

John Humphrey Noyes

1811-1886

John Humphrey Noyes was an ex-Calvinist preacher who, after claiming that he had achieved perfectionism, was not allowed to preach his faith. John Noyes went on to found the Oneida community. The Oneida community was created in the late 1830s in Putney, Vermont, but moved to Oneida County in New York in 1848. The members of the community strived to be perfectionists. Members of this community did not practice monogamy; for Noyes believed that devoting oneself to one individual was not only selfish but reserved for sinners. Instead, Noyes claimed that all men should be married to all women and vice versa. This was known as the doctrine of complex marriage. Complex marriage was then related to the idea of “male continence”. In short, men could have relations with women as long as they disciplined themselves and refrained from “finishing”. This was a prime method of birth control and also showed one’s self-control. Furthermore, John Noyes disliked the idea of private property and he favored socialism in the sense of communal ownership of property and possessions. Members of the Oneida community were quite unique because they created and sold many products, from slippers to silverware. Noyes disliked the idea of separate spheres for men and women, so women worked alongside men in factories. They also dressed more like men and had cropped haircuts, unlike most women during the time period. Men also helped women with household duties which made the sexes seem more equal. One of the most radical ideas of Noyes was to breed a perfect race of people. Women could voice preferences for their partners, but a committee had the final say as to who they had children with. Noyes preferred that older members who were seen as “more perfect” raised children with younger “less perfect” members of the community. Noyes’ ideas were disliked by many of the younger members who had fallen in love with people of their own age. This in part led to the undoing of Noyes’ model community, and in 1879 Noyes left for Canada to escape persecution. Oneida stopped following complex marriage and abandoned capitalism soon after. Some of its members broke off and eventually formed a silverware company known as Oneida Limited. John Humphrey Noyes is important because his beliefs led to the creation of the Oneida community, and this community provided goods to many Americans while also leading the Oneidans to be more self-reliant. Noyes’ belief that women and men should not live in separate spheres also led to feelings that women deserved more rights.