

Utopia on the Wabash

The History of Preservation in New Harmony

Upon seeing New Harmony, Indiana, in 1819, one visitor exclaimed, “That wonder of the West.” The town stood on an efficient grid plan amid 30,000 acres of heavily forested land along the Wabash River. Some 800 German pietists, members of the communal Harmony Society of George Rapp (1757-1847), began purchasing and settling the wilderness location in 1814. As they anxiously awaited the second coming of Christ in the next 10 years, the Harmonists cultivated 3,000 acres and built a town of 180 buildings including homes, churches, mills, and a huge stone granary.

Welsh-born Robert Owen (1771-1858), cotton mill owner and social reformer of New Lanark, Scotland, purchased New Harmony from Rapp’s Harmony Society in 1825. Owen invited anyone attracted to his plan for a “New Moral World” built on education, science, social equality, rational religion, and communal living to join him in making New Harmony its first model. Noted Scottish geologist and philanthropist William Maclure (1763-1840) became his financial and educational partner in this utopian venture in 1826. Maclure brought several of Philadelphia’s best natural scientists and Pestalozzian educators to New Harmony. In 1827, the communal experiment ended, but Maclure’s protégées, Owen’s sons and one daugh-

ter, and many others perpetuated New Harmony’s educational, scientific, and reform tradition along with its physical presence.

John C. Leffel’s *History of Posey County* records that in 1844 the town contained 12 stores, two steam mills, and two tanneries. The streets were raised and the sidewalks graveled. A high levee was built to the river in order to make a road passable to it in all seasons, and at the sides of the levee were canals to admit keelboats and flat boats into the town when the water was high. The town of New Harmony was incorporated in August 1850, and the town board was organized to pass the customary ordinances and bylaws regulating saloons, peddlers, and the rate of taxation. The town board adjourned their meeting April 11, 1867, and their charter lapsed. The town was not re-incorporated until 1881.

Between the Civil War and World War I, the character of the town changed, but Owen/Maclure Community descendants continued to preserve its heritage. In 1894, the Workingmen’s Institute, founded by William Maclure in 1838, moved from the New Harmony school to a new Romanesque Revival structure built with funding provided by Dr. Edward Murphy (1813-1900). The oldest continuously open library in Indiana, it houses a museum, an art gallery, a public circulating library, and archives devoted to New Harmony

Left, the Rapp Granary in 1890; right, the Rapp Granary in 2000.



and Posey County history. Murphy also provided the funding for the construction of an auditorium in 1913. That same year, the New Harmony School was erected on the site of the former Harmonist church, and the original doorway of the church was incorporated into the structure. Local historians, in recognition of New Harmony's centennial, noted these accomplishments in 1914.

During that time, two local photographers began photographing people, structures, and special events throughout the town. Two of New Harmony's earliest "preservationists," William Frederick Lichtenberger (1849-1924) and Homer Fauntleroy (1866-1952), documented many of the original Harmonist structures before their demolition or demise. New Harmony resident and amateur historian, Don Blair (1909-1992), collected the glass negatives of Lichtenberger and Fauntleroy and donated them to the University of Southern Indiana in 1985.

In 1925, the Fauntleroy House, home of Jane Dale Owen Fauntleroy (1806-1861) and Robert Henry Fauntleroy (1806-1849), was sold to the Indiana Federation of Clubs to be maintained as a memorial to Indiana women's clubs because the Minerva Society, one of the first women's groups dedicated to intellectual pursuits, was founded there in 1859. Mary Emily Fauntleroy (1858-1954), sister of Homer Fauntleroy, remained in the home as the caretaker and collected many of its furnishings so the home could be open to the public. She also purchased the Harmonist Community House No. 2, the only remaining three-story Harmonist dormitory, and began gradual restoration. In 1939, the Indiana Federation of Women's Clubs gave the Fauntleroy House to the State of Indiana for its preservation as a historic site, and Mary Emily sold Community House No. 2 to the state for the same purpose.

In 1937, the State of Indiana created the first New Harmony Memorial Commission to oversee early preservation concerns. In their 1942 publication, *The New Harmony Memorial Movement*, the Commission states:

The New Harmony Memorial is a shrine to idealism—the memorialization of spiritual values and social ideals of our historic heritage that stand the test of time. It is based upon the fact that the little town of New Harmony was the stage of two world-famed experiments in community socialization in the early days of Indiana as a Territory and a new State.

Elaborate plans were conceived to focus the actions of the commission on the remaining historic structures of New Harmony's earliest years. The early work of the Commission laid the groundwork for purchase and protection of key historic properties in the community. Several of these properties were restored and interpreted by the State of Indiana as the New Harmony State Memorial, later renamed the New Harmony State Historic Site.

In 1948, Kenneth Dale Owen, descendent of Robert Owen, bought the Rapp-Maclure House. This large brick structure was originally constructed as Father George Rapp's residence in 1817-18 and was renovated by Owen in 1990. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Robert Lee Blaffer Trust, founded by Owen's wife, Jane Blaffer Owen, restored many of the historic homes in the community. A private, not-for-profit community group, Harmonie Associates, was formed to help with improvements in the town.

In 1965, the Town of New Harmony was designated as a National Historic Landmark district by the United States Department of the Interior. In 1973, the Indiana State Legislature established a second New Harmony Memorial Commission. The new commission's task was to bring statewide assistance for New Harmony's preservation and development. Before the end of 1973, the town raised its share of a state-federal planning grant and adopted zoning. Private investors restored a five-building commercial block.

Between 1974 and 1980, The Lilly Endowment, Inc., provided a generous grant to the private, not-for-profit, Historic New Harmony, Inc., permitting acquisition and restoration of significant properties. The town received the Award of Merit from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for its planning and management efforts. Non-historic buildings were moved to new locations, permitting their continued commercial and residential use. Historic buildings were relocated to an area of prime historic significance. In many cases, the buildings were moved to their original sites; in other cases to replace those with similar characteristics.

In 1985, Historic New Harmony, Inc., became a division of the University of Southern Indiana, promoting cultural and educational programs, and continuing the maintenance and



The 1832 Weingartner map of New Harmony.

preservation of its properties. In 1991, Historic New Harmony combined resources with the New Harmony State Historic Site to become a “unified program” of the University of Southern Indiana and the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites. The New Harmony Memorial Commission, with membership appointed by the governor, oversees the activities of the unified program.

The Rapp Granary/Owen Foundation, incorporated in 1995 as a private not-for-profit, completed reconstruction of the Rapp Granary/David Dale Owen Laboratory in 1999. In 1999, Historic New Harmony received a grant from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources to prepare a district nomination for

listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination was approved at the state level the next year. Currently, New Harmony is working toward expanding the boundaries of the National Historic Landmark district. In addition, in 1998, the American Institute of Certified Planners designated New Harmony as a National Planning Landmark.

In 1982, the United States Department of the Interior, in cooperation with the Federal Interagency Panel for World Heritage, placed New Harmony, Indiana on the Indicative Inventory of Potential Future U.S. World Heritage Site nominations.

Following the progressive traditions of the Harmonist and Owen/Maclure Communities, Richard Meier’s award-winning Atheneum/Visitors Center, completed in 1979, welcomes over 50,000 visitors seeking intellectual stimulation and spiritual renewal annually. Enhancing the themes discovered throughout 12 historic sites open to the public are Philip Johnson’s Roofless Church and many historic and contemporary gardens and parks. Guided tours, educational programs, and special events are presented from March 15 through

December 30. For more information, visit Historic New Harmony’s web site at www.newharmony.org.

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Illustrations courtesy Historic New Harmony, New Harmony, Indiana.