Brook Farm: An Ideal Society with a Flawed Economic Plan

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Outline

Thesis: As part of the nineteenth century social reform movement, the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education was an attempt by prominent Transcendentalists to create a perfected society. After only six years of existence, despite noble social ideologies and great physical effort, Brook Farm failed and dissolved. Aside from the fact that it is not certain that the realization of a perfected society is possible, Brook Farm's failure was due to insufficient financial support and unsuccessful business decisions.

I. Introduction of Brook Farm
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At the start of the nineteenth century, in the United States, the social reform movement began as an intellectual revolution whereby the supporters of the movement were chiefly concerned with creating a perfected society (Bliss et al. 1146). Established in April 1841, the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education was an attempt designed to attain this Utopian ideal. Brook Farm's leader, George Ripley, had left his Unitarian congregation in Boston and on a picturesque hillside in West Roxbury, Massachusetts became the shepherd of a different sort of flock. With the inspiration of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the company of prominent Transcendentalists like Margaret Fuller and Nathanial Hawthorne, Ripley struggled to lead this model society of reform until its dissolution in August 1847 (Ward 1-2).

To be sure, creating an ideal society that meets the needs of all individuals is a massive undertaking. However, one might think that a large group of dedicated and scholarly men and women invested financially and intellectually in this project would be fully equipped to successfully manage the challenge. Nevertheless, despite all of the noble and Herculean efforts of its participants, Brook Farm failed. The reason for its failure is both complex and simple. Author Sterling Delano put it best in his book *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* by stating that of all the numerous "communal and utopian societies" at that time, Brook Farm and its New England contemporaries were more concerned with

reforming social and moral attitudes than they were with realizing financial proliferation (XIV). More completely, if the realization of a perfected society were at all possible, the sustainment of Brook Farm's specific social and moral ideals would most definitely require endurable and ideal economic support.

According to the Constitution of the Brook Farm Association, the main objective of its creators was to establish an economically self sufficient community that would, at the same time, financially fuel and demonstrate the member's agreed conception of a society living together for the realization of a greater human purpose; this purpose included and integrated intellectual, spiritual and physical ideals as defined by the Association (1).

Central to Brook Farm's ideology was a transcendental philosophy. In the United States, according to author Lindsey Swift, Transcendentalism began as an intellectual revolution and developed as a "new movement in thought" "toward(s) individualism" (2-3). Basically, Transcendentalists promoted revolutionary ideals which encouraged each man to establish a unique relationship with the world.

In 1836, this revolution sparked the formation of a group of New England scholars to meet informally and discuss these new ideologies as they were already frustrated with the reigning conservative dogmas. Begun by Frederick Hedge, George Ripley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and George Putnam, and attended by prominent scholars and literary thinkers, this group eventually became known as the Transcendental Club (Swift 7). To illustrate Transcendental ideologies, these renowned men and women sought to intellectually correct

what they perceived to be the most basic and unequivocally deficient social attitudes and dilemmas. Chief among these attitudes needing correction, as stated by Ripley, was the belief that man could not be enlightened without the assistance of a specific form of revelation; with a "mind over matter" attitude, the members of the Club declared that the true source of enlightenment resided ultimately within each individual (Delano 4).

Nearly three years after it was established, Brook Farm drafted a new constitution that integrated Fourierism into the community's ideals. Fourierism is defined by the New Encyclopedia of Social Reform as a system of Socialism developed by Charles Fourier (Bliss et al. 499). Using what he termed "mathematical harmonies," Fourier believed that "fixt [sic] mathematical divisions" of labor arranged in specific group structures that catered to the preferences of each individual would result in a superiorly balanced society (Bliss 500). While the New Encyclopedia of Social Reform concedes that Fourierism had many noteworthy and reputable supporters, Fourier's "profound thoughts" "mingled with fantasy" which "at times, ventured into the absurd" (Bliss et al. 499-500). For instance, Fourier believed that by selling hen's eggs and restructuring labor into his prescribed phalanxes, England "could pay off [its] national debt in six months" (Bliss et al. 500).

Delano sees the "popular" rise of Fourierism during the 1840s as a potent factor that impacted the eventual outcome of the Brook Farm experiment (XIV). The inclusion of Fourierism "caused a serious rift between Ripley" and some of its members and supporters who consequently abandoned the Brook Farm project (Delano 140,154). Regardless of this

reduction of original membership, longtime Brook Farm resident Rebecca Codman Butterfield credits the positive aspects of the labor in the community to the application of a Fourieristic system (Myerson 615). And it is true that within half a year following the integration of Fourieristic principles eighty seven new people came to live at Brook Farm (Delano 157). Even so, Lindsey Swift asserts that the community's conversion to Fourierism was a "radical" change that caused its failure (280).

If intellectual thought was the wheel, spirituality was the axis around which transcendental individualism revolved. According to Delano, the Transcendental Club "was organized…to provide a forum to discuss theological and moral subjects" (4). Mutually resistant to early Unitarianism, all Transcendentalists maintained that the common discernment of spiritual truth originates from the individual soul of every man as opposed to a forced acceptance of truth as dictated by the church. Specifically, Transcendentalists rejected the church's insistence that the miracles of the Bible were "empirical proof of religion" and purported man's natural ability to intuit as a true source of knowledge and communion with God (Goodman 2).

Having left his job as a minister with the Unitarian Church to lead the Brook Farm community, it might seem that Ripley would have had the perfect opportunity to fashion Brook Farm into a church of his own making. In a sense, it is true that the Farm became Ripley's church and the workings of the community his religious rituals. However, during the length of his leadership, Ripley exemplified his Transcendental conviction that the source of

religious instruction is the soul of each individual. Rebecca Codman Butterfield emphatically states that although various forms of religious services were available to residents, the decision to participate was strictly voluntary (Myerson 621). Nonetheless, most members of the community shared a belief in a Divine being and were free to interpret and voice their privately conceived spiritual revelations. The imposition of faith, or in this case the lack thereof, did not cause the dissolution of Brook Farm. If anything, according to author Dan McKanan, Brook Farm's spiritual attitudes and beliefs remained with the residents long after the community ended (176-177,182).

While the scholarly members of the Transcendental Club spent considerable time and mental effort intellectually reforming society, very few felt it necessary to personally carry out this reform by means of a model community. In fact, Emerson believed that "the Reform of Reforms must be accomplished without means" (Swift 10). Perhaps Emerson had no need to create a community that would facilitate an ideal relationship with the world and God since he sought this fulfillment alone with nature and through his writing (Goodman 1). However, having deeply experienced the intellectual and spiritual ideology of Transcendentalism on an individual level, George Ripley was eager to demonstrate its physical form on a communal level.

The mind over matter attitude of Transcendentalists did not consider the physical aspects of existence inferior; more accurately, they believed that the mind and body should work together in collaboration. Ripley considered Brook Farms' aims of combining laborious

farming with a high quality holistic education in an aesthetically rural setting the perfect formula for nurturing and elevating its inhabitants (Delano 61). The life of an intellectual farmer did have an uplifting effect on Ripley and most of the other residents. Ripley's wife, Sophia, commented that her husband "worked as hard as any day laborer with constantly increasing strength and no suffering" (Delano 45). Directly contrary, Nathaniel Hawthorne eventually considered the menial work of the farm a "very painful" "intrusion" of his "imagination and intellect" (242). The fact that Ripley's specific lifestyle ideals did not produce the same result for all Brook Farmers surely had some influence on the project's outcome. But, bearing more weight, the economic support that this lifestyle required was insufficient.

Initially, as a joint stock company, the Brook Farm Association issued "twenty-four shares of stock", at the rate of five hundred dollars a share, to ten different subscribers who included Nathaniel Hawthorn, Charles A. Dana and the Ripleys (Swift 18). However, more than half of these stock pledges were never paid, leaving the community critically undercapitalized (Swift 18). According to the articles of the constitution, shareholders were not liable for financial obligations and contracts incurred by the association. Additionally, stock could be redeemed in full provided the shareholder gave one year's notice. Consequently, the year after Hawthorne left residence at Brook Farm he requested the redemption of his stock in full; but, because the association was unable to repay him, he was forced to sue (Ward 2).

Thus, raising capital was a problem from the beginning, more than likely because the

venture was so speculative. Lindsey Swift notes that Emerson, although an occasional visitor and lecturer to the community, considered a monetary investment in Brook Farm to be unsound (10). But the members of Brook Farm were aware that most investments were made by persons who felt a personal commitment to the social reform movement more so than a surety of economic gain. Delano states that Ripley's decision to switch to Fourierism was partly motivated by the prospect of gaining additional stock investors seeking to advance their cause (139, 323). Unfortunately, these prospective investments never materialized.

Failure to raise cash capital and generate profit from the agricultural activities caused Ripley to heavily mortgage the farm. Immediately following its purchase, being the only certain financial asset, the land was mortgaged for five hundred dollars more than the purchase price of ten thousand five hundred dollars (Swift 19, 20). At times of debt consolidation, building expansion, industry equipment purchases, and pressing household needs, Ripley would again refinance Brook Farm's real estate. The total mortgage due on the property at dissolution was fourteen thousand five hundred dollars (Delano 312).

With little agricultural experience, Ripley bought the beautiful parcel of land before he understood that farming efforts would not yield a substantial profit to support his ideal community. For example, problems with tilling the land included a lack of tools and shortages of both manure and skilled laborers (Swift 41-42). In addition, the farm's produce and dairy output was only enough to feed the community (Swift 41). Conversely, ample

amounts of hay were grown but brought a low price at market (Swift 41). It is evident that although Ripley had spent many months studying and calculating farming methods before he actually began to work the land at Brook Farm, his intellectual approach did not guarantee his agricultural success. However, with massive amounts of labor and inspiring natural beauty, the farm did afford the members opportunities to achieve Ripley's ideal conception of mind, body and spiritual communion (McKanan 164).

After the January 1844 adoption of Fourieristic principles, the economic focus at Brook Farm moved from agriculture to an expansion of industry. The numerous trade industries installed at Brook Farm were an attempt to simultaneously increase income, enlist the skills of new residents, and provide the community with self generated goods and services (Swift 40, 43). Included in these industries were shoe-making, carpentry, printing and "the manufacture of Britannia ware and of doors, sashes and blinds" (Swift 43). Although these industrious efforts satisfied many of the community's needs, they failed to generate a profit.

To begin, the Association constructed a new workshop to house the industries and invested in a steam engine for power (Delano 209). These major investments were financed with the hope that the industries would succeed and generate substantial income (Delano 157). This hope proved false for the industries' operating costs exceeded the income they generated. Also notable, the sash and blind industry required more start-up capital due to the expense of materials needed for their manufacture (Delano 215). With sufficient capital,

lumber could have been purchased in bulk for a reduced rate and then stored for the purpose of properly drying the wood which would have resulted in a higher quality product (Delano 216).

Before the community became increasingly focused on modeling a Fourieristic phalanx, Brook Farm was first and foremost an educational institute. Not surprisingly, the Brook Farm school was the best realization of Ripley's Transcendental ideals. Students and teachers pursued educational activities with a collective eagerness and displayed a high level of individual accountability (Swift 69). The impressive and well educated faculty which included Ripley, Charles Dana, John Sullivan Dwight, Abby Morton, and Sophia Ripley taught students ranging in age from infant to adult (Delano 79-80). In addition to fundamental courses, the advanced subjects taught for the adult and preparatory students included algebra, agricultural chemistry, history, music, philosophy, languages, and literature (Delano 80-81). Not related to their studies, but equally educational, students over the age of ten were mandatorily expected to perform one to two hours of physical work every day; this produced a positive connection between the students and the aims of the community (Swift 70). With the students engaged in labor and all members of the community granted access to a superb education, the school at Brook Farm demonstrated Ripley's ideal of a society integrated in mind and body. But, the school's prodigious success could not prevent the dissolution of Brook Farm.

According to Delano, by August of 1842 seventy percent of the Brook Farm population was students and boarders (77). And, although they "represented" the community's most reliable source of income, the rapid increase of students precipitated underfunded housing expansion projects which escalated the Association's debt (Delano 77). Furthermore, coincident with the conversion to Fourierism, Ripley's direct physical involvement with the school decreased to twenty-two percent of his total labor hours from May 1844 to April 1845 (Delano 321). Nevertheless, Delano states that the educational example set by the Brook Farm school was a lasting achievement because it served as a model for subsequent private boarding schools in New England and adult education night classes across America (79, 81).

At Brook Farm, in addition to generating sustenance, labor was considered a vital means of fulfilling the community's ideologies. Therefore, residents were offered room and board in exchange for a full day's labor; those who chose not to work were charged four dollars per week (Swift 20-21). Thus, labor and money were equally interchangeable. For example, student James Burrill Curtis arranged to pay his board one half in labor and the other half in money amounting to two dollars per week (Myerson 418). The type of work carried out was also considered equal and no differentiation in pay rate was made due to an individual's gender, experience, or skill level (Delano 65-66).

In her memoir, Rebecca Codman Butterfield describes the Fourieristic system of labor at Brook Farm as a division of "general departments, called "Series" that were further

divided into “smaller departments called Groups” (Myerson 614) These “Groups” managed specific kinds of work and members of the community had some level of choice of employment that determined which “Groups” they would be laboring in (Myerson 614-615). Butterfield attributes a charming and “social nature to all” labor at the farm because work was managed by a diversified group of people (Myerson 615). Specifically, she states that the “mingling” of people of “different ages”, “degrees of culture” and gender created “circumstances” that made labor “attractive” (Myerson 615). Butterfield credits the positive social attributes of Brook Farm to the application of Fourierism. However, more accurately, many members believed that Fourier’s social ideals as they applied to the laborer were compatible with their own ideologies (Delano 145-146).

Having an appreciation for mathematics, it is also possible that Ripley was inclined to embrace Fourier’s ideas because they used a numerical formula to organize and guide labor; this provided a careful “record-keeping” method for quantifying labor (Delano 145). However, regardless of Fourier’s exacting postulations, his method had never been pragmatically proven to bring about success. Yet, since the Brook Farm community’s very existence was one of experimentation, it’s apparent that previous proof of Fourier’s methodology was not a necessary factor to determine its exploration through implementation. Ultimately, preoccupied as the residents were with the meticulous categorizing and organizing of the Fourieristic method, this all encompassing effort did not bring successful monetary fruition from the products of such labor.

To be sure, operating a business as complicated as an entire community certainly requires a financially fit business plan. This is especially necessary in order to withstand unpredictable events such as serious illness or accident. In November of 1845, with an outbreak of smallpox, Brook Farm experienced the former. One-third of the residents were afflicted with the disease. Because those afflicted were quickly cared for and quarantined, the outbreak ceased by the end of the month with no fatalities (Delano 246, 248). But, the community's economy did not recover. In addition to the health of the residents, the plague affected the industries and the school. The financial loss approximated by associate John Allen totaled three thousand dollars (Delano 248).

The final injury to the financial health of Brook Farm came in the form of an accidental fire. As prescribed by Fourier, the association began constructing a central community structure in the summer of 1844; this Phalanstery was a major building project that would adequately house all of Brook Farm's residents and it was expected to be completed two years after it was begun. Unfortunately, late one evening in March of 1846, the entire structure caught fire and was quickly reduced to cinders. Since the Phalanstery was not insured, the seven thousand dollars invested in its construction was a total loss to the Association (Swift 24-25). This loss was severely reflected in the marketability and value of the stock (Swift 24). Thus, Ripley finally came to terms with the truth that monetary investments in Brook Farm would not likely yield an economically profitable result.

Over the course of the next year and several months the energies of the Brook Farmers were disunited. Almost immediately following the fire, Ripley, with the support of John Allen, Charles Dana, and John Dwight, changed course and devoted most of his time away from Brook Farm leading a development to nationally further Associationist causes (Delano 270, 271). In the community it was decided to move the focus away from the industries and back to the school; consequently, the number of residents declined from roughly one hundred people in the early spring of 1846 to about thirty by late summer (Delano 282). In September, however, the decline of the school's enrollment to a meager twelve students was a more significant loss. It was then firmly understood that the community's source of income had all but ceased to exist (Delano 283). Hence, some of Brook Farm's assets were liquidated as needed, including Ripley's personal library, until a board of trustees was appointed to completely dissolve the remaining property in August of 1847 (Swift 25, 137).

Undoubtedly, the struggle to create and maintain societies that provide basic physical, mental and spiritual subsistence is a common human condition. Yet, it was the desire to realize a society that met these needs in a superlative or ideal form that united the participants of Brook Farm. And, while it is more than evident that economic failure was the direct cause of dissolution, it is impossible to know for sure whether the West Roxbury community would have succeeded given ample financial support and prolific economic practices. Accordingly, we can also say for certain that from the past and through to the present day the ideal society remains elusive.

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