George Rapp Biography

George Rapp

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Biography

George Rapp (1757-1847) was the founder of the "Harmonist" sect and community, the most successful utopian association in America in the 19th century, and an inspiration for comparable ventures.

Born Johann Georg Rapp in Iptingen, Württemberg, Germany, on Nov. 1, 1757, Rapp followed his well-to-do father into farming. Rapp read earnestly in religious lore, the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, among others, affecting his study of the Bible. Rapp's simple eloquence and fundamentalist views attracted followers, and by 1787 he was preaching. In a few years he counted some 300 families committed to attaining heavenly conditions on earth. Subjected to persecution by Lutheran clerics and magistrates, they looked abroad for friendlier surroundings.

In 1803 Rapp went to America and purchased 5,000 acres of unimproved land near Pittsburgh, Pa., and with additional followers prepared the site of "Harmony." By February 1805 they had organized the Harmony Society, with Rapp as leader. With a common fund, a simple and uniform style of dress and routine, and a mild approach to community offenders, the hardworking Rappites built a prosperous community.

Two years later the Rappites chose celibacy, a product of biblical interpretation. However, they enjoyed family life, food and wine (though no tobacco), art, singing, and other amenities. They did not separate men from women and emphasized cooperation rather than compulsion in most matters.

In 1814 the Rappites concluded that lack of water routes, limited space, and other conditions made moving necessary. They purchased some 38,000 acres in a southwest corner of Indiana on the Wabash River. Once again they prospered under their able leader and his adopted son Friedrich, sending wine, woolen goods, and other products as far as New Orleans.

Nevertheless, within several years they tired of the uncivilized area and early in 1825 sold their holdings to the British communitarian Robert Owen. They returned to Pennsylvania to build "Economy" on 3,000 acres on the Ohio River below Pittsburgh. Their fame as farmers and manufacturers, as well as their exemplary community life, brought distinguished visitors to view their homes and mills. Although celibacy precluded an indefinite career for the Harmonists, the group persisted even beyond its founder's death and counted 250 members as late as 1890. Rapp remained in full control of his faculties until his death on Aug. 7, 1847. In accordance with Harmonist traditions he was buried in an unmarked grave.