories to agriculture and a change from it, not as the chief occupation, either for a district or for any of its individuals.⁵

The instability of the new economy was underscored by the Panic of 1837. This is viewed by most American historians as our first Great Depression,⁶ with widespread unemployment, bank failures, falling currency values, and poor market prices, which lingered for years. Roberts, in his study of this panic, highlighted that the “1836-1848 economic crisis was a political and cultural phenomenon as well. Economic uncertainty and stagnation produced unprecedented political and social instability.... There was a widely shared feeling that the country had lost its way. The descent from the boom times of the mid-1830s was often taken as evidence of a moral failure.”⁷ This moral failure was highlighted by social and religious reformers, including those forming intentional communities. In Ohio, in addition to the Fourierist phalanxes formed during this period, there were also groups like the Brotherhood, Fruit Hills, and the Prairie Home Community.⁸ Disaffected people could also choose from communal experiments that date earlier, such as the Shakers or Mormons. Charles Fourier had developed very detailed plans on how the phalanx would operate; people would invest in the phalanx through funds or their labor, those who invested more would benefit more through dividends, and the community would support itself through light industry and agriculture.⁹ He even described what the architecture should be in the communities, and this influenced a number of building projects in New York, such as the “Unity Household.”¹⁰

Another factor in the growth of the Fourierist utopians was publicity. The main promoter and interpreter of Fourier in the U.S. was New Yorker, Albert Brisbane. He hailed from the Burned-Over District, a region well known for its religious revivals and reform movements. Brisbane published

many works, through newspaper articles, journals, and books, about his understanding of Fourier, with an emphasis on the economic benefits of the phalanx.¹¹ Historian Catherine Rokicky reported that Brisbane ignored Fourier's progressive views on women and marriage,¹² but his writings do not reflect this interpretation. Take the following excerpt from his work, *Social Destiny of Man*:

Association once organized, five-sixths of the women will immediately be free to devote themselves to productive occupations; this result will be produced by the suppression of the complicated and useless works, which arise from the multiplicity of households, from the troublesome care of children, from the bad quality of manufactured goods, and from the foolish changes of the fashion, which absorb in interminable works of the needle, and in superfluous trifles, so many women.¹³

It is uncertain how progressive each phalanx was in practice. In addition to his writings, Brisbane financially and organizationally supported the creation of various phalanxes, such as the North American Phalanx in New Jersey.

Eight Fourierist communities existed in Ohio: The Marlborough Association, Ohio Phalanx, Clermont Phalanx, Trumbull Phalanx, Integral Phalanx, Utopia, Memnonia Institute, and Columbian Phalanx. Reportedly, the only other state with this number of phalanxes was New York.¹⁴ The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 encouraged emigration of New Yorkers and other New Englanders to Ohio, as relocation was now cheaper and easier. Rokicky described:

The state of Ohio and the Western Reserve in particular played pivotal roles in the religious, reform, and utopian communities of the nineteenth century. The Western Reserve or "New Connecticut" consists of the northeastern portion of Ohio from Lake Erie extending south to the forty-first parallel and stretching 120 miles west from neighboring Pennsylvania.... Because of the westward migration patterns, Ohio lay in position to receive those affected by the movements in the East, especially those from the Burned-Over District.¹⁵

As stated earlier, the Burned-Over District was a region in New York state which had experienced a series of non-conformist religious and social

revivals in the early nineteenth century. The utopian communities in Ohio were primarily located in the Western Reserve (northeast region) and around Cincinnati (southwest region) during this period.

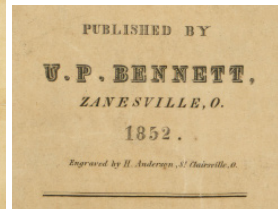
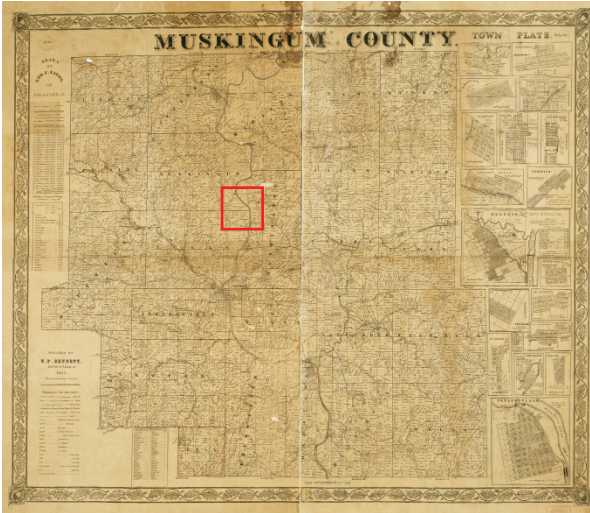
Cincinnati experienced great growth, becoming known as the “Queen of the West,” particularly after the completion of the Miami and Erie Canal in 1827. Due to its location, millennial and pre-millennial missionaries connected with groups, such as the Disciples of Christ and Stone Movement, passed through this region and had an influence on utopianism. It appears that no utopian communities existed in the northwest region of the state, and only two communities were located in the southeast, both Fourierist groups: the Ohio Phalanx (Belmont County) and the Columbian Phalanx (Muskingum County). Future study should explore the reasons for the paucity of communities in these regions of Ohio.

Zanesville should not have been a bad location for a utopian community focused on agriculture and light industry. Its location on the National Road and the Muskingum River would have made trade simple. Zanesville had served as the capital of Ohio from 1810-1812, was a commercial center with several industries by the 1840s, and experienced a substantial population influx during the decades of 1820-1850. Zanesville also had the influence of social and religious activists. The Putnam District, which would be annexed to the city in 1872, was a center of the Underground Railroad. Preachers of the Restoration Movement, such as Alexander Campbell, (who was a friend with Robert Owen),¹⁶ were active in Zanesville. This climate should have been ripe for a utopian society.

However, of all the Ohio phalanxes, it has been reported that the Columbian had the shortest existence.¹⁷ According to a newspaper report, the Columbian Phalanx formed between Dresden and Zanesville on April 8, 1844.¹⁸ Plans for the community date at least to March 2, 1844, when Dr. Michael Gittings entered into a land deal with Phalanx leaders, Simeon Shurtliff, Jacob Anthony Baker, Alexander Campbell¹⁹ and William Ricketts.²⁰ Gittings originally was from Maryland, but had moved to Zanesville and was involved in land speculation in the region as early as 1834.²¹ Shurtliff, Baker, and James Oatley were trustees of the Columbian Phalanx, and the agreement with Gittings was for 1250 acres at a price of \$16 per acre.²² Gittings had done business with Shurtliff before in selling him property in Putnam.²³

Frost: A Short History of the Columbian Phalanx

According to one source, the Columbian Phalanx was located along the Muskingum River, seven miles north of Zanesville in Franklin County.²⁴ This is not geographically possible, however, as Franklin County is two counties to the west. Most likely, the name Columbian was confused with Columbus somewhere along the way, which is located in Franklin County. A location near the river would have been ideal for the community in order to ship its goods and crops. Seven miles north of the city along the river would most likely place it in Muskingum Township.



Muskingum County Town Plats.

Published by U.P. Bennett,

Zanesville, O. 1852.

Note the properties of Gittings and Baker on either side of Muskingum Creek.

This was the location of the Columbian Phalanx.

Library of Congress Geography and Map Division
Washington, D.C.
20540-4650 USA dcu



A nineteenth century description of Muskingum Township stated that, “There are in the township some smaller streams, and some never-failing springs. The general surface is undulating, but in the eastern part, near the river, are prominent headlands, some of which rise quite abruptly. The soil is chiefly sandy loam, though in the headlands spoken of is found a predominant clayey subsoil.”²⁵ This diversity in soil would have been suitable for a wide variety of crops. The geography also was in line with Fourier’s ideal location. Fourier biographer, Jonathan Beecher, noted, “Fourier always imagined the Phalanx in a rural setting. Ideally, he wrote, it should be situated on a square league of land. The terrain would be relatively hilly; water plentiful; and the soil and climate would be suitable for the cultivation of a wide variety of crops. The Phalanx would also have to be located within a day’s ride of a large city or capital.”²⁶ It is almost as if Muskingum Township is exactly the type of place Fourier had in mind. Other pieces of evidence that give support for this location include a notation that a Shurtliff settled in this region,²⁷ later land sales in the same township to Jacob Baker by Michael Gittings,²⁸ and a collection of photographs taken by Donald Janzen in 1979, indicating the phalanx’s location in this township.²⁹ The reason the location cannot be pinpointed with more accuracy is due to the fact that the land deal for 1250 acres fell through.

Michael Gittings had agreed to turn over the deed to the Phalanx on September 1, 1844.³⁰ However, the group had not secured the \$20,000 which they promised to pay him for the land. On November 17, 1844, Gittings announced a public sale of this property to be held January 7, 1845, along with eight yoke work oxen, twelve plows, thirteen milk cows, fifty sheep, and forty hogs.³¹ However, no records exist noting any land sales by Gittings in January 1845. An article by journalist, Mary Gove, from March 15, 1845, described the Columbian Phalanx as having paid \$10,000 on the land,³² with a membership of 150 people, thirty log buildings and one large two-story building under construction.³³ Gove described a community in trouble though. Former Methodist minister, Alexander Campbell,³⁴ who had some leadership in the Phalanx, had been expelled, along with his wife and five children. She stated that one member said, “Campbell is the wickedest man in the world—he has spoken against the Bible, he has spoken against marriage, he has worked on Sunday, he has taken in members without property, he has said he would as lief have a black man join as a white man.”³⁵ Some members of the Phalanx reportedly left with him.

It is uncertain when the thirty-two families of the Phalanx were actually evicted from their utopia.³⁶ William Ricketts of the community had purchased one acre free and clear in Muskingum Township on April 2, 1844, so perhaps, some stayed with him during the turmoil. Phalanx member, Jacob Baker, was able to purchase some property in that area from Gittings on April 17, 1845. Unfortunately, no articles of agreement or complete member list of the Columbian Phalanx survive, so it cannot be for certain how this group was organized or much of its culture. A newspaper report with more than a little bias had stated that the Columbian Phalanx did not observe the Sabbath and that the group was populated with some who wished to exploit others, some philanthropists who hoped for a better society, and a large number who had been unsuccessful in all of their earlier endeavors.³⁷ A letter to the *Harbinger* from August 15, 1845, disputed that the group had broken up and “those that remain are in a constant state of discontent and bickering, owing to want of food and comforts of life.”³⁸ Another letter to the *Harbinger* stated that as of October 4, 1845, the group was still in existence.³⁹ Its glowing report stated:

We are in a prosperous condition. The little difficulties which beset us for a time, arising from the lack of means, and which the world magnified into destruction and death, have been dissipated. Our crops of grain are the very best in the state of Ohio, a very severe drought having prevailed in the north of the state. We could, if we wished, to sell all of our corn on the ground. We have one hundred and fifty acres, every acre of which will yield one hundred bushels. We have cut one hundred acres of good oats. Potatoes, pumpkins, melons, etc., are also good. We are getting out stuff to build a flouring mill in Zanesville, for a Mr. Beaumont;⁴⁰ two small groups of seven each make twenty five dollars per day at the job. We have the best hewed timber that ever came to Zanesville and it is used in all the mills and bridges in this region. We have purchased fixtures for a new steam saw mill with two saws and a circulator and various other small machinery all entirely new which we shall get into operation soon. Plenty to eat, drink, and wear with three hundred dollars per week coming in, all from our own industry, imparts to us a tone of feeling of quite different zest to an abundance obtained in any other way. The world has watched with anxious solicitude our capacity to survive alone.⁴¹

PUBLIC SALE

PURSUANT to a Deed of Trust executed to me, on the 17th day of November, 1844, by Simeon Shurtliff, Anthony Baker and James Oatley, Trustees of and for the COLUMBIAN PHALANX, in Muskingum county and State of Ohio, to secure the payment of certain debts therein specified, I will offer for sale, at the HOUSE of JAMES OATLEY, on the domain of the said COLUMBIAN PHALANX, on WEDNESDAY, the 7th day of January next, the following described personal property, to wit:—

8 YOKE OF WORK OXEN,

13 MILCH COWS,

TWELVE PLOUGHS AND HARROWS,

Fifty head of Sheep, Forty head Hogs,

ONE THRASHING MACHINE, all the CORN on the FIELDS of the domain, all the WHEAT sown and growing on the said domain, all the OATS in stack or rick, all the HAY in stack, all the FODDER on the lands aforesaid, all TOOLS and IMPLEMENTS for farming, all CARPENTERS and BLACKSMITH'S TOOLS, and all other articles of property belonging to said Columbian Phalanx, or so much thereof as shall pay off and satisfy my present debt due, together with all costs of sale, &c.

Sale will commence at 10 o'clock, and continue from day to day until the amount be sold.

TERMS—A credit of six months will be given, with interest from day of sale, the purchaser giving note and approved security, and in all cases, where the terms are not complied with, the property will be re-sold at the risk of the first purchaser.

M. D. GITTINGS.

December 26, 1845.

Printed at the Courier Office—Zanesville

Public Sale, December 26, 1845. Printed at the Courier Office—Zanesville.

A broadside advertising the liquidation of the assets of the Columbian Phalanx.
Communal Societies Collection, Hamilton College

Gittings and Baker were involved in a series of lawsuits, some connected with the community, between 1847-1852.⁴² Recall that Baker later successfully purchased land from Gittings on April 17, 1845, in Muskingum Township.⁴³ In less than a year, Baker would grant some land to the Columbian Phalanx, under an Article of Agreement contract on March 31, 1846.⁴⁴ This type of land transfer is common when the grantee, in this case, the Columbian Phalanx, does not have enough money for a down payment. It is uncertain as to when the group actually ceased to exist based upon the historical record. It appears that this group was actually in existence for approximately two years, which would make it longer-lasting than some other Fourierist experiments in the state, such as the Ohio Phalanx, Integral Phalanx, and Memnonia Institute.

Though, ultimately, this Phalanx, like all of the others, failed, there is some comfort in a group of individuals attempting to offer an alternative possibility to U.S. society. It is likely that the Columbian Phalanx suffered from some of the same problems that plagued other Fourierist groups, such as lack of effective leadership, financial difficulties, competition between groups, and poor understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the Fourierist experiment.⁴⁵ For two years, this community near Zanesville struggled to survive and does form an important part of the overall history of nineteenth century utopian societies. I will also never look at my hometown in quite the same way.

Notes

1. Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 125.
2. Beecher, 212.
3. Charles Fourier, *The Social Destiny of Man* (New York: C. P. Somerby, 1876), 93.
4. Robert Preucel, *Archaeological Semiotics* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 176.
5. Charles Fourier, *Selections from the Works of Fourier*, translated by Julia Franklin (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Company, 1901), 119.
6. There was the Panic of 1819, yet it was not as severe or long lasting.
7. Alasdair Roberts, *America's First Great Depression: Economic Crisis and Political Disorder After the Panic of 1837* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2012), 8.
8. Catherine Rokicky, *Creating a Perfect World: Religious and Secular Utopias in Nineteenth-Century Ohio* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 6.
9. *Ibid.*, 121.
10. A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History* (Self-published, 2007), 281.
11. *Ibid.*, 122.
12. *Ibid.*, 122.
13. Albert Brisbane, *Social Destiny of Man* (Philadelphia: C. F. Stollmeyer, 1840), 440.
14. James Matthew Morris and Andrea Kross, *Historical Dictionary of Utopianism* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 108-9.
15. Rokicky, 5.
16. Tarunjit Singh Butalia and Dianne Small, eds. *Religion in Ohio: Profiles of Faith Communities* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 80.
17. Rokicky, 6.
18. Ohio State Journal, April 15, 1844.
19. This is not the same Alexander Campbell as the one connected to the Restoration Movement.
20. *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Ohio*. Vol. 19 December Term 1850, 347-57. 1860.
21. Muskingum County Recorder, Deeds 1803-1838.
22. *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Ohio*. 347
23. Muskingum County Recorder, Deeds 1838-1859.
24. Morris and Kross, 66.
25. *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Muskingum County, Ohio* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1892), 362.
26. Beecher, 242-43.
27. *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Muskingum County, Ohio*, 363.
28. Muskingum County Recorder. Deeds 1838-1859.
29. Donald Janzen, photo collection 1979, David L. Rice Library University Archive and Special Collections, University of Southern Indiana.

30. *Reports of the Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Ohio*, 347-57.
31. Courier Office Ohio.
32. There is no primary source evidence that backs up this claim.
33. John Commons, et al. *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Vol. 7, *Labor Movement, 1840-1860* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1958), 278.
34. This is a different Alexander Campbell from the Campbell connected to the Restoration Movement.
35. Commons, 279.
36. Morris and Kross, 66.
37. Ohio State Journal, April 15, 1844.
38. John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1870), 404.
39. Ibid., 406.
40. William Beaumont did operate several mills in the Zanesville area during this period, as noted in *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Muskingum County, Ohio*.
41. Ibid., 406.
42. *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Muskingum County, Ohio*, 192.
43. Muskingum County Recorder, Deeds 1838-1859.
44. Ibid.
45. Rokicky, 139.