

Searching for Freedom through Utopia:
Revisiting Frances Wright's Nashoba

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Introduction

Utopia and American Freedom

Intrinsic to the etymology of the word utopia—a sixteenth-century pun spun from the amalgamation of the Greek words for both *good place* and *no place*—is a subtle comment on the true nature of the idealistic world to which the word refers. Yet, the negative implications of Thomas More’s play on words has not deterred a myriad of enthusiastic reformers, visionaries, and fanatics from attempting to translate their schemes for the ideal society from the impractical realm of philosophical discourse into a viable alternative to the status quo. Indeed, early nineteenth-century America proved to be a fertile ground for utopian idealists—attracted perhaps by the purported freedom of the new democratic nation or by its vast swathes of virgin land—to plant the seeds of their personal visions for the model society. From the spiritually fervent and sexually celibate Shakers to the atheistic working-class communitarians led by Robert Owen, a variety of religious and secular communal societies took root in this fecund land prior to the Civil War.¹

Among those idealists blazing utopian trails throughout the new nation was Frances Wright, a fiery and independent young woman brimming with notions of social reform. Wright, an early women’s rights advocate and intellectual, came from Britain with a substantial inheritance and in 1825 established Nashoba, a communal society comprised of purchased slaves and reform-minded whites near Memphis, Tennessee. Wright’s primary objective was the creation of a practical system that would facilitate the

¹ A definitive work in the field of early nineteenth-century American utopian societies, though somewhat dated, is Arthur Bestor’s *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950). A more recent addition to the American utopian cannon is *America’s Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), a series of essays edited by Donald E. Pitzer.

emancipation of America's slaves. In theory, the purchased slaves, living with benevolent whites who would serve as educators and exemplars for the slaves, would earn their freedom by laboring on the Nashoba farm. After working long enough to reimburse Wright for the cost of their purchase, they would be sent from the United States to another country where they could live as free, educated citizens—for as they were toiling in the fields of Nashoba, the slaves were also to obtain academic lessons and receive instruction on the merits of socialist principles. Meanwhile, Wright bestowed upon the free men and women of the colony (who were both white and mulatto) her radical views on morality, which included a repudiation of the institutions of marriage and religion and an affirmation of women's rights. Ultimately, Wright's colony—suffering from second-rate soil, the illness and absence of its founder, and the stresses of creating a mixed-race utopian haven for slaves and whites—lasted a mere four years. In late 1829, Wright conceded the failure of the community and personally delivered the slaves to live free lives in Haiti.²

As peripheral groups that often deviate from the standard practices and beliefs of American society, utopian communities such as Nashoba have generally been relegated to the realm of footnotes and addenda in American history.³ For what reason ought the historian study these quirky anomalies whose actions, at first glance, seem irrelevant to the broader trends and issues in American society? In fact, utopian communities are significant precisely because they reject a society's typical customs and behaviors. When placed in the context of the larger society against which they rebelled, utopian

² Arthur Eugene Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America 1663-1829* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1950), 219-226.

³ See Paul S. Boyar, introduction to *America's Communal Utopias*, ed. Donald E. Pitzer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), x-xiii.

communities reveal the social and cultural issues plaguing that society, as well as the “dominant fears of an individual or age.”⁴ As such, utopian communities, while intrinsically fascinating for their deviant behavior, are also useful tools for the historical analysis of the larger society from which they have sprung. The Nashoba community in particular lends itself to the study of a greater theme that pervades the very fabric of American history: freedom.

Historian Eric Foner’s recent work, *The Story of American Freedom*, investigates this “magic but elusive word” that plays so prominent a role in American history.⁵ In his introduction, Foner notes that freedom is often the organizing theme of American historical works; however, these works “tend to give [freedom] a fixed definition and then trace how this idea has been worked out over time.”⁶ Instead, the American historian should take into account multiple meanings of freedom, so as to recognize “how dissenting voices, rejected positions, and disparaged theories have also played a role in shaping the meaning of freedom.”⁷ As Foner explains, the rallying cry of freedom was often appropriated and transformed by various individuals and groups in American history. For example, skillful use of the rhetoric of freedom allowed pro-slavery Southerners to justify slavery within the context of a Declaration proclaiming that men were endowed with a triad of freedoms: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Slavery apologists argued that the subjugation of the black segment of the population was a necessity for the preservation of the economic autonomy of the white portion of the

⁴ Paul Conkin, cited in Paul Boyer, “A Joyful Noyes: Reassessing America’s Utopian Tradition,” *Reviews in American History* 3 (1975): 25-30.

⁵ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), xiv. Foner attributes this quote to historian Carl Becker.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁷ *Ibid.*

nation, and economic autonomy was often viewed as a vital component of liberty. Without slavery, they asserted, no Americans would have liberty.⁸ Undoubtedly, the interpretation and utilization of the notion of freedom in the American context is a complex subject that ultimately may be more clearly elucidated by an investigation of the Nashoba community, which sought to transform antebellum ideas of freedom in a utopian environment, particularly with regard to liberty for slaves and freedom from the restrictive moral codes of American society.

This exploration of the concept of American freedom, as expressed in a utopian communitarian context, is precisely the objective of Michael Fellman in *The Unbounded Frame: Freedom and Community in Nineteenth Century American Utopianism*. While Fellman focuses on later nineteenth-century American utopian communities and does not mention Nashoba, the lens through which he views communal societies is useful for the analysis of Frances Wright and her utopian experiment. Fellman specifically hones in on the “strong tension between freedom and community” that permeated American utopian societies.⁹ The theoretically unbounded freedom of the young American nation as a limitless laboratory for novel social schemes often attracted utopian leaders such as Frances Wright, but by sheer virtue of organizing under the auspices of a rigidly defined utopian community, the communitarians forsook a portion of the very freedom they were seeking in the United States. This “need for formalism, for authority, for community to shape freedom”¹⁰ was a fundamental characteristic of Frances Wright’s utopian community, and this thesis will explore the tension created by the sometimes

⁸ Ibid., 32-33.

⁹ Michael Fellman. *The Unbounded Frame: Freedom and Community in Nineteenth Century American Utopianism* (Greenwood, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), xv.

¹⁰ Ibid., xvii.

contradictory elements of a structured communitarian society and the search for freedom in Nashoba.

The American rhetoric of freedom captured the imagination of the Scottish-born Frances Wright, who came to believe that while the new nation was far from perfect, the Founding Fathers had established a framework in which the young radical's notions of freedom could flourish via a reforming communal society. A number of facets of Wright's utopian community specifically addressed her concern with the lack of freedom in the American nation. Certainly, the most egregious flaw in this purportedly free country was the perpetuation of the system of slavery, and Nashoba directly tackled this failing with its emancipatory system. Wright also observed other societal problems in America and attributed them to a deficiency in freedom. Influenced by Robert Owen, she sought to remedy the plight of the worker—the “wage slave”—by implementing communitarian principles in her utopia. Moreover, she was grieved by the moral restrictions placed upon both sexes in antebellum American society by the institutions of marriage and the church, and she particularly strove to grant women in her community the freedom to control their minds, bodies, and finances separately from their husbands or lovers.

While Frances Wright has not garnered the historical fame (or infamy) of her fellow utopian Robert Owen, the antislavery Grimke sisters, or other early nineteenth-century feminists such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, this maverick activist has been the subject of several historical works. Celia Morris Eckhardt's relatively recent biography *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* builds upon previous biographies, filling in the gaps where early twentieth-century historians failed to elucidate

or research thoroughly the nuances of Wright's life.¹¹ Utilizing a substantial corpus of new evidence and reassessing older material, Eckhardt depicts a complex woman whose manic passion for social activism was matched only by her rash mistakes and depressive tendencies. The woman "who had spent her life recklessly in pledging the urgent and commanding justice of the people's cause" also suffered from "waves of depression," according to Eckhardt's psychological analysis of this often enigmatic figure.¹² Eckhardt devotes two chapters to Fanny's Nashoba tale, but her work focuses primarily on the cadences and overall message of Wright's life as a whole, rather than the community itself. On equality—one of Wright's favored causes that she often coupled with liberty—Eckhardt includes a brief reference, noting that Wright's life, among other things, is a tale of "how much people love the rhetoric of equality and how little they are inclined to make equality possible."¹³ Though Eckhardt's work is undoubtedly the most important secondary material extant on Wright, her research and analysis still leave room for further exploration of Wright, and Nashoba in particular, in light of the fundamental American theme of freedom.

While Eckhardt focuses on the curious persona of Frances Wright, John Egerton, in *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin, and the "New Communities" in Tennessee's Past*, couples the utopian community itself with other manifestations of the communitarian impulse in Tennessee history. Egerton attempts to shed light on this "obscure figure in the shadows of nineteenth-century America" by comparing Wright's

¹¹ Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). The two earlier, less thorough biographies of Wright are as follows: A. J. G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright Free Enquirer* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939) and William Waterman, *Frances Wright* (New York: Columbia University, 1924).

¹² Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright*, 295, 33.

¹³ Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright*, 4.

efforts with those of two other Tennessee utopian visionaries, Thomas Hughes of Rugby and Julius Wayland of Ruskin.¹⁴ Noting that the United States was home to “upwards of 200 experimental utopian communities” during the nineteenth century, Egerton also places these three Tennessee communities within the larger context of nineteenth-century American utopias. Like many other utopian communities of the century, Nashoba, Rugby, and Ruskin all “failed spectacularly,” but, Egerton maintains, the lofty pursuits of the leaders of these communities were not in vain, for they contributed to the very utopian objective inscribed in the Constitution itself: “to form a more perfect union.”¹⁵ Egerton seems to conclude that Frances Wright and her utopian ilk were, in fact, quintessentially American in their quest for perfection.

In contrast to Egerton’s positive assessment of Nashoba and its utopian cohorts, William and Jane Pease in “A New View of Nashoba” offer a more negative estimation of the community, which they evaluate as one of many “Organized Negro Communities” that speckled the map of nineteenth-century North America.¹⁶ In fact, as the title of their article suggests, the Peases’ work responds to a number of early twentieth-century pieces on the Nashoba community that often painted an uncritical picture of the utopia.¹⁷ According to the Peases, however, Nashoba suffered greatly because Frances Wright was concerned with two goals—freeing the slave and liberating the human mind—that in this instance worked at “cross purposes.”¹⁸ In other words, Wright attempted to create both a typical communal utopian society in the tradition of Robert Owen in order to “liberate the

¹⁴ John Egerton, *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin, and the “New Communities” in Tennessee’s Past* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

¹⁶ William and Jane Pease, “A New View of Nashoba,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 19 (1960): 100.

¹⁷ See Edd Winfield Parks, “Dreamer’s Vision: Frances Wright at Nashoba,” *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 2 (1932), 75-86 and O.B. Emerson, “Frances Wright and Her Nashoba Experiment,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 6 (1947), 291-315.

¹⁸ Pease, “A New View,” 107

human mind,” but at the same time aimed to elevate the status of, and eventually free, the African American. The dual purposes of the community left the black residents of Nashoba befuddled, neglected, and ultimately no better off than they were five years earlier. The Peases’ lament, “What had begun as an Organized Negro Experiment had ended as nothing. The Negro was the final loser.”¹⁹ While there is much credence to the critical assessment of Nashoba wrought by the Peases, history’s judgment of Frances Wright and her utopian community ought not be so harsh. Like many utopian experiments, the Nashoba community fell fantastically short of its aims; however, as Egerton suggests, Nashoba and other utopian communities were valuable in their own time and in ours because they embody the characteristically American quest for perfection. This thesis will carry Egerton’s positive assessment of Nashoba one step further and explore the community in terms of the quintessentially American pursuit of freedom.

Other scholarly works situate Wright and Nashoba within the framework of a larger subject, such as sex and marriage in nineteenth-century America or women in nineteenth-century utopian communities. Carol Kolmerten’s recent work *Women in Utopia: The Ideology of Gender in the American Owenite Communities*, describes the roots of the liberal sexuality of the Nashoba community. Kolmerten attempts to show how the egalitarian rhetoric of Owenite communities did not correspond with the reality of the woman’s position in these societies, which was often no different from the limited role of the woman in the oppressive patriarchy of American society as a whole.²⁰ More

¹⁹ Ibid., 109.

²⁰ Carol Kolmerten, *Women in Utopia: The Ideology of Gender in the American Owenite Communities* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1973), 1-12. Nashoba is often referred to as an “Owenite Community,” that is, a communal society based on the theories of the English reformer Robert Owen.

important to this discussion of Nashoba, however, is the chapter Kolmerten devotes to Frances Wright and her utopia, in which she explains much of the basis of Wright's anti-marriage, pro-free love ideals that manifested themselves in Nashoba. According to Kolmerten, Wright vociferously criticized the social customs of early nineteenth-century American society. She condemned the "servitude of matrimony" and lamented that women who rejected the "unnatural restraints" society placed on females were considered to be disgraced and dishonored.²¹ Unfortunately, Kolmerten explains, Wright attempted to introduce her radical ideas in the wrong era of American society; her failures and public condemnation are an example of "what happens to a woman seeking equality for women within a patriarchal state."²²

Similarly, Raymond Muncy's *Sex and Marriage in Utopian Communities, 19th Century America*, focuses largely on the familial, sexual, and gender relationships within a number of American utopian communities and considers Nashoba's curious tale of free love and miscegenation within the broader scope of nineteenth-century communal societies.²³ Muncy traverses the diverse sexual landscape of American utopian communities, from the celibate Shaker societies to the "complex marriages" involving more than one couple in the Oneida community. No matter what creed of sexuality and marriage adopted by a particular utopian community, Muncy notes, the communal system—in which residents shared housing, food, and work at close quarters and were often expected to place the interests of the community before their own kin—was "totally

²¹ Ibid., 126-127.

²² Ibid., 141.

²³ Raymond Lee Muncy, *Sex and Marriage in Utopian Communities, 19th Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 197-204.

different from the typically isolated family in America.”²⁴ Muncy, taking a stance similar to that of the Peases, concludes that the radical views of sexuality (interracial free love) championed by Wright only “frustrated the Negroes at Nashoba” and merely served to hinder her emancipatory goals.²⁵

Historians such as Muncy, Kolmerten, the Peases, Egerton, Eckhardt and others²⁶ have explored Frances Wright and Nashoba from a number of varied angles, but Frances Wright’s search for American freedom and the tensions between freedom and community in Nashoba, as suggested by the works of Eric Foner and Michael Fellman, remains to be explored. Ultimately, this thesis will make a unique contribution to the secondary material on Nashoba and utopian communities in general by placing Nashoba within the context of American freedom and by investigating the ways in which Frances Wright sought to transform the definition and implementation of this concept in American society. It will explore Wright’s own struggle to define both liberty—an Enlightenment derived term that suggests civil liberty—and freedom—a more all-encompassing concept—as well as the tensions that arose in Nashoba when issues of freedom, liberty, and communitarian structure clashed.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 11.

²⁵ Ibid., 204.

²⁶ Cf. Susan Kissel. *In Common Cause: The “Conservative” Frances Trollope and the “Radical” Frances Wright* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State UP, 1993); John C. Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860* (New York: New York University Press, 1988); Helen Heineman, *Restless Angels: The Friendships of Six Victorian Women* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1983).

²⁷ While the terms “freedom” and “liberty” are used interchangeably in modern American society, a nuanced investigation of the roots of the words and their historical usage indicates that the two words, in fact, have different meanings. Liberty more aptly applies to what we think of as “civil liberty”; the Oxford English Dictionary defines liberty as “exemption from arbitrary, despotic, or autocratic rule or control.” Liberty also implies some level of constraint, particularly through the social contract. On the other hand, freedom, “the state of being able to act without hindrance or restraint, liberty of action,” has much broader connotations, including “license,” and is not necessarily associated with the constraints of the social contract, as liberty is.

Chapter I

Drawn to the Sufferings of Humanity:

The Birth of a Utopian Visionary

“The human mind,” twenty-four year-old Frances Wright once proclaimed, “is ennobled by liberty...and humanized when the book of knowledge is thrown open to its inspection.”²⁸ From the earliest years of her childhood and adolescence, the life of Frances Wright resonated with the echoing theme of liberty. Trapped in a stifling aristocratic world to which she instinctively understood she did not belong, a youthful Wright endeavored to break free of her conservative, upper-class confines via the intellectually liberating avenues of books and intellectual pursuits. Once she had achieved her own freedom as an independent woman, she began to devote her efforts toward the emancipation of others, particularly the oppressed and maligned populations of humanity. Before the establishment of Nashoba in 1825, when Wright was thirty years old, she encountered a multitude of radical theories and influential intellectuals, from utilitarian philosophers to democratic statesmen, who shaped her perception of the world. Wright’s quest for freedom through the Nashoba community was the product of her assimilation and modification of the ideas and people she came in contact with in both Europe and America during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Frances Wright, born in 1795 and orphaned at age three along with her sister and brother, was the elder daughter in an affluent merchant family of Dundee, Scotland.²⁹

²⁸ Frances Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (London: Longman et al. 1821). Reprinted with introduction and notes by Paul R. Baker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963): 63. Wright penned these words in 1819, but published them in 1821.

²⁹ Frances Wright D’Arusmont, *Biography and Notes* (Boston: J.P. Medum, 1848). Reprinted from the Dundee *Northern Star*, 1844. This “biography” is actually an 1844 autobiography written directly by

Separated from her siblings and placed in the care of two indifferent aristocratic relatives—a maternal grandfather and an aunt—in England, she filled her lonely childhood with books. As she recollected in her 1844 autobiography, the young Wright quickly realized that her opinions drastically deviated from those held by the Tory relatives of the “lettered aristocracy” to whom she had been relegated; she endured “the absence of all sympathy with the views and characters of those among whom her childhood was thrown.”³⁰ Several early biographers of Wright relate a tale regarding her grandfather, the retired military officer General Duncan Campbell. According to the story, when Wright, as child, enquired why the beggars she saw throughout London were so poor, her blue-blooded grandfather replied that the poor were too lazy to work. When the perceptive girl pointed out that her grandfather did not work, he replied “ ‘I could not associate with the rich if I worked. It is a shame for a rich man to work. Some are born rich and some are born poor.’ ”³¹ Such attitudes alienated Wright from her guardians, and for the duration of her childhood Wright lived as an intellectual outsider among her own kin.

After obtaining some of her father’s personal papers, however, Wright recognized that her understanding of the world—while severely at variance with that of her caretakers—was surprisingly similar to that of the deceased James Wright, whom she had

Wright, though she refers to herself in third person throughout the work. A letter from Wright follows the biography indicating that its contents are accurate. Certainly, Wright to some extent “constructed” this autobiography to portray her life in the way she wished to be remembered—as an always-fervent advocate for the causes of freedom and equality. Nevertheless, its contents are still useful, perhaps even more so, in understanding the persona of Frances Wright. NB: D’Arusmont was Wright’s marital surname, deriving from her post-Nashoba 1831 marriage to Phiquepal D’Arusmont, whom she later divorced.

³⁰ Ibid., 5.7. Wright indicates that her maternal ancestors were of the titled aristocracy in Great Britain; for instance, her mother’s uncle was “Baron Rokeby.”

³¹ A.J.G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright Free Enquirer: The Study of a Temperament* (New York: Harper, 1939), 8. Also in Joel Brown’s unpublished memoir of Frances Wright, Cincinnati Public Library.

barely known. Indicating the postmortem influence this man had on his impressionable young daughter, Wright described her father at length in her 1844 autobiography. The elder Wright, the son of a wealthy Dundee merchant, was educated at the “best academies of Perth and Edinburgh” and pursued an intellectual career that included antiquarian research for the British Museum in London and correspondence with Adam Smith.³² As a sympathizer of the French Revolution who had promoted an inexpensive publication of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*—a defense of the French Revolution and a celebration of democratic government and equality—James Wright was “an object of government espionage” in 1794.³³ This free-thinking Scott even altered the motto on the Wright family crest from the more traditional “For the king” to the radical “Our country is dear, liberty dearer.”³⁴ As the younger Wright expanded her intellectual world, she rapidly began to adopt the cause of liberty—specifically, civil liberty, or a citizen’s exemption from the despotic and arbitrary rule of government—espoused by both Thomas Paine and James Wright.

While the political activism exemplified by her father’s actions would eventually come to play a large role in Wright’s own life, for the moment she contented herself with indulging in purely intellectual pursuits. for she was “surrounded at all times by rare and extensive libraries” at the home of Duncan Campbell and “commanded whatever masters she desired.”³⁵ Wright recalled an early experience with a tutor—a “shrewd mathematician and physician”—who chastised her for asking a “dangerous” question.

³² D’Arusmont. *Biography*, 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4. Paine’s work was originally published in 1791 in an expensive volume, which prevented the British masses from easily obtaining it. The British government attempted to stifle later, less pricey versions of the tract.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5. In the original Latin: “*Pro rege saepe*” and “*Patris cara carior libertas.*” respectively.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

When she inquired whether “Truth” could be dangerous and the tutor answered affirmatively, the clever student surmised that “men were afraid” of Truth.³⁶ As lofty philosophical thoughts concerning “Truth” and “dangerous questions” pried upon her young mind, current events began to pique Wright’s interest. Sometime during her early adolescence this inquisitive reader came across the Italian Carlo Bocca’s account of the American Revolution; as she recalled in her autobiography, this tale so fascinated and enthralled her that she became convinced that she must have read a fictional story, until she was finally able to verify the existence of the United States with a current atlas. Amazed that “there existed a country consecrated to freedom, in which man might awake to the full knowledge and full exercise of his powers,” Wright became infatuated with this new nation.³⁷ The search for liberty that had inspired her father’s actions was being fulfilled across the ocean, and Wright was determined to one day witness this liberated country in person.

At the age of eighteen, Wright was able to escape the clutches of her odious aunt and grandfather, and in 1813 both she and her younger sister Camilla (who had been consigned to a different relative during her childhood) decided to reside with their great-uncle, Professor James Mylne, who held the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. A man whose sentiments were far removed from the orthodox Tory sympathies of Wright’s previous guardians, Mylne was an opponent of the slave trade and was a philosopher of the “Adam Smith tradition.”³⁸ A student of Mylne’s at Glasgow who later achieved greater fame as the president of Princeton University

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 10.

³⁸ George Davie, *The Scottish Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 2001), 135. Adam Smith held the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow prior to Mylne.

recollected his old professor as an “adherent of liberal principals” who was “regarded as a dangerous man by the government of the day.”³⁹ This proponent of freedom—whose “liberal” sympathies and subversive tendencies were strikingly similar to the political leanings of her father—resonated strongly with young Wright. She recalled the “mutually warm affection” that characterized the “confidential friendship” between James Mylne and herself, and the language she utilized to describe this “venerable professor” indicates the crucial role he must have played in these formative years of her early intellectual experience.⁴⁰ Recollecting Mylne in her autobiography, Wright noted that she held a “high opinion of his liberality and elevation of mind.”⁴¹ Additionally, Mylne introduced Wright to his in-laws, the Millar family, whose patriarch, John Millar, was a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher who studied under Adam Smith and favored “liberal policies,” supporting American independence and the abolition of the slave trade.⁴² Though Millar was long deceased by the time Wright arrived in Glasgow, his intellectually and academically active children befriended Wright. The philosophical leanings toward liberty espoused by Mylne and the Millar family coincided with views later advocated by Wright, so this progressive academic company certainly must have influenced the intellectual development of the young radical.

Three years of residence in a university environment with access to university libraries and academic personalities such as Mylne widened the breadth of Wright’s knowledge and augmented her radical tendencies. Most significantly, Wright continued to pursue her study of the new American nation that had captured her imagination.

³⁹ James McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy* (London: Reprografischer Nackdruck der Ausgabe, 1875). Reprinted (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966), 364.

⁴⁰ D’Arusmont, *Biography*, 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴² Alexander Broadie, ed., *The Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1997), 801.

Describing the nature of her interest to the librarian of the University of Glasgow, she was shown the way to a remote corner of the library “filled as it was with volumes and pamphlets from floor to ceiling” where she could find “all that had ever appeared in print respecting the American colonies.”⁴³ Yet, though Wright spent much of her time immersed in books behind thick library walls, her eyes were not closed to the world outside of her privileged social sphere. Appalled by the destitution so apparent in British society, this young woman was “powerfully drawn toward the sufferings of humanity.”⁴⁴ Specifically, Wright was deeply affected by the current social calamity that was wrecking havoc in her native Scotland during the time she resided there. The Highland Clearances, in which landowners expelled peasant farmers from the land to acquire pasture for profitable sheep, were particularly brutal and widespread between the years 1811 and 1821.⁴⁵ In her autobiography Wright recalled her shock when she witnessed “the peasantry ejected, under various pretexts, from the estates of the wealthy proprietors of the soil among whom she moved.”⁴⁶ What better solution to the vicious inequalities she observed in Great Britain’s hierarchy, Wright must have mused, than the apparent liberty established by this new nation across the Atlantic?

The lure of the United States proved to be strong, and in 1818, when Wright was twenty-three, she arranged that she and Camilla should take an extensive tour of the United States.⁴⁷ Settling in New York City with a family of English expatriates for several months, the sisters were introduced to the upper crust of New York society, including Charles Wilkes, a prominent employee and eventual president of the Bank of

⁴³ Ibid., 12-13.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁵ Eric Richards, *History of the Highland Clearances*, vol. 1 (London: Croom Helm, 1982). 284.

⁴⁶ D’Arusmont, *Biography*. 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.

New York.⁴⁸ With the bravado that would come to typify her character in later years, Wright (a foreigner and woman, no less) successfully employed her New York connections to find a theater company that would produce a play she had written during her Glasgow years. *Altorf*, a tale of Switzerland's fourteenth-century struggle for freedom from Austrian rule, was performed on February 19, 1819, and published shortly thereafter. As Wright expounded on the promise of the future of American theater in the preface to the published work, she—ever-infatuated with the new nation—included an homage to the freedom of speech permitted in the United States: “America is the land of liberty. Here is the country where Truth may lift her voice without fear—where the words of Freedom may not only be read in the closet, but heard from the stage.”⁴⁹ Indeed, this drama exemplified the theme that was fomenting in the future activist's mind: the human being's endless struggle for freedom. When the Swiss patriot Erlach proclaims, “I wed in life or death the cause of freedom,” one senses that Wright, speaking through the mouthpiece of her character, was taking a vow that was to her far more important than an ordinary marriage vow.⁵⁰ Indeed, throughout her life, Wright sacrificed many things—including her friendships, her reputation, and her fortune—for her ultimate ideal of freedom, and the very freedom of speech guaranteed in America had provided her with the opportunity to espouse her views on stage.

The journey of the adventurous Wright sisters in the new world produced some notable literary fruit, for upon her return to England in 1820, Wright published *Views of*

⁴⁸ Frances Wright to Julia Garnett, 22 November 1820, in “The Nashoba Plan for Removing the Evil of Slavery: Letters of Frances and Camilla Wright, 1820-1829.” Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin, ed. *Harvard Library Bulletin*. 23 (July 1975): 23 (August 1975). Wright often corresponded with the sisters Julia and Harriet Garnett, two women of the British expatriate family with whom Wright and her sister lodged in New York.

⁴⁹ Frances Wright, *Altorf* (Philadelphia: M. Carey & Son, 1819). iv.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

Society and Manners in America. In this laudatory travel journal comprised of a series of twenty-eight letters written to a friend in Scotland, the eloquent authoress described her admiration for the American democracy, in which “the wheel of government, moved by the united impetus of the whole people, turns noiseless and unimpeded, watched by all and suspected by none.”⁵¹ In addition to her extended stay in New York and some brief visits to New England states, Wright and her sister also visited Washington, D.C. This was the grand finale of their two-year American adventure, in which they were given the opportunity to observe directly the mechanisms of the democratic government. The sisters watched debates in the Senate and the House of Representatives and were introduced to a number of American politicians, including Henry Clay and the President, James Monroe.⁵² Wright repeatedly waxed sentimental when describing the liberty found in the American nation and even referred to it as utopia attained:

“It is singular to look round upon a country where the dreams of sages, smiled at as utopian, seem distinctly realized, a people voluntarily submitting to the laws of their own imposing... There is something truly grand in this moral restraint, freely imposed by a community on itself.”⁵³

Here Wright indicates her understanding of liberty in terms of the European Enlightenment tradition. She alludes to the social contract to which the American citizens have submitted themselves; they are granted liberty, but they are also constrained by civil society. Moreover, it is clear that liberty—as realized in the democratic government of the United States—and utopia had become intimately interwoven in Wright’s psyche.

⁵¹ Wright, *Views*, 59.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 262-266.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 188.

The democratic foundations of this young society, Wright discovered to her delight, had fostered a measure of social equality that was unknown in her native Britain. Upon her first glimpse of the New World, Wright caught sight of “thousands of little villas or thriving farms” along the coastline, implying that the United States was unscarred by the stain of the “great proprietor”—the absurdly wealthy landlords who kept Britain’s masses mired in poverty and denied them liberty.⁵⁴ She noted, moreover, that there seemed to be “neither poor nor uneducated” citizens in America and lauded the indifference of Americans toward the British class hierarchy.⁵⁵ When Wright visited Philadelphia a few months into her American journey, she was overcome with admiration for William Penn and the Society of Friends, or Quakers. Wright proclaimed, “The annals of the human race present us with no name more dear, at once to humanity and to liberty, than that of Penn.”⁵⁶ Penn and his followers had produced “many wise laws and humane institutions.” and Wright praised them for their support of freedom of speech and their opposition to the death penalty and slavery.⁵⁷ But Quakers were not the only compassionate inhabitants of the United States, for as Wright explained, “A people who have bled together for liberty... are bound together by ties of amity and citizenship far beyond what is usual in national communities.” The standards of equality and benevolence found in America’s population were, Wright believed, directly related to the liberty fostered by its democratic government.

Yet, however grand the edifice of American democracy may have appeared to Wright, she did not deny that a blemish stained the otherwise polished facade of the new

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-37.

nation. The institution of African slavery, which created a paradoxical situation in this purportedly free country, troubled Wright enormously. Writing to a friend in New York shortly after she returned to England, Wright lamented that in the Southern states liberty was “mocked & outraged by a race of free men, who while they have [America’s] name in their mouths...grasp the chain of oppression in their hands, denying to the wretched sons of Africa that holy birthright which they themselves declare man holds of God.”⁵⁸ Wright did eventually address this issue in the otherwise praised-filled account of her travels in the United States. Indicating her gradually evolving, more critical opinion of America, she closed her chronicle’s last chapter—written at the end of her two-year journey—with a discussion of slavery. Wright mulled over the consequences of emancipation, musing that “to give liberty to a slave before he understands its value is, perhaps, rather to impose a penalty than bestow a blessing,” as the slave would most likely merely end up impoverished and uneducated, perhaps in a worse position than he was in before, when released from his master.⁵⁹ It appears that freedom, to Frances Wright, was much more than simply release from physical bonds of captivity; true freedom included the possession of the mental tools needed for a productive life as an American citizen enjoying liberty within the confines of the social contract.

Thus, more promising for the abolition of slavery, Wright noted, was a story related to her regarding a Virginia planter who emancipated seventeen of his slaves and transported them to Illinois; the former master provided them with land, tools, and advice on how to survive as free men and women.⁶⁰ While she admired this Virginia planter, Wright wondered why this “work of benevolence” should be left to the “philanthropy of

⁵⁸ Frances Wright to Harriet Garnett, October 1820. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Views*, 268-269.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

individuals,” when instead the state could take charge of the situation. Characteristically quixotic, she called for the state of Virginia to single-handedly take on the burden of this philanthropy and orchestrate a gradual abolition of all slaves.⁶¹ Wright closed her American memoir with an inspirational quote relayed to her by James Monroe: “ ‘The day is not very far distant when a slave will not be found in America!’ ”⁶² The seeds had been planted for Wright’s future exploits; the hope embodied in Monroe’s words would soon blossom in Wright’s own utopian vision of a civic community of free individuals.

The opinions espoused by Wright in *Views* drew the attention of many. She garnered vitriolic criticism from Tory conservatives in England who still held reservations about the young upstart nation, as well as the praise of more radically minded people at home and abroad. The utilitarian Jeremy Bentham and the revolutionary war hero General Lafayette were eager to make her acquaintance, and even Thomas Jefferson took note of this young woman’s publication.⁶³ Other notable figures with whom she came into contact after the publication of her travel journal during the first half of the 1820s included James Mill, Joseph Hume, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Frances Trollope, and a host of other less illustrious intellectuals. By publishing *Views*, Wright had opened the door to elite European intellectual circles, and the men and women she met in the years after her return from America would expand and reinforce the high opinions of liberty, equality, and democracy she had formed in her adolescence and young adulthood.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 270.

⁶³ Thomas Jefferson to General Lafayette. 4 November 1823. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol XV, ed. Andrew Lipscomb (Washington DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), 293.

Jeremy Bentham, who proclaimed “I am in love with her” in a letter to a friend before he had even met Wright, was the first intellectual of note to invite her friendship after the publication of *Views*.⁶⁴ The English philosopher Bentham was the father of utilitarianism, a theory that held that the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people ought to be the guiding principle of morality and politics. Certainly, Wright, who fervently desired to aid the downtrodden of Europe and America, would have supported such a moral and political code. Moreover, Bentham’s demand for legal reformation in England—including prison reform, the reorganization of law codes, and the extension of the right to vote—must have struck a chord with Wright’s liberal sentiments.⁶⁵ Evidently the philosopher was likewise impressed with Wright’s work and intelligence, for he advertised her name and her writing throughout his correspondence, as in this September 1821 letter to Etienne Dumont: “Miss Frances Wright: aged 25: one of the sweetest and absolutely the strongest minds ever cased in a female body... Let yours be open for her reading: mine will be.”⁶⁶ At the impressionable age of twenty-five, Wright undoubtedly internalized much of Bentham’s philosophy, and her later work sometimes echoes his own.

Shortly after their initial encounter in the summer of 1821, Bentham introduced Wright to a celebrated man who shared her love of the American nation: General Lafayette. Wright described her first meeting with this “venerable friend of human liberty” in a September 1821 missive addressed to Bentham. Relating the nature of their conversation, Wright explained, “The enthusiasm and heart affection with which he

⁶⁴ Jeremy Bentham to Richard Rush, 29 July 1821. *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. 10, ed. F. Rosen and P. Schofield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 361.

⁶⁵ Charles Milner Atkinson, *Jeremy Bentham: His Life and Work* (New York: August M. Kelley, 1969).

⁶⁶ Jeremy Bentham to Etienne Dumont, 24 October 1821. *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 414.

spoke of *our Utopia*, the high respect he expressed for the character of its people, the ardent love of liberty which breathed through all his discourse, found, I need not say, an answering note of sympathy in me.”⁶⁷ According to the letter, the aged and wizened Lafayette relished in detailing his revolutionary war memories to an interested listener, and the youthful and eager Wright devoured the tales of the old general who was a direct participant in the formation of the nation she so admired. The “Utopia” to which she referred was merely the United States itself, for, at this early stage, Wright was so enamored with the near-perfect new nation that its mere existence, in her opinion, heralded the attainment of utopia. Lafayette and Wright also discussed their shared affection for Bentham; as Wright explained, “we talked of you often... General La Fayette [sic] expressed the highest respect and admiration for the philosopher and philanthropist, to whom, as he observed, the whole human race owes a debt of gratitude.”⁶⁸ The old general, the even older philosopher, and the youthful Wright were tied together by their commitment to principle of liberty, as it was embodied in the new nation of the United States. Perhaps these men of the older generation saw Wright as a representative of the younger generation who was passionate and intelligent enough to carry on their ideals—democracy and utilitarianism, respectively—into the next era.

In any case, Wright took up a three-year residence at the Lafayette estate in France, La Grange, where she grew very close to the old general and continued to socialize with the upper crust of Europe, even becoming involved with revolutionary political proceedings. As Lafayette was an elected member of the French Chamber of Deputies, Wright frequently observed the proceedings of this parliament in person, and

⁶⁷ Frances Wright to Jeremy Bentham, 12-15 September 1821. *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*. 391-394.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

eventually came to possess what she deemed to be the “general confidence of the revolutionary leaders throughout Europe.”⁶⁹ When Wright resided with Lafayette in France, the General, ever seeking to support the cause of liberty, became involved with the Carbonari, a revolutionary secret society begun in Italy for the purpose of overthrowing the monarchy and which spread to France with the same aims. Wright apparently played a small role in the conspiracies involving Lafayette and the Carbonari, serving as an inconspicuous courier for Lafayette’s correspondence with Carbonari expatriates in London.⁷⁰ The uprising planned by this organization ultimately failed, crushed by the French government, and with that failure came the end of Wright’s sojourn in France. Wright later noted in her autobiography that this period of political immersion in France “had somewhat modified and greatly matured her views,” giving the young woman a great disdain for “absurd drawing room intrigues and fashionable conspirators” who ultimately toyed with the fate of “human lives.”⁷¹ Though, ironically, in just a few years Wright herself would be toying with the fate of over thirty lives at Nashoba, this French adventure compelled Wright to abandon the upper-class intrigues of Europe and inspired her to look elsewhere to satisfy her desire for activism.

After three years of political conspiracy in France, Wright was ready to return to her beloved America, not simply as a visitor, it would turn out, but as a resident. She and Camilla accompanied General Lafayette on a triumphal tour of the United States in 1824.⁷² Wright, however, was soon distracted from polite society’s balls and parlour

⁶⁹ D’Arusmont, *Biography*, 14-16.

⁷⁰ Sylvia Neely, *Lafayette and the Liberal Ideal, 1814-1824: Politics and Conspiracy in an Age of Reaction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 197-198.

⁷¹ D’Arusmont, *Biography*, 18.

⁷² Wright’s decision to accompany Lafayette was much to the chagrin of his appalled family, who were incredulous of the pair’s assertion that their relationship was purely platonic. While speculations on the nature of their relationship abounded at the time, it was, most likely, not of a sexual nature.

calls. While spending time in Virginia, she commented in a letter to a New York friend, “We shall find here as in Norfolk much pleasing and polished society—but my thoughts & feelings ever wander from it, contrasting the condition of the proud & accomplished master with that of the debased & injured slave to whom the master’s will is law.”⁷³

Wright’s itinerant thoughts were probably the result of a recent meeting in Philadelphia at the beginning of their journey, in which she and Camilla convened with “the Haytan [sic] agent [Jonathan] Grandville” who was in the process of coordinating the colonization of African Americans in Haiti.⁷⁴ Sent as an emissary by Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer⁷⁵, Grandville had just “dispatched 4 vessels from different ports charged with [transporting] black families to Port au Prince” when he spoke with Wright and her sister. Grandville explained to Wright that the Haitian government provided the capital for the relocation of the American blacks, and after completing a certain amount of agricultural work in Haiti, the emigrants’ “debt would be cancelled” by the government, thus supplying an “incentive for industry.”⁷⁶ From the very inception of her second North American journey, Wright’s mind was attuned to the nation’s most glaring exception to liberty and freedom, and she had already begun to gather information on potential solutions to the problem.

Some of Wright’s tension regarding the paradoxical situation of the free country was alleviated by a visit to Monticello, where she spoke with former President Jefferson about “some steps which he considers as preparatory to the abolition of slavery at least in

⁷³ Frances Wright to Julia Garnett, 30 October 1824. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

⁷⁴ Frances Wright to Julia Garnett, 12 November 1824. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

⁷⁵ Chris Dixon, *African America and Haiti: Emigration and Black Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Greenwood, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000). 36.

⁷⁶ Frances Wright to Julia Garnett, 12 November 1824. *Harvard Bulletin*.

this state.”⁷⁷ Jefferson agreed with the Haitian government’s plan for the black emigration to the island nation, a “safe & convenient haven for the black population of the US.” Noting the racial prejudice “so deeply rooted in the American mind,” Jefferson mused to Wright that “emancipation without expatriation... seems impossible.”⁷⁸ With such grand emancipatory schemes dominating the tenor of her American travels, even the company of Jefferson could not satiate Wright’s active mind and restless feet; she quickly decided that she wished to experience more than upper-class social gatherings. A whole new nation remained to be explored—by stagecoach, by steamboat, and even on horseback.

In her first visit to the United States, Wright spent most of her time in New York, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia, but she did not venture into the Deep South or out to the frontier land of the West. On her second journey, however, Wright was determined to see the entirety of the vast nation. Touring the nation from Boston down to New Orleans and up to Indiana, Wright encountered two drastically different institutions that were to make an indelible imprint upon her mind: New Orleans slavery and Robert Owen’s communitarian experiment at New Harmony, Indiana. Of New Orleans she declared, “Surely this is the Babylon of the revelations, where reignth the great Western slavery, mud & musquitoes... as you travel south the features of slavery grow harsher until they find their *ne plus ultra* in New Orleans.”⁷⁹ Wright described New Orleans extensively; she noted the multiple levels of status in the city’s unique society, in which a “curious” class of free mulattos, some slave-owning, was awkwardly situated in the social hierarchy between the white planter class and enslaved black masses. Wright observed that this

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Frances Wright to Julia Garnett. 12 April 1825. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

free mulatto class seemed to result from the common practice in which a “creole planter” had “two regular families, a legal white & an illegal colored... the latter in many cases educated and provided for as well as emancipated.” Yet despite “the curious & ... interesting mixture of population exhibited” in New Orleans, Wright’s overall impression of this Southern bastion of slavery consisted of images of “poor wretches,” “the clank of chains,” and “iron hearted tyrants.”⁸⁰

Disturbed by the “plague” of slavery she beheld in New Orleans, the bold Wright spoke to area planters about the situation. The planters Wright encountered related their fears to her regarding the possibility of a slave uprising. Wright explained, “The alarm of the more reflecting whites is extreme & some have confessed to me that they only considered the schemes for gradual emancipation (which had occurred to me & which I ventured to hint at) as impossible because they would come too late.”⁸¹ Wright was anguished over the hellish state of Babylon, but having spoken with its inhabitants, whose fear of a slave uprising might convince them to accept emancipation, she may perhaps have already ascertained that some form of redemption might be possible for this great evil.

Fortuitously, Wright’s observations of Babylon were tempered by her visit to a veritable Garden of Eden. As she traveled up the Mississippi and viewed the stunning plantations that lined its banks, she “could have wept [thinking] that such a garden was wrought by the hands of slaves.”⁸² Wright’s description of the expansive landholdings of the Southern upper class strikingly contrasts with her rosy first impression of the American shore several years earlier, when she praised the coastline dotted with small

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

farms and the absence of the “great proprietors” so common in Europe. The seasoned Wright, whose life was now peppered with several years of traveling and experience, had shed her naïve first impressions for a more nuanced view of the purportedly free and equal nation. Thus, when her steamboat finally arrived in the North, she “thanked heaven at the entrance of the Ohio.”⁸³ For just beyond this river, in Indiana, Wright found her heaven—Robert Owen’s communitarian utopia, New Harmony.

When Wright visited New Harmony in the spring of 1825, Robert Owen, an English industrialist turned social engineer, had just purchased the land and physical structures of the community from a group of religious communitarians known as the Rappites, or Harmonists, led by Frederick Rapp. Before venturing into the Deep South, Wright had briefly sojourned at Harmonie, as the Rappites had originally called the community, to observe the communal way of life. Now, visiting the community for a second time, Wright met its new leader, Robert Owen, a self-made man who had managed the most successful cotton mills in Manchester, England, and had developed communitarian principles by observing his power to mold the activities and characters of the residents of his self-contained mill town, New Lanark, in Scotland. He had improved the lives of the mill town’s inhabitants while still maintaining substantial profits by implementing policies of reduced working hours, enhanced sanitation, and childhood education. Owen’s signature maxim was “The character, physical and mental, of all men and women, is formed... not BY themselves... but FOR them.” Owen felt that, having discovered “the greatest of all truths for man to know,” he could shape the characters of men and women within a communitarian society.⁸⁴ Thus, with Owen at the helm of a

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Robert Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen* vol. I (1857; repr. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967), iv.

community, its inhabitants could ultimately be “made to become at maturity, good, wise, and happy.”⁸⁵ Of course, when Wright met Owen, he had only begun to embark on his American communitarian venture. and she could not have known that New Harmony would fail miserably within just a few years. Rather, Wright had happened upon a reformer with an impressive record of accomplishment in England, a new community bustling with 800 inhabitants, and an infectious zeal that could only be matched by her own.

Wright explained the early appeal of communitarianism in a letter, “When I first visited Harmonie... a vague idea crossed me that there was something in the system of united labor as there in operation which might be rendered subservient to the emancipation of the South.”⁸⁶ Now, on her second trip to this communal territory and with the horrors of New Orleans fresh in her mind, Wright had discovered a possible foundation for her budding emancipatory scheme. Whereas Robert Owen was laboring to liberate the white working classes of North, Wright thought she could utilize his communitarian plan to liberate the enslaved masses of the South. The principles of communitarian labor embodied in New Harmony held great appeal for Wright, and her ever-active mind began to foment a rudimentary plan for action.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Frances Wright to Julia Garnett, 8 June 1825. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

Chapter II

Nascent Nashoba:

The Search for Liberty in a Utopian Context

Wright's experiences in the Deep South and in New Harmony led her to propose a practical communitarian experiment that would rid America of the great evil of slavery, bring freedom to all of its people, and enshrine liberty in this new world. Describing her second tour of the nation in a letter to a friend, Wright proclaimed, "during these 7 months I may say that my thoughts & enquiries have been engrossed by, & directed almost exclusively to, the subject of slavery."⁸⁷ This traveler did not consider herself to be on a pleasure trip; instead, she spent her yearlong journey through the South and the West researching her cause and laying the groundwork for her future plans. Wright spoke to numerous people in order to procure "all the information possible from every individual I came across," and she even plunged into legal research on slavery. She examined "the laws respecting it in the different states & reflected upon all the possible means of removing the evil."⁸⁸ In this same letter, Wright explained the fundamentals of her plan, which attempted to account for practical limitations as well as idealized goals.

Well-versed in the emancipation experiments that had preceded her own, Wright described the flaws of these schemes to explain the necessity of advancing her own unique vision. She explained, "The schemes hitherto adopted (in the way of emancipation & colonization societies, etc) I have always considered as doing individual

⁸⁷ Frances Wright to Julia Garnett, 8 June 1825. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

benefits at the expense of helping forward the general evil.”⁸⁹ Wright held that these organizations either merely shipped abroad the unwanted free blacks, who were competition in the eyes of the “jealous” whites, or simply released “old or lazy slaves”—those who were not economically valuable—to fend for themselves in a society that resented their presence. Furthermore, Wright charged that the organizations that raised money for the purchase of the freedom of slaves merely helped to “swell the market for slavery,” for “so long as the market exists the commodity will be encouraged.”⁹⁰ Even in her later autobiography Wright recalled that at this time “she had but little sympathy with the professed abolitionists, among whom she usually found much zeal with little knowledge.” In fact, Wright was concerned about their philanthropic motives—or lack thereof—for “hatred of the planter seemed oftentimes to be a stronger feeling than interest in the slave.”⁹¹

Specifically, Wright was criticizing the two polar extremes of the abolitionist movement in the United States.⁹² The American Colonization Society, holding that freed slaves could not coexist with antagonistic whites in American society, sought to transport ex-slaves from the United States and settle them in Africa. The ACS received support from many notable American leaders, including Henry Clay and James Monroe.⁹³ At the other end of the spectrum were those abolitionists who opposed colonization and advocated the immediate emancipation of slaves; in the 1820s, African Americans themselves led this movement and began a publication, *Freedom's Journal*, to promote

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Wright, *Biography and Notes*, 22-23.

⁹² Cf. Pease, “A New View of Nashoba,” 99.

⁹³ Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 16-22.

their views.⁹⁴ Immediatism became more prevalent in the 1830s, after the demise of Nashoba, through the efforts of William Lloyd Garrison.⁹⁵ In creating her plan for Nashoba, Frances Wright included some elements of both of these positions, while discarding those aspects of the groups that she considered ineffective.

Unlike the immediatists, Wright felt that it would be very difficult for emancipated African-Americans to coexist peacefully and productively alongside the prejudiced and resentful white population. Referring to the legislation of emancipation in the Northern states, Wright explained in her autobiography that she had seen “the evil effects produced by the mere governmental abolition of an evil which has its seat in the mind, the habits, and through hereditary influences, in the very physical organization of a race.”⁹⁶ The free African Americans in the Northern states were still subject to the prejudices of Northern whites, and Wright accordingly believed that emancipatory legislation in the South would not eradicate the oppression of the blacks. Moreover, rather than supporting the mere colonization advocated by the American Colonization Society, Wright thought it would be best to first prepare slaves for their freedom through education and then, when they had the tools to survive on their own, they could resettle in a less hostile country. Even in the possible scenario of a mass revolt among slaves (as many planters feared) before emancipation became a reality, Wright believed that it was “highly important that a portion of that people be prepared for liberty, that they may then be the means of civilizing the ignorant mass.”⁹⁷ The preparation for liberty through interaction between the slaves and the free inhabitants of Nashoba—who would serve as

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁶ Wright, *Biography and Notes*, 24.

⁹⁷ FW to Julia Garnett, 8 June 1825. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

the educators and exemplars of the slaves, rather than as their fellow laborers—was a key aspect of Wright’s fledgling plan, and this distinguished her scheme from the prominent contemporary abolitionist organizations. Liberty, to Frances Wright, was more than the eradication of the physical chains of slavery; it involved providing the slaves with the tools to free their minds and become productive citizens within society.

Wright was aware that many planters feared a large-scale revolt in the ever-multiplying slave population, and she hoped to take advantage of this fear by offering the slave owners a way to rid themselves of the dangerous burden of their slaves without any pecuniary loss. Wright noted the “terror of the whites at the increasing number of blacks in Louisiana” when she was traversing the Southern states, and she ascertained that the reason the number of slaves continued to grow despite this fear was that the planters, “tempted by the prospect of great immediate gains,” found it less costly to import slaves from Africa or the Upper South rather than to care for older slaves who became less efficient as they aged.⁹⁸ Emancipation in the South could be implemented peacefully, Wright believed, if it was instituted gradually and the economic interests of the planters were taken into consideration.

Strongly influenced by Robert Owen and her experiences in New Harmony and other communitarian societies, Wright also thought that the principle of “united labor” would allow an experimental freed slave community to function in a more productive manner than a plantation system dependent on coerced labor.⁹⁹ In her autobiography, Wright recalled her thoughts during her first visit to a communitarian settlement. She

⁹⁸ Ibid. Although the United States had banned the importation of slaves from Africa in 1807, a black market existed and a substantial number of slaves were imported after the ban. Also, Wright might have been referring to the exportation of slaves from Virginia to states in the Deep South.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

noted that she was “forcibly struck—not merely with the advantages of united and organized labor—but with their peculiar appropriateness to the object which, at the time, engrossed her attention [slavery]”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Robert Owen, the leader of the New Harmony community, had mesmerized Wright. According to Wright, this utopia founder was “working miracles” and it seemed as though he would “revolutionize a 2nd time the North as I pray we may do the South.”¹⁰¹ Wright had found an organizing principle for her experiment: communitarian ideology. This system, which Wright had already witnessed in the Rappite and New Harmony communities, was one in which goods and resources were held in common with each member holding an equal share in the community. Moreover, the goals of the community were placed before the desires of the individual, and labor was shared equally among the inhabitants; such a communal system, Wright believed, would provide an ideal environment for an experiment involving the education and emancipation of America’s slaves.

The creative reformer thoroughly investigated the practicality of applying the communal labor of contemporary utopian societies to her emancipatory plan. Speaking with Frederick Rapp, the leader of the Rappites, she discovered that “the effects of united labor are, even in a free state, so greatly exceeding those of individual labor, as to injure the latter when found in the neighborhood of the former.”¹⁰² If the advantages of communal labor over individual labor were so readily apparent in the North, Wright mused, then in the South slave labor would not be able to “stand in competition” with communal labor. In fact, Wright boldly proclaimed, “My belief is that two or three plantations worked on the plan of united labor (where the confidence of the parents

¹⁰⁰ Wright, *Biography and Notes*, 24.

¹⁰¹ FW to Julia Garnett, 8 June 1825. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

should be won by kindness to the belief that their labor was for their personal redemption, the relief of their race & the practical education of their children) would suffice to undersell & render wholly profitless all the slave labor of the state in which they should be located."¹⁰³ Wright discussed her plan with Rapp and George Flower, who both had experience in communitarian societies, and the men agreed that her proposal was sound. After conferring with Rapp, Wright declared, "I have found him decidedly of the same opinion & obtained from him the ready promise of his valuable assistance." Likewise, George Flower, a fellow communitarian Wright met at New Harmony, was so enthusiastic about the plan that he promised to "supply all the stock, cattle, cows, sheep & pigs, to rent out all his lands under cultivation & assist in the direction of the new establishment."¹⁰⁴ When Wright's esteemed old companion, General Lafayette, gave Wright "his blessing" regarding the communitarian plan, she decided that it was time to materialize her lofty ideas.

Wright soon solidified her plan, and in autumn of 1825 she published it in the *New Harmony Gazette*, the newspaper of Robert Owen's communitarian experiment, in a lengthy article entitled "A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States, without Danger of Loss to the Citizens of the South." Here she delineated the technicalities of what was to become the Nashoba experiment. On land purchased in a cotton-producing Southern state, she intended to settle "from fifty to one hundred Negroes" who would work under a system of "co-operative labor" similar to that found in New Harmony. Wright noted that the "great advantages of united, over individual labor, have been evinced by the practice of several religious communities—Moravians, Shaking

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Quakers, and Harmonites.”¹⁰⁵ Particularly impressive, Wright continued, was the Rappite community, “now in possession of superabundant wealth,” thanks to its policy of communal labor, of course.

She hoped that men and women working in the community would put forth greater effort in their labors because of “the prospect of liberty together with the liberty and education of the children.” Wright reported that a school for children was a primary goal for her model emancipation community and explained that the education of the community’s adults would be accomplished via weekly meetings during which she and other community leaders would teach “the object of the establishment... and the necessity of industry, first for the procuring of liberty, and afterwards the value of industry when liberty shall be procured.” Wright, as a leader and educator of the community, intended to cultivate the minds of the slaves so that they would be industrious, thoughtful, and successful when they were released from bondage.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, a crucial component of the plan was a “school of industry” which would “carry order and co-operation from the schoolroom into the field.” The slaves would be educated so that they would understand the theory of communal labor and the benefits they would reap from participating in such a community.

The average length of service for the slaves (for they were to remain as *de jure* slaves for the duration of their stay in the community), Wright explained, “must be somewhat decided by experience.” but she hoped that it would take an average of five years of work for a slave to cover the cost of “the first purchase money, the rearing of

¹⁰⁵ Frances Wright, “A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States, without Danger of Loss to the Citizens of the South,” *New Harmony Gazette*, 1 October 1825.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

infancy, and loss by sickness or other accidents.”¹⁰⁷ After repaying the debts they had incurred, the slaves would be freed and transported to another country, such as Haiti or Mexico. The primary source of the slaves was to come from plantation owners who were “anxious to manumit their people, but apprehensive of throwing them unprepared into the world.” Wright’s belief that there actually existed substantial numbers of slave owners who were “anxious” to manumit their slaves probably derived from the anecdotal evidence she had collected from her travels throughout the United States. In fact, Southern “cotton culture” strongly discouraged the manumission of slaves during the 1820s for any reason, and numerous laws prevented slaveholders from freeing their slaves.¹⁰⁸ Yet, though laws and culture curbed the potential for manumission, some resolute slave owners did surmount these obstacles to free their slaves, particularly in the Upper South border regions; for example, the Maryland State Colonization Society documented the manumission of over 200 slaves annually by the 1830s.¹⁰⁹ In order to have a constant supply of slaves for Nashoba, Wright apparently was counting on those masters so determined to free their slaves that they would overcome the substantial legal and cultural barriers to manumission.

As she was aware that some sort of plantation workforce must replace the slave labor that she wished to phase out of existence, Wright proposed that the “class of poor whites” throughout the South ought to furnish the replacement employees.¹¹⁰ However, Wright did not want to mandate that all the slaves who had graduated from the Nashoba program must leave the United States, for “with the same facility that the door of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 140-141.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 142.

¹¹⁰ Wright, “A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery.”

colonization is opened, so also can it be closed.”¹¹¹ If the community could financially support them, and their labor was necessary, some of the freed slaves could remain at Nashoba and continue to work for the betterment of the community if they so chose.

The confidant reformer imagined that her experiment, if successful, would be replicated in other states and hoped that eventually the multiplication of her system would lead to the gradual abolition of slavery. Revealing her idealistic tendencies, at the close of her article Wright included a table demonstrating that if her establishment began with a mere 100 slaves, she could emancipate the entire slave population of the United States in a period of eighty-five years, and if she began with 800 slaves, in sixty-five years the whole slave population would be freed.

Calculation Shewing [sic] at What Period the Labor of One Hundred People (Doubling Itself Every Five Years) Might Redeem the Whole Slave Population of the United States.

Years	Slave Population at Present	Persons on the Establishment doubling their number every five years from their earnings	
	2,000,000	Begin With 100	Begin with 800
5		200	1,600
10		400	3,200
15		800	6,400
20		1,600	12,800
25		3,200	25,600
30	3,920,000	6,400	51,200
35	(natural increase)	12,800	102,400
40		25,600	204,800
45		51,200	409,600
50		102,400	819,200
55		204,800	1,638,400
60		409,600	3,276,800
65	7,840,000	819,200	6,553,600
70	(natural increase)	1,638,400	
75		3,276,800	
80		6,553,600	
85		13,107,200	

¹¹¹ Ibid.

In advertising her plans to the public, Wright attracted the attention of two notable Americans, Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, whose correspondences to Wright offer insightful perspectives on the planned experimental community. Jefferson bestowed upon Wright unreserved praise for attempting to provide a solution to one of his “greatest anxieties.” He remarked that her plan had “aspects of promise,” particularly since the implementation of unified labor had been reaping success for the Owenites and Rappites.¹¹² While also supportive of the necessity of procuring a remedy for the great evil of slavery, Madison was more cautious in offering approval of Wright’s ideas. Questioning the monetary advantage of communal over individual labor, he doubted that the proposed establishment would produce enough profit to free the slaves in five years. Madison also noted that in cases in which communal labor proved to be successful—in Harmonist and Shaker communities—a “religious impulse” and a religious authority figure united and commanded the community.¹¹³ Indeed, Madison was perhaps prophetic in foreshadowing the financial and leadership problems that would later plague Wright’s experimental community.

Regardless of whether Wright ever took Madison’s comments seriously, her bold plan achieved concrete form in December 1825. Writing again to a female companion in New York, Wright described her purchase of a plot of land fifteen miles from a small Indian trading post called Memphis. Attempting to avoid the swamplands that harbored malaria-bearing mosquitoes, she selected an area of drier, second-rate soil, upon which she conferred the name of Nashoba, the Native-American appellation for the nearby Wolf

¹¹² Thomas Jefferson to FW, 7 August 1825, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Andrew Lipscomb, ed. Vol XVI. (Washington DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904): 119-121.

¹¹³ James Madison to FW, 1 September 1825, *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*. Vol III. (New York: R. Worthington, 1884). 495-498.

River.¹¹⁴ Despite pleas published in newspapers and pamphlets,¹¹⁵ the only monetary donation Nashoba ever received came in the form of “goods in the amount of \$550... from a wealthy Quaker merchant in New York.”¹¹⁶ Wright invested much of her income—which was substantial but certainly not unlimited—into the experiment. In an April 1826 letter, Wright revealed that she had already used \$10,000, “more than a third of my property,” to jumpstart the establishment of the community.¹¹⁷

In the months since the publication of her plan, Wright and her sister Camilla had enlisted a few hardy idealists to join them on their adventure. Among their first recruits were George Flower and his family, English immigrants who had founded a settlement at Albion, Illinois, a decade earlier in 1816. Their pioneering experience in community-building made them particularly qualified to help construct the foundations of the Nashoba community, and Flower’s reputation as a champion of social causes—he was an abolitionist and a friend of Robert Owen—made him a perfect ideological match for Wright.¹¹⁸ Flower, like Wright and Owen, was an affluent English citizen who had immigrated to the United States in search of better social conditions than those that could be found in England, particularly for farmers.¹¹⁹ In a memoir of his pioneering experiences in Illinois, Flower suggested that the “real liberty” of the United States lay in its “great space” and “good land, dog-cheap everywhere” which attracted “poor laborers. from every country in Europe” who toiled and prospered on the vast expanses of land in

¹¹⁴ FW to Julia Garnett, 1 December 1825. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

¹¹⁵ Cf. “Frances Wright’s Establishment,” *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 17 Dec 1825 and “Frances Wright,” *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 14 Jan 1826.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ FW to Julia Garnett, 11 April 1826. *Harvard Bulletin*.

¹¹⁸ See George Flower, *History of English Settlement in Edwards County Illinois* (Chicago: Fergus Printing, 1909). Some sources suggest that Flower and Wright engaged in an affair during the Nashoba experiment. At the insistence of his wife, Flower and his family left Nashoba before the official end of the community.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

America.¹²⁰ In addition, in 1823, just a few years before meeting Wright, Flower had devoted his energy to successfully campaigning against a law that would have legalized slavery in Illinois. Wright clearly had discovered a like-minded soul who could aid her in her quest for freedom.

The Wright sisters also happened upon James Richardson, a doctor from Edinburgh living in Memphis, and they invited the Scottish physician—whose medical expertise would prove to be of great advantage in the coming years—to join the community.¹²¹ Several other free men and women, such as Richesson Whitby and William Maclure, both from New Harmony, joined the community during its duration, some for a year or two and others only for a few weeks. However, though Wright had requested “a few mechanics, such as carpenters, brick-layers, etc...free persons, skilled in the various handicraft arts, either black or white” in a published letter, few people answered her call, and ultimately no more than a dozen free men and women lived and labored at Nashoba.¹²² Early in the experiment, Wright composed a deed of trust for Nashoba, dated December 17, 1826, in order to ensure that the aims of the experiment would be upheld if she died.¹²³ The “Deed of the Lands of Nashoba, West Tennessee,” cites ten trustees of Nashoba: General Lafayette, William Maclure, Robert Owen, Cadwallader Colden, Richesson Whitby, Robert Jennings, Robert Dale Owen, George Flower, Camilla Wright, and James Richardson. Four of these ten trustees—Lafayette, Colden, Jennings, and the elder Owen—never actually came to Nashoba; they were

¹²⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹²¹ FW to Julia Garnett, 11 April 1826. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

¹²² “Frances Wright’s Establishment,” *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 17 Dec 1825.

¹²³ Frances Wright, “Deed of the Lands of Nashoba, West Tennessee,” Nashoba Research Files, University of Memphis Mississippi Valley Collection.

merely associates of Wright whom she supposed shared her sentiments and would uphold her intentions with regard to the community.

Nashoba's initial slave population included fifteen slaves. Five men and three women—Willis, Jacob, Grandison, Redick, Henry, Nelly, Peggy, and Kitty—were purchased in Nashville.¹²⁴ In addition, Robert Wilson, a benevolent slaveholder from South Carolina, donated an all-female family of seven, a mother and her six children.¹²⁵ Wright certainly hoped that more donations of this variety would be forthcoming, but such good fortune was not in the cards for Nashoba. However, according to reports of the demise of Nashoba five years later, Wright emancipated thirty-one slaves, not fifteen;¹²⁶ other slaves, therefore, must have been born, purchased, or donated during the duration of the experiment.

Having outlined the technicalities of her community and having obtained land, slaves, and fellow utopian pioneers, Wright was ready to embark upon her utopian journey. She hoped to apply the Enlightenment concept of liberty she had acquired during her formative years in Europe to the community, in which she sought to educate and “civilize” the slaves and then free them to live productive lives as citizens under the social contract. As the Nashoba community began to function, however, Wright encountered a number of issues that encouraged her to challenge the boundaries of her European definition of “liberty” and take up the broader cause of “freedom.”

¹²⁴ FW to Julia Garnett, 11 April 1826. *Harvard Library Bulletin*: “Deed of the Lands of Nashoba, West Tennessee.”

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Robert Dale Owen, “An Earnest Sowing of Wild Oats,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1874, 75.

Chapter III

Grappling with Liberty and Freedom:

Challenges to Nashoba and Frances Wright's Response

Liberty for the American slaves was of utmost importance to Frances Wright when she designed her utopian community. Yet, as the slaves and free inhabitants of Nashoba began to toil in the fields and immerse themselves in the day to day work of constructing a communal society, issues that dealt with the broader sweep of American society—rather than simply slavery—began to surface in the community. In particular, Wright began to use Nashoba as a means to criticize the moral values that were prevalent among the middle and upper classes of antebellum American society.¹²⁷ During the five-year duration of the Nashoba experiment, Wright expressed her controversial views in writing, via treatises published in various abolitionist and mainstream newspapers, and in lecture form. Wright began lecturing to packed houses during the third year of the Nashoba experiment (1828) and continued on the lecture circuit throughout the remainder of the experiment's lifespan. Both her written and spoken words regarding sexuality, marriage, the condition of women, and religion provoked a storm of fury from Americans who resented this affront to their moral values.

As might be expected, some of those Americans who were aware of the existence of Wright's unusual utopian community vociferously criticized the establishment. The most significant of the societal backlashes against Nashoba came after the publication of the daily log written by one of the Nashoba trustees, James Richardson, in the *Genius of*

¹²⁷ John C. Spurlock's *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860* (New York: New York UP, 1988), gives an account of the mainstream values regarding sexuality and marriage in antebellum America and confirms that Frances Wright's views on this subject were highly deviant from the majority opinion.

Universal Emancipation in the summer of 1827. By this time, Wright, incapacitated by a bout of malaria, had departed Nashoba for a restorative (and possibly fund-raising) visit to Europe and left the care of the community to her sister and Richardson. While the publication of Richardson's diary offered a rare glimpse into the daily activities of the inhabitants of Nashoba, it was perhaps unwise to expose the intimate details of the community to an audience that was not prepared to accept the socially deviant practices of the communitarians. The log detailed many interesting, innocuous facets of Nashoba, including how the trustees dealt with the disobedience of the slaves and how the children's school functioned, but the most insidious passage was in fact a reference to James Richardson himself. The entry is as follows:

Sunday Evening, June 17, 1827. Met the slaves—James Richardson informed them that Mamselle Josephine* and he began to live together; and he took this occasion of repeating to them our views on color, and on the sexual relation.

*A Quateroon, daughter of Mamselle Lolotte.¹²⁸

In publicly proclaiming his sexual liaison with Mamselle Josephine, Richardson was flouting two societal taboos: overt sexual relationships outside of the marriage bond and miscegenation. Wright and her fellow trustees at Nashoba saw nothing wrong with interracial relationships, and Richardson's entry implied that such behaviors were being presented as acceptable to all the inhabitants of Nashoba. Indeed, soon after the publication of this account, an outraged reader (and an advocate of abolition) penned a blistering letter to the editor condemning "an establishment so indecent, so libidinous, so repugnant to the safe and honest maxims of Christian life."¹²⁹ Even the editor of the

¹²⁸ "Frances Wright's Establishment," *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 28 July 1827.

¹²⁹ "Frances Wright's Establishment," *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 18 Aug 1827.

Genius of Universal Emancipation himself, Benjamin Lundy, a friend of Wright, reproached the establishment if it did indeed hold such tenets, and he called upon Wright to explain the contents of the Nashoba log.¹³⁰

Wright's reply to the attacks following the publication of the Nashoba log was a fiery explication of the ideals that fueled her zeal for the experimental community. Never one to conform to popular pressures, Wright ultimately stood fast by James Richardson's publication. In an articulate essay entitled *Explanatory Notes, respecting the Nature and Objects of the Institution of Nashoba, and of the Principles upon which it is founded*, published serially in three successive issues of several newspapers early in 1828, she elucidated the purpose of the Nashoba community and the principles underlying the experiment.¹³¹ Her passionate treatise began at the most basic level: the "welfare of man." Wright believed the simplest way to ensure humanity's welfare was to guarantee the freedom of all men, for "men are virtuous in proportion as they are happy, and happy in proportion as they are free." While noting that one sort of freedom—civil liberty—had already been granted to a portion of the population in United States, Wright nevertheless asserted that much work remained to be done to liberate the American people. Speaking of America's successful overthrow British rule, she declared "it is much to have the fetters broken from our limbs, but yet better is it to have them broken from the mind." Liberating the minds of Americans, Wright contended, would result in a society in which all humans—man and woman, black and white—would be wholly free.¹³²

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Frances Wright, "Explanatory Notes, respecting the Nature and Objects of the Institution of Nashoba, and of the Principles upon which it is founded," *The Correspondent*, 29 Feb 1828, 8 Mar 1828, 15 Mar 1828. Also published in the *New Harmony Gazette* and *Genius of Universal Emancipation* in serialized form.

¹³² Ibid., 29 Feb 1828.

Acknowledging that such a task was not one she could feasibly realize, Wright explained that she sought merely to gather a few like-minded men and women who were willing to work towards freedom on a smaller scale, in a community that would have as its object “the protection and regeneration of the race of color, universally oppressed and despised in a country self-denominated free.”¹³³ In describing the particulars of this institution, Wright took the opportunity to lecture on nearly every facet of her contemporary society that troubled her and declared that such aspects of society—from the repression of women to the “quackery” of religion—would have no place in her experimental community.

Not one to shirk from declaring her opinions, however controversial, to whomever might be listening, Wright unabashedly approached a topic not often verbally acknowledged by the middle and upper classes of American society: sexuality. Richardson had publicly declared his decision to live—and presumably indulge in sexual activity with—a woman of mixed race at Nashoba, and Benjamin Lundy and others who had read the article demanded a response from Wright. Did Wright really encourage such behavior, or was this incident merely a case of a morally deviant overseer going astray while the mistress was away? To the dismay of Lundy and others, Wright fully supported Richardson and even elaborated on her beliefs regarding sexuality. On sexuality in general, Wright proclaimed, “Let us not attach ideas of purity to monastic chastity, impossible to man or woman without consequences fraught with evil, nor ideas of vice to connections formed under the auspices of kind feeling!”¹³⁴

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 15 Mar 1828.

Combining her radical views on sexuality with her abolitionist goals, Wright proposed a solution to the slavery problem that would aid in releasing the African-Americans from oppression: the amalgamation of the races. As evidence for her position, Wright pointed to an oft-occurring Southern phenomenon, “where the child is the marketable slave of its father.”¹³⁵ White plantation masters often had *sub rosa* affairs with their female slaves, producing mulatto children. In Wright’s eyes this clearly demonstrated that, contrary to the belief of slavery advocates, “idle indeed is the assertion that the mixture of races is not in Nature.” Amalgamation happens all the time, Wright argued, so why not encourage it openly? Wright thought that this would be “equally desirable for both [races],” for race certainly cannot produce societal turmoil if no racial variation exists!

Wright also had much to say about the institution of marriage. Describing society’s pressure upon individuals to abide by the “matrimonial law,” Wright lamented the societal consequences of adultery: “public opinion... so frequently stamps with infamy, or condemns to martyrdom, the best grounded and most generous attachments which ever did honor to the human heart.”¹³⁶ Wright sought to free the “noblest of human passions”—sexual love—from the repressive institution of marriage. Furthermore, when discussing the admission of husband and wife pairs to Nashoba, she unabashedly denounced the “tyranny” of marriage, in which a woman was often forced to “forfeit her individual rights or independent existence.” Even more powerfully, Wright proclaimed that a husband, under the auspices of the marital institution, often held the wife “as a galley slave to the oar.” She also noted society’s condemnation of illegitimate

¹³⁵ Ibid., 15 Mar 1828.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 8 Mar 1828.

children—another consequence of the tyranny of marriage. These children and their mothers were usually shamed by society and consequently “rendered desperate by misfortune.” Moreover, Wright alluded to the necessity of birth control to prevent the multiplication of offspring “beyond the resources of their parents.”¹³⁷ Mere civil liberty—Wright’s initial motivation for the Nashoba experiment—was no longer the only goal of the community; instead, Wright now sought to achieve a broader definition of freedom, one in which both men and women were released from society’s repressive stance on marriage and sexuality.

Wright’s controversial opinions on marriage and sexuality were frequently the subject of her public lectures, which began shortly after the publication of her *Explanatory Notes*.¹³⁸ Though the lecture halls in which Wright spoke were consistently filled to capacity—perhaps more out of curiosity than genuine interest in her causes—public opinion regarding the views she espoused on marriage and sexuality was exceedingly negative. In one editorial letter in a Boston newspaper, a man anticipating the arrival of Wright to his city for a speaking engagement proclaimed, “If it be true that she attacks the present laws on the subject of marriage contract, we have no doubt that wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters will all look upon her as an enemy.”¹³⁹ Indeed, the American populace was not yet prepared for Wright’s radicalism; the “High Priestess of Infidelity,” as she was dubbed by numerous preachers, was years ahead of her time.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Ibid..

¹³⁸ Wright’s first address was on July 4, 1828, in New Harmony, IN. According to biographer Celia Eckhardt, she was most likely the first woman in America to lecture before a large mixed-sex audience on a public occasion. Wright then embarked upon a lecture series starting in Cincinnati in August of 1828. Variations of these lectures were presented in numerous major Eastern cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. They are published in several places, including *Life, Letters, Lectures* (New York, Arno Press, 1972).

¹³⁹ “Miss Wright,” *The Free Enquirer*, 22 July 1829. From the *Boston Globe* [no date].

¹⁴⁰ Camilla Wright Whitbey to Harriet Garnett, 20 November 1828. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

The radical moral values regarding sexuality and marriage that Wright hoped to implement in Nashoba logically connect to another cause she wished to influence: the condition of women. Her views were such that one might regard Wright as a proto-feminist; she was perhaps one of the first women in America to publicly support feminist issues long before the radical movement came to the fore with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. As Wright explained in her *Explanatory Notes*, she was determined to free women from the tyranny of marriage—initially in the Nashoba community and perhaps later on a grander scale. However, she also put forth a proviso that suggested that the burden of repression did not sit solely with the male; a woman who wished to be free at Nashoba ought not “assert claims to the society or peculiar protection of any individual of the other sex, beyond what mutual inclination dictates and sanctions.”¹⁴¹ In other words, the independent woman of Nashoba must not play the role of the helpless ingénue who requires aid from a male protector.

In addition to vilifying American society’s malicious treatment of women with illegitimate children, Wright obliquely commented on the dichotomy between the prevalence of prostitution and the sexual repression of the average married wife. Wright asserted that the “ignorant laws, ignorant prejudices, and ignorant code of morals” of society “condemn one portion of the female sex to vicious excess, another to vicious restraint, and all to defenseless helplessness, and slavery.” Wright felt that both prostitutes and married wives were “victims” of their society, which allowed them neither pleasure nor love. These same “ignorant” codes of morals also affected the male sex, condemning them to “debasement, licentiousness, if not loathsome brutality.”¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ “Explanatory Notes,” 8 March 1829.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

The solution to the problematic condition of women, Wright decided, could be found in education. In *Explanatory Notes*, Wright alluded to the value she placed on the education of the female sex, stating that she wanted the community to be populated by “young persons, of both sexes, of independent minds and liberal education.”¹⁴³ In addition, Wright’s lectures often refer to her support of female education. In a speech entitled “Free Inquiry,” Wright tried to rally the crowd against those men “who will aid in the instruction of their sons, and condemn only their daughters to ignorance” and those men who say “‘for our daughters, little trouble or expense is necessary. They can never *be anything*; in fact they *are nothing*.’ ” Disregarding the view that females were only good for the “market of marriage,” Wright informed parents that they had to consider their children of both sexes “as *human beings*” and “ensure them the fair and thorough development of all the faculties, physical, mental, and moral, which distinguish their nature.”¹⁴⁴ Wright evidently believed that female education was part of a woman’s natural right as a human being. Using her oratorical skills as spark with which to kindle the fire of activism among the crowd, she fervently proclaimed,

Equality! Where is it, if not in education? Equal rights! They cannot exist without equality of instruction. ‘All men are born free and equal!’ They are *born*, but do they not so *live*? Are they educated as equals? And if not, can they *be* equal? And if not equal, can they be free?¹⁴⁵

For Wright, the education of women was intrinsically linked to two of the principles for which the United States supposedly stood: liberty and equality. She sought to start small

¹⁴³ Ibid, 15 March 1829.

¹⁴⁴ Frances Wright, “Free Inquiry,” *Course of Popular Lectures*. (London: James Watson, 1829). Reprinted in *Life, Letters, Lectures*, 29-30.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 25.

by implementing this policy of equal education at Nashoba, but she certainly hoped to spread her word far and wide through her lectures.

One final societal institution that Wright zealously condemned and discouraged at Nashoba remains to be explored. In her *Explanatory Notes*, she proclaimed that religion was to “occupy no place” in the establishment of Nashoba, particularly in its school where it was most important that “the reason of children be left to its free development.”¹⁴⁶ Why did Wright have such distaste for religion? The answer to this question is tied to the themes discussed above: sexuality, marriage, and the condition of women. In the preface to a printed compendium of her lectures, Wright described the effects of the “worst species of quackery, practiced under the name of religion” on the female sex. She declared that religion “virtually lays the reins of government, national as well as domestic, in the hands of the priesthood, whose very substance depends upon the mental and moral degradation of their fellow creatures.”¹⁴⁷ Wright thought that religion, as a governing force in American society, encouraged the societal ills described above. As evidence for the negative impact of religion, Wright cited an incident indicative of the Second Great Awakening that she witnessed in Cincinnati. A revival was held in the city, and Wright was repulsed by the fanaticism that was encouraged at the event, during which the “despair of Calvin’s hell itself seemed to have fallen on every heart.” In particular, those most entranced by this “odious experiment on human credulity and nervous weakness” were women. Religious leaders promoted marriage and repressive sexuality, and Wright was accordingly distressed that women were the primary target of this dubious “quackery.”

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Frances Wright, “Preface,” *Course of Popular Lectures* (New York: Free Enquirer Press, 1829).

In an 1829 lecture entitled “Religion,” Wright expounded upon her philosophical reasons for objecting to religion. Wright discussed the nature of knowledge at length and concluded that it was her belief that “nothing can be known where there is nothing to operate our senses.”¹⁴⁸ The philosophical Fanny Wright felt simply that if she had no proof for the existence of a God, then God must not exist. Religious leaders were merely building “castles in the air.”¹⁴⁹ However, the practical Fanny Wright also noted the real-world consequences of widespread religious sentiment. According to Wright, religion consumed “twenty millions per annum” and “all the leisure days of the industrious classes.” In Wright’s opinion, this wasted money and time that could be used for something far more utilitarian and less harmful. Moreover, Wright lamented the evils produced by religious wars: “The rivers of earth run blood! Nation set against nation! Brother against brother!... Such are the doings of religion!”¹⁵⁰ Wright did not intend to institute such an evil in her utopia, and, though she did not bar religious individuals from her community, she warned them that they would be in the company of those who practiced no religion at all.¹⁵¹

What prompted Wright to attack America’s moral values via Nashoba and her lectures? What made her believe she could alter ingrained notions of propriety and decency? Wright’s Fourth of July Address at New Harmony, Indiana—the first lecture she ever gave—may shed some light on these questions. Wright had been infatuated with the United States and its theoretical freedom since she was a teenager in England. Thus

¹⁴⁸ Frances Wright, “Religion,” *Course of Popular Lectures* (London: James Watson, 1829), 56. Reprinted in *Life, Letters, Lectures*. Wright was a proponent of Epicurean philosophy and even wrote a philosophical play in her 20s entitled *A Few Days in Athens*.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵¹ *Explanatory Notes*.

when she was given the opportunity to give a lecture on the anniversary of the very day when this freedom had been established, she chose to reflect upon that which she believed made America great: “the principle of *change*.”¹⁵² Literally, this power of change existed in the United States’ democratic government. Wright noted, “Better were the prospects of a people under the influence of the worst Government who should hold the power of changing it, than those of a people under the best who should hold no such power.” Yet, Wright’s assessment of the power of change applied not only to the government itself, but also to the American people. Speaking of a human’s capacity to change, and thus improve, Wright explained, “To hold him *still*, he must be chained. Snap the chain, and he springs forward.” If an individual is freed of his shackles—as men and women theoretically are under the government of the United States—he has an unlimited ability to change and improve. Wright may have been dismayed by the lack of freedom she observed in American society, but she was not discouraged, for in her eyes the United States was fertile ground for change. Through the Nashoba community, she could effect change on multiple levels and even alter the very definition of freedom itself. Not only could she bring civil liberty to the slaves in her community, but she could also impart a broader definition of freedom—freedom from repressive social mores and from religion—to all the American people.

¹⁵² Frances Wright, “Address, delivered in the New-Harmony Hall, at the Celebration of the Fourth of July, 1828,” *New-Harmony Gazette*, 9 July 1828. In a curious coincidence, the views Wright expounds upon here closely resemble those of her long-deceased father, whose papers she obtained, according to her autobiography, long after she gave this speech. Over thirty years prior to Wright’s Fourth of July Address, James Wright wrote, “ ‘The spirit of the law and the tenor of the conduct of governments, in order to be well-adapted to the mutable and ever-varying state of human affairs, ought constantly to *change* according to the existing circumstances and the temper of the age.’ ” Wright, *Biography*, 4.

Chapter IV

Later Nashoba:

The Mounting Tension between Liberty, Freedom, and Utopian Community

As Wright often expounded in print and in lecture, the expansion of civil liberty and freedom for both slaves and the American people was her overarching goal in the Nashoba community. Yet, in practice, tensions often arose between liberty, freedom, and communal society within Wright's utopia. Wright made the eradication of human bondage the primary purpose of the Nashoba experiment; paradoxically, however, the enslaved men and women of this utopian community remained in a state curiously similar to that which they were accustomed under their previous slave driving owners (though certainly with some differences). Furthermore, the communal living aspect of the utopian experiment also, by its very nature, endangered the freedom of Nashoba's inhabitants. The peculiar tension that arose between the relative lack of freedom among the Nashoba residents and the purported purpose of the experiment deserves further inquiry, for it will shed light upon the multiple facets of the issue of freedom.

In a June 1826 letter to the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, Wright described the current condition of the experiment and the slaves. She explained that most of the slaves were "disposed to laziness," though they were slowly improving their work ethic, and many of them had bad habits commonly found among those born into slavery, such as "petty thieving and lying, and... the use of abusive language."¹⁵³ Wright also related an instance in which a slave was punished. Though they had "as yet only once been obliged to resort to coercion" in a "bad case of theft, malice, and obduracy in one of the

¹⁵³ "Letter from Frances Wright," *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 10 June 1826.

Nashville girls,” they nevertheless punished the slave woman with “solitary confinement and a diet of bread and water.”¹⁵⁴ No such punishments inflicted on any of the free white participants of the Nashoba community are recorded in any extant records of the community; thus, the slaves were probably not treated as free and equal members of the community, despite Wright’s trademark rhetoric of liberty and equality.

Moreover, it is significant that the slaves were kept as such for the duration of their stay at Nashoba. In the daily log of Nashoba kept by James Richardson and published in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, the entry on May 6, 1827, states that the resident trustees of Nashoba (Frances Wright, Camilla Wright, Robert Dale Owen, Richesson Whitby, and James Richardson) had agreed that “if any of the slaves neglect their duty... we will exclude the slaves from the benefit of the plan, and we will treat them according to the slave system.”¹⁵⁵ The “slave system” was the very antithesis of freedom; American masters subjected their slaves to enormous cruelty and certainly did not provide them with the education and positive environment that Frances Wright claimed Nashoba would engender. While the slaves at Nashoba may have been ostensibly working toward ultimate liberty in the future, they were still far from free.

When James Richardson chose to publish the Nashoba log in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, he selected only certain parts of the journal for publication in the newspaper. One journal entry that he omitted from publication reveals a startling facet of Nashoba; on May 24, 1827, Richardson recorded, “Two women slaves tied up and flogged by James Richardson in the presence of Camilla and all the slaves. Two

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ “Frances Wright’s Establishment,” *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 28 July 1827.

dozen and one dozen on bare back with a cowskin.”¹⁵⁶ Admittedly, Wright was not present when this incident occurred, for she had left for Europe a month earlier to revitalize her malaria-ravaged body.¹⁵⁷ According to the views Wright had espoused in her previous letters and newspaper publications about Nashoba, this sort of treatment—the type often found in the typical American “slave system”—was utterly at odds with the original guiding principals of the community. For instance, in the summer of 1826, Wright had written that all was well at Nashoba, and the slaves were being encouraged to work “without any harsh means whatsoever.”¹⁵⁸ Perhaps with the utopia-founder, the guiding force behind the experiment, thousands of miles away in Europe, the situation at Nashoba—already deteriorating because of unsuccessful harvests and rampant disease—compelled the overseers to revert to traditional methods of coercion.

Additionally, the overriding concerns of the communal society, by their very nature, stifled the individual freedom of Nashoba’s inhabitants. Robert Dale Owen, a son of Robert Owen, writing in his travel journal, described the conditions of the community when he visited it for two weeks before departing with Wright for her restorative trip to Europe in 1827.¹⁵⁹ In addition to his role as traveling companion, Robert Dale was a confidant of Wright and her co-editor at the New Harmony newspaper, *The New Harmony Gazette*, so this fellow utopian had a particular interest in the communal life at

¹⁵⁶ “The Nashoba Book.” Quoted in A. J. G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright Free Enquirer* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), 166-167. Original no longer extant, but copies of some entries were made by Alice Perkins, one of Wright’s early biographers; part of it is quoted in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 28 July 1827.

¹⁵⁷ FW to JG, 25 July 1827, *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

¹⁵⁸ “Letter from Frances Wright,” *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 10 June 1826.

¹⁵⁹ The situation in New Harmony had deteriorated by this time, and in Robert Dale’s words, the community “no longer existed as such” for each occupation was “working and acting for itself.” In Nashoba Robert Dale was hoping to find a new communal society to adopt, as New Harmony had disintegrated.

Nashoba.¹⁶⁰ On his way down the Mississippi to visit the community, Robert Dale recorded his thoughts on Wright's utopian society. Though he remarked, "the principals [sic] upon which this community has commenced I approve of," he nevertheless acknowledged that the "few members at present" made it difficult to tell how the communal aspect of the experiment would fare.¹⁶¹ When he arrived at Nashoba, he observed that the inhabitants had cleared about 100 acres and had built two "double log-cabins" and one "single" log-cabin—but not much more.¹⁶² Indeed, Robert Dale noted, the experiment seemed to "progress slowly."¹⁶³

Though the physical structure of the community might have not yet reached expectations in the two years since Nashoba's establishment, the inhabitants of Nashoba were making progress in the intellectual facet of communal living. Wright and her cohorts had established a school for the children, thus initiating a fundamental component of the Nashoba plan. If the ideology of communal labor was to be successful among the Nashoba slaves in the long run, their children needed to be inculcated with the rhetoric that would encourage compliance with the communal plan. Wright wrote to a friend in 1827 describing Nashoba's newly acquired teacher, Charlotte Larieu (also referred to as Mademoiselle Lolotte), a mulatto woman from New Orleans who was accompanied by her quadroon daughter, Josephine. Noting that the mother and daughter were "cooperating in our views usefully, actively & affectionately," Wright was pleased at the school's progress. She reported, "The children of both slaves & free are now gathered

¹⁶⁰ Wright served as co-editor of this paper, later remained *The Free Enquirer* when the printing offices were relocated in New York City, from 1828 until the paper's demise in 1835.

¹⁶¹ Robert Dale Owen, "Robert Dale Owen's Travel Journal," *Indiana Historical Society Publications* 25 (1977): 19.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 24.

together under the charge of Charlotte and Camilla; separated from the contamination of their parents, who they see only in the presence of their directors & waiting only the arrival of Mr. Jennings¹⁶⁴ from Philadelphia [to] enter on a regular system of instruction."¹⁶⁵

The implementation of communitarian policies at Nashoba provides an opportunity to investigate the tension between communal living and freedom, Wright's ultimate goal. Another portion of James Richardson's Nashoba log includes a reference to the Nashoba school and is quite revealing with regard to the tension between the ideal of freedom and the policies of communal living:

Sunday Evening, May 29, 1827. Camilla Wright... informed [the slaves] that tomorrow, the children, Delila, Lucy, Julia, and Alfred, will be taken altogether from under the management of their parents, and will be placed, until our school is organized, under the management of Mamselle Lolotte; that communication between the parents and the children shall, in future, be prevented, except such as may take place by the permission, and in the presence, of the manager of the children.¹⁶⁶

Under the communitarian system, as established by Robert Owen and others before him, child rearing was not the concern of the parents, but of the community as a whole. Wright, and other communitarians who had paved the way before her, believed that in order to fully instill children with the ideas necessary for them to participate in communal living, the children needed to be kept away from the potentially corrupting influence of

¹⁶⁴ "Robert L. Jennings, an experienced teacher, member of the New Harmony Community, and Trustee of Nashoba." Footnote from *Harvard Library Bulletin*. He never made it to Nashoba.

¹⁶⁵ FW to Harriet Garnett, 17 Août 1827, *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

¹⁶⁶ "Frances Wright's Establishment," *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 28 July 1827.

their parents. Parents were likely to spoil their own children and favor them over the others, which would undermine the mission of the community in which all members were theoretically equal. An additional unpublished passage of the Nashoba log is indicative of this tendency:

Reprimanded Willis for having tried to interfere between Lolotte and one of his own children—and Dilly for having given bread and meat to one of her own children sent to her kitchen by Lolotte.¹⁶⁷

Wright and her associates apparently felt that the conditioning of the children and the equality of their access to provisions and education was more important than the right of the slave parents to have access to their children.

Additional records, such as the following Saturday evening, May 26, 1827, entry in the Nashoba book, also suggest that other aspects of the communal way of life hampered the freedom of the black inhabitants of Nashoba:

Agreed that the slaves shall not be allowed to receive money, clothing, food, or indeed anything whatever from any person resident at, or visiting this place whether trustee, co-adjutor, probationer, or stranger... Agreed that the slaves shall not be permitted to eat elsewhere than at public meals, excepting in such sickness as may render confinement to their cabins necessary.¹⁶⁸

Certainly, for a communitarian society to function properly, meals needed to be taken in common and all inhabitants had to hold an equal amount of goods, property, and money in the society. Yet, it is curious that these journal entries specify that only the “slaves” were to abide by these communitarian rules and regulations. No mention is made of the

¹⁶⁷ “The Nashoba Book.” Quoted in A. J. G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright Free Enquirer* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), 167.

¹⁶⁸ “Frances Wright’s Establishment,” *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 28 July 1827.

rest of the community, and one wonders if the black residents of Nashoba were “disposed to laziness” because the example of their free brethren—who seemed exempt from strict regulations and physical labor—was not particularly conducive to fostering a diligent work ethic.

The Nashoba resident trustees, however, did attempt to give some measure of liberty to the slaves working at Nashoba, as another portion of the Sunday, May 6, 1827, journal entry printed in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* indicates:

The wish of two-thirds of the slaves, expressed at two successive weekly meetings, will be considered by us [the resident trustees] as sufficient ground for separating any slave from the others, as having been deficient in industry.¹⁶⁹

In other words, if the slaves collectively felt that one of their own was not cooperating by putting in an equal amount of physical labor, the group could vote to have the benefits of the communal society withdrawn from that slave. The Wednesday, June 15, 1827, journal entry records just such a case, when the slave Henry claimed that due to a pain in his knee, he could not plough. The resident trustees took a vote among the slaves “respecting the capacity of Henry to follow the oxen to-day” and the group, apparently determining that Henry was feigning the illness, voted that he should “attend to it [the plough].”¹⁷⁰ Clearly, the trustees allowed the slaves to exercise the right to vote on some aspects of their situations, but the majority of the logbook entries suggest that the trustees unduly controlled the lives of the slaves, often treating them as children or mere chattel.

Even if one agrees that the incident of corporeal punishment at Nashoba was an anomaly produced by unsatisfactory conditions and the absence of the community’s

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

leader, it is evident that the trustees of Nashoba did not regard the slaves as equals of the free members of the community.¹⁷¹ Moreover, it is clear that the daily workings of the Nashoba community were at odds with the rhetoric of freedom Wright so fervently preached in her lectures throughout the nation. In order to reconcile the discrepancy between Wright's rhetoric of freedom and the restricted lives of the Nashoba slaves, one must look to the various definitions of freedom that Wright developed. It appears Wright applied her European Enlightenment understanding of liberty, in which the unhampered freedom of citizens was constrained and subordinated to the greater good of society, to the slaves of the Nashoba community. Before the slaves could achieve the broader freedoms about which Wright lectured, they first had to be "civilized" and introduced as productive citizens to civil society. Eventually, once the slaves had been freed and given their civil liberty, they too could have the more extensive freedoms Wright spoke of and hoped to impart to all Americans.

¹⁷¹ Two free mixed-race women. Charlotte Lariou and her daughter Josephine, were recruited to teach at the Nashoba school in 1827; the documents indicate that they were treated equally despite their mixed race. This suggests the imbalance between freedom and restrictions in Nashoba were based on the free/slave distinction and not upon a black/white distinction.

Conclusion

The Failure of Nashoba and the Success of its Legacy:

Nashoba and American Freedom

As one might expect, the *Explanatory Notes* and Wright's lectures did not endear her to the majority of Americans. Benjamin Lundy of the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* wrote a lengthy editorial objecting to the radical nature of Wright's experiment, particularly in terms of the proposals regarding religion and morality. Lundy declared of Nashoba, "We consider it too wide a departure from the rules sanctioned by wisdom and experience, and calculated to break up the foundations of the social order, instead of improving the edifice at present erected."¹⁷² Even James Madison, an advocate of the abolition of slavery and a friend of Wright, questioned the direction of the experiment in a letter to General Lafayette. He noted, "She has, I fear, created insuperable obstacles to the good fruits of which they might be productive by her disregard, or rather defiance, of the most established opinions and vivid feelings." He noted that her views on miscegenation were "universally obnoxious" and her opinions of religion and marriage were similarly distressing to the majority of the nation.¹⁷³ It seems that Nashoba did indeed draw upon the "dominant fears" of the age.

Several months after these attacks on Nashoba, Wright concluded that the time had come to abandon the community. Her sister, Camilla, described the decision to end the experiment in a November 1828 letter. Following a succession of wildly popular lectures in the Midwest, Wright came to understand that her faculties were best suited to

¹⁷² "The Institution of Nashoba." *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 26 April 1828.

¹⁷³ James Madison to General Lafayette, 20 February 1828. *Works of Madison* Vol III (New York: R. Worthington, 1884), 617-621.

public lecturing and not utopia-building, as Camilla explained: “All hopes of an association at Nashoba being ended she thought it would be a poor appropriation of her talents to sit down & devote herself to the emancipation of a few slaves, besides its being an employment for which she was altogether & in every respect incompetent.”¹⁷⁴ The community was left in the care of an overseer until 1829, when Wright determined the fate of the Nashoba slaves. Again, Camilla detailed Wright’s decision in a letter; Wright had decided that the slaves should be removed from the country, and “after consulting with many experienced individuals as to the most eligible location,” she resolved to send them to Haiti.¹⁷⁵ Wright requested permission to deposit the slaves in Haiti from the island nation’s president, Jean Pierre Boyer. Robert Dale Owen was in possession of Boyer’s letter to Wright accepting her proposition, and he summarized the letter years later in a periodical article. After “eulogizing Miss Wright’s philanthropic intentions,” Robert Dale wrote, the president assured asylum for the slaves and promised that they would be “placed as ‘cultivators’ on land belonging to kind and trustworthy persons.”¹⁷⁶

Why did Nashoba fail? By peering through the eyes of Frances Trollope, a brief visitor to the Nashoba community, one may glean some insight into the answer to this question. When she returned from her curative vacation in Europe, Wright brought along Trollope, an impoverished European intellectual and aristocrat who hoped to escape her debts by fleeing to America.¹⁷⁷ In the same manner as Wright, Trollope published a memoir of her first American experience, and just as *Views* was a popular item in Europe in 1821, Trollope’s 1832 memoir, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, was well

¹⁷⁴ Camilla Wright Whitbey to Harriet Garnett, 20 November 1828. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

¹⁷⁵ Camilla Wright Whitbey to Julia Garnett Pertz, 1 November 1829. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

¹⁷⁶ Robert Dale Owen, “An Earnest Sowing of Wild Oats,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1874, 75.

¹⁷⁷ Frances Trollope was the mother of Anthony Trollope, who later became a well-known British novelist.

received in Europe.¹⁷⁸ Trollope's work, on the other hand, appealed to a far different European audience; her acerbic criticism of American society earned liberal praise from English Tories.¹⁷⁹ Trollope had hoped that she and the three children who accompanied her could pleasantly reside at the Nashoba community, but she quickly decided otherwise. She recalled that when she first caught sight of Nashoba "desolation was the only feeling—the only word that presented itself."¹⁸⁰ Continuing her critical analysis, she noted that "they were without milk, without beverage of any kind except rainwater...no vegetables but rice... no meat but pork."¹⁸¹ Clearly the inhabitants of Nashoba lacked sufficient provisions, and, moreover, the facilities were appalling, according to Trollope. The bedroom had no ceiling and leaked continually, and the chimney of the log cabin regularly caught fire several times a day. Evidently, Nashoba was not the splendid New World utopian paradise Wright had described and Trollope had imagined.

Nevertheless, Trollope explained, Wright seemed oblivious to the flaws of her community. Trollope rationalized Wright's bizarre behavior toward the experiment, musing, "But, to do her justice, I believe her imagination was so exclusively occupied on the scheme she then had in view that all her other faculties were in a manner suspended, for she appeared perfectly unconscious that her existence was deprived of all that makes life desirable."¹⁸² In fact, Trollope maintained, "I never saw, I never heard or read, of any enthusiasm approaching hers, except in some few instances, in ages past, of religious

¹⁷⁸ Though, of course, the American press lambasted Trollope for her unkindly representation of their country.

¹⁷⁹ Donald Smalley, introduction to *Domestic Manners of the Americans* by Frances Trollope (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1949), viii.

¹⁸⁰ Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832; repr. New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1949), 27.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 27-28.

fanaticism.”¹⁸³ Trollope, with her refined European sensibilities, was shocked at the rugged life of the American frontier and may have been exaggerating in her description of Nashoba and Wright; nonetheless, the comparison of our atheist heroine to a religious fanatic is a valuable insight. Like many utopia-leaders, Wright failed to recognize its flaws until the whole edifice of the community came tumbling down.

Eventually, Wright did come to understand the futility of continuing the Nashoba experiment (albeit two years later). as Camilla described, “After a 4 years experiment [she] ascertained that the Slaves at Nashoba *cannot* at the low state of agricultural produce which has prevailed from their first arrival there, raise a sufficiency for their food & clothing & far less lay by a surplus fund for their emancipation, & are moreover a constant source of anxiety & pecuniary loss.”¹⁸⁴ Wright conceded her failure, though she did not give up her cause. Writing and lecturing on American society’s ills until her death in 1852, she continued to disseminate her thoughts on freedom, equality, and emancipation to the masses for twenty years after Nashoba’s demise.

Though the Nashoba community failed in its prescribed mission, the legacy of the utopian experiment may be considered a success in terms of the window it has opened upon society and freedom in early nineteenth-century America. Wright herself gradually embraced multiple meanings of freedom throughout the duration of the experiment and used these definitions for a number of different purposes. On one hand, Wright attempted to prepare the slaves at Nashoba for civil liberty, and, accordingly, the Nashoba community limited the freedom of the slaves as they worked and lived in the establishment. Wright evidently felt that the slaves were not ready for the greater

¹⁸³ Ibid., 28.

¹⁸⁴ Camilla Wright Whitbey to Julia Garnett Pertz, 1 November 1829. *Harvard Library Bulletin*.

freedoms about which she often lectured and wrote, and instead she sought to first grant them a restricted form of liberty. On the other hand, Wright utilized Nashoba as a platform for the advocacy of an even fuller expression of freedom in American society, one that encompassed far more than just civil liberty. In practice, these various definitions of freedom clashed both with each other and with the structure of the communitarian society itself, which, by its very nature, often constrained freedom.

Some historians, such as Raymond Muncy and William and Jane Pease, contend that Nashoba failed precisely because of the contradictory elements of Wright's rhetoric of freedom and her utopian plan; as the Peases note, providing liberty for the slave and freeing the human mind worked at "cross purposes" in the Nashoba community.¹⁸⁵ Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that Nashoba, in fact, did not fail for ideological reasons; instead, Nashoba's demise can be traced to a host of technical problems plagued the community. For instance, the land Wright purchased for Nashoba was second-rate, which hindered the community's attempt to maximize its agricultural output. Wright also had difficulty obtaining the goods that were necessary for survival in the American frontier, where life was certainly harsh. The malaria-infested Memphis swamps sickened both Wright and her sister, and Wright's ensuing absence from Nashoba also contributed to the deterioration of the community. Unlike George Rapp of the successful Harmonie community, who "knew much about agriculture and manufacturing,"¹⁸⁶ the aristocratic Wright had no experience in farming or community management, which must have hampered her ability to run Nashoba. Clearly, numerous troubles beset Nashoba;

¹⁸⁵ Pease, "A New View," 107

¹⁸⁶ Karl J. R. Arndt, "George Rapp's Harmony Society," *America's Communal Utopias*, ed. Donald Pitzer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997): 65.

nonetheless, they could have been solved through the use of more skilled management and the acquisition of better land.

Thus, Frances Wright's ideological basis of Nashoba was not necessarily the cause of the downfall of the experiment, as Muncy and the Peases claim; instead, the practical issues of illness, farming, and finances led to the end of the community. Despite the failure of the experiment, Wright's theories of liberty, freedom, and communal living ought not simply be dismissed as the impractical musings of an obscure utopian romantic. Many of the causes she championed later became accepted into American society, thus vindicating her theories on civil liberties and social mores. Moreover, Wright's utopia was an early attempt to expand the definition of American freedom—that quintessential theme by which modern Americans define themselves and utilize to distinguish their nation from others around the world. Wright, who emblazoned on her Cincinnati tombstone, "I have wedded the cause of human improvement, staked it on my fortune, my reputation and my life," should be remembered as more than a quixotic utopian who flirted with the *no place* of which Thomas More wrote; in many ways, Wright was a practical activist, and Nashoba was the concrete manifestation of her progressive ideals—ideals that would one day, long after her death, become imbued in American society.

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