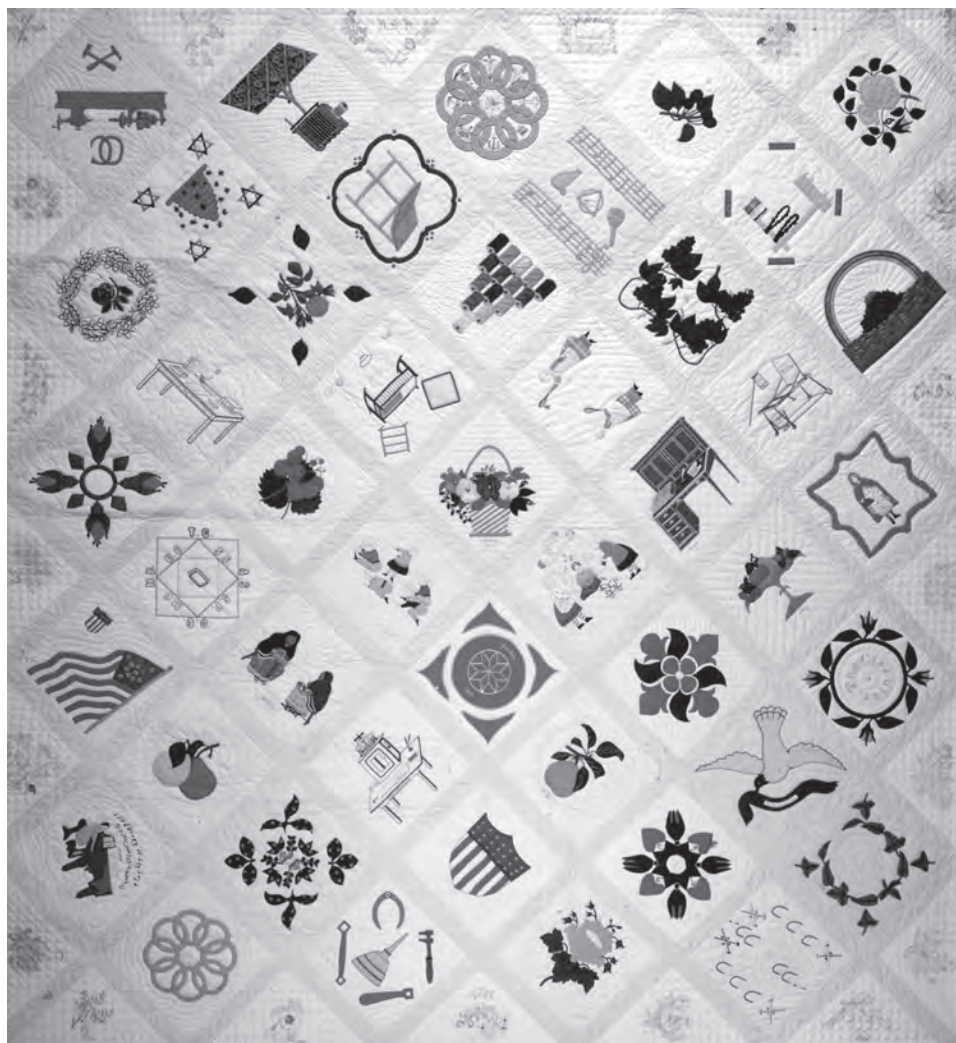


# Oneida Community JOURNAL

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# The ONEIDA COMMUNITY MANSION HOUSE

## *A National Historic Landmark*

ONEIDA COMMUNITY MANSION HOUSE (OCMH) was chartered by the New York State Board of Regents as a non-profit museum in 1987. It is the only site to preserve and interpret the history of the Oneida Community, one of the most radical and successful of the 19th century social experiments. OCMH publishes the Oneida Community Journal to inform the public of the cultural and educational activities at the Mansion House and to present articles about social and historical topics of interest within the context of its mission.

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The Best Quilt, 1873 (*OCMH Archives, photograph by James Demarest*)

### O. C. JOURNAL

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## LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*Patricia A. Hoffman*

**I**n the December 2009 letter, I announced that the Gifford Foundation will match up to \$10,000 any new or increased memberships or contributions. To date we have raised almost \$4,000! We have until November 2010 to raise the balance so if you have been thinking about becoming a member, buying a membership as a gift, or making a donation, this is the perfect time to do it!

It has been a very busy winter. We were one of 268 organizations nationwide to be awarded a grant to participate in The Big Read. The Big Read is National Endowment of the Arts program presented in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Arts Midwest, to bring back literature into the American culture.

We are partnering with the Oneida Public and Sherrill-Kenwood Free libraries to present activities and events for children and adults during The Big Read throughout the entire month of March. Our selection from the NEA's list of classic American stories provided a double bonus for readers and theater lovers alike: Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and his Pulitzer Prize winning play *Our Town*.

As I write this, The Big Read is scheduled to kick off on March 6 with a keynote address by writer and teacher Donna Woolfolk Cross, author of the popular novel *Pope Joan*. Long-time theatre critic and award-winning playwright Tony Vellela will join us from New York City on March 19 to present the documentary he wrote and produced, *"Living and Dying in Our Town."* And on March 27, our Big Read will culminate with a presentation of *Our Town* by Victoria Buda's Academy of Theatrical Arts in the Big Hall of the Mansion House. Not one to let an opportunity go by, we are turning the evening into a major fund

raising event by including an option of a South-American dinner (in keeping with the locale of Wilder's book) and desserts at Zabroso Restaurant.

The New York State Council on the Arts has awarded us a grant to renew the "Braidings of Jessie Catherine Kinsley" exhibit, which was installed in 1998. This renewal will give us the opportunity to display braidings that have been donated to the Mansion House since that time as well as additional works by her art instructor, Kenneth Hayes Miller. We are pleased that The Exhibition Alliance in Hamilton, NY will oversee the room's design as they did in the existing exhibit.

This issue of the Oneida Community Journal represents the first to be published since Jessie Mayer retired as editor after twenty years. Over time the Editorial Committee will develop its own style and is sincerely interested in your comments and suggestions along the way. You will notice that the issue is themed around women to coincide with our spring adult enrichment series, "Feminist Expression in Craft." We enjoyed the thematic approach and look forward to trying it again in the future.

After more than a decade of service, Ruth Wixted has retired from her position as Office Assistant at the Mansion House. A talented artist, Ruth designed many signs, flyers, advertisements, brochures and invitations during her tenure. She taught herself Adobe Photoshop and went on to do the layout for the Oneida Community Journal four times a year. Ruth scheduled all the tour guides and arranged the special tours with a generous amount of patience and perseverance. It is not often that you find someone as talented and dedicated as Ruth and we definitely miss her at the Mansion House.



## WOMEN IN PARADISE: GENDER ROLES IN THE ONEIDA COMMUNITY

*By Giles Wayland-Smith*

**D**rawing on the theme of this issue of the *Journal*, this article seeks to examine the status and role of women within the Oneida Community and to draw from that analysis some lessons for today. While the phrase “women in paradise” undoubtedly is overdrawn, I do want to make the argument that women in the Oneida Community would seem to have held an unusually advanced position (especially when compared to their sisters in the larger society throughout the 19th century) and that we can learn much from examining their life in greater detail.

The history of the Oneida Community is well-known, especially to the readers of the *Oneida Community Journal*. Nevertheless, several key points must be re-emphasized. The absolute central starting point is that this was a religious community, anchored in the religious vision of John Humphrey Noyes. The doctrine of Perfectionism posited that people could become perfect in Christ’s image and that, having shed sinfulness, they could create a perfect society; they could create a literal Eden, a new Jerusalem, here on earth. This radical deviation from orthodox Christian belief was based upon the assertion that the Second Coming of Christ had actually occurred in 70 AD with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. This meant that the Kingdom of God, God’s millennial reign, had been set in motion in the here and now. It was the Perfectionists’ role to realize that Kingdom in all its fullness.

That brings us to the Oneidans’ second key religious doctrine: Bible Communism. People could become perfect, i.e. sinless, in imitation of Christ, by removing a fundamental cause of selfishness: private property. It was necessary, in other words, to return to the principles of the Primitive Church where all property was held in common. But it didn’t stop there. Selfishness, sinfulness, was as much of people as it was of things. Therefore, Bible Communism went one very radical step further by doing away with monogamous marriage. It created *complex marriage*,

through which all adult males were married to all adult females and free — if closely monitored — sexual relations were encouraged among consenting partners.

It can’t be stressed enough how important it is to keep these religious tenets in mind, because literally *everything* about the Oneida Community flowed from them: from the architecture of the nearly 100,000 square foot Mansion House they built for themselves to the manicured lawns and gardens that for the members consciously replicated Eden; from the ways in which they organized their economic survival to the ways in which they governed themselves; from gender relationships and child-rearing practices to the ways in which they entertained themselves. Everything drew its sustenance from these organizing principles: Perfectionism and Bible Communism.

But let’s turn to the topic at hand: “women in paradise.” There is one major fact, of course, that makes this claim seem like a contradiction in terms. Namely, the fact that the Oneida Community was a *patriarchy*. It was a patriarchy based not only upon the Perfectionists’ general belief that men were spiritually superior to women but also, and of major importance, because John Humphrey Noyes asserted that he stood in a Biblical, prophetic line of descent that ran from Christ to St. Paul to himself. It was no wonder that he, Father Noyes, was considered by all to be the lynchpin of the millennial movement and to stand at the center of the community in every aspect of its daily life.<sup>1</sup>

In light of this, how is it possible to intimate that women were well-off, much less in paradise? At one level, it isn’t possible. But I do think that a detailed examination of Community life yields a much more positive picture. Women actually were advantaged in many ways, especially when compared to the situation facing women within the larger society at the time. This was evident in a variety of Community pronouncements. For example, John Humphrey Noyes early pledged the



Association to “remove the torments and encumbrances between you and the men; the *First Annual Report* (1849) promised to relieve women from “propagative drudgery”; and the 1871 *Handbook* made even broader claims:

“Communism gives woman, without a claim from her, the place which every true woman most desires, as the free and honored companion of man. Communism emancipates her from the slavery and corroding cares of a mere wife

and mother; stimulates her to seek the improvement of mind and heart that will make her worthy [of] a higher place than ordinary society can give her...Gradually, as by material growth, the Community women have risen to a position where, in labor, in mind, and in heart, they have all and more than all that is claimed by women who are so loudly asserting their rights.”

But it was more than just rhetoric. There were strong elements of women’s liberation “on the ground,” so to speak. Perhaps the major reason for this (and a factor too little acknowledged in the literature) was due to the Community’s principle of communal property and equal sharing of material benefits. This fundamental underpinning of the Community, even if it was never narrowly framed in terms of gender, had the effect of releasing women from the economic bondage that shackled women in the larger society and providing a material foundation on which more gender-egalitarian inclinations could be realized. To frame this in Marxist terms, changing the economic substructure inevitably led to the transformation of the superstructure, or the way in which the group structured its social institutions.



Three O.C. women about 1875  
(left to right): Tirzah Miller, Lily Hobart, Helen Campbell Noyes  
(OCMH Archives)

There are at least two broad areas that highlight this elevated role and status of women within the Oneida Community: the marital relationship and work.

“Complex marriage” was undoubtedly the most controversial of the Community’s doctrines and it certainly was complex! The practice did away with monogamous marriage. Specifically, it made every adult man and adult woman married to each other and it encouraged free, consensual sexual relations among such adult members. Everyone had to agree with this modified free love system: those who legally were married when they joined the Community had to renounce their ties and those joining singly or being born into the community had to agree to the doctrine. What did this mean in practice? And in what way and to what extent might this be liberating for women?

First, the practice of complex marriage meant that a deep, loving relationship between one man and one woman was prohibited. Any such attachment was what they called “special love” and, as something that inherently drew attention away from the community, this was to be prevented at all costs. People who were seen to be “sticky,” to use their phrase, were subject to public chastisement through a process called *mutual criticism* or they could be physically separated by sending one of the offending parties to a branch community.

To what degree was this liberating? Doing away with monogamous marriage obviously was not liberating when viewed within the context of romantic love, a notion that was growing as an ideal within the 19th century. It also is true that an increasing number of members, particularly among the younger generation who were born into the Community, came to question the practice. But complex marriage made women equal partners in a marriage and this was definitely not the case legally at that time.<sup>2</sup> It also did away with the fairly common situation whereby women were more or less unwillingly placed into marriage for political or economic or social reasons. In this regard, the Community’s emphasis on psychological as well as formal parity between the genders in the marital relationship appears to be notably liberating.

The practice of complex marriage also can be seen to be liberating for women in several other ways. Perhaps the most important of these was the fact that the Community had a very open and positive attitude towards sex itself. This stood in stark contrast to the overtly secretive and restrictive patterns of the Victorian era. But complex marriage was liberating for women in much more immediate terms: it allowed women to more freely choose their sexual partners; it relieved women of frequent and/or unwanted pregnancies; and it totally reversed existing gender roles by emphasizing female pleasure in the sexual act and male responsibility for birth control. Let us look at these several issues in turn.

Freedom of choice, in sexual relationships as well as other aspects of Community life, was hardly unlimited. The first restriction arose from the fact that sexual intimacy was considered to be holy, an act that not only brought two people closer together but also closer to God. This was the opposite of “free love” licentiousness. And, because older people were considered to be more spiritually developed, the Community espoused a doctrine of *ascending and descending fellowship*; this meant that older men and women should have sexual relation with their younger opposite numbers so as to infuse the sexual act with its proper spirituality. (The doctrine also had the practical virtue of keeping the more hot-blooded, less sexually experienced younger people away from each other.) Given these facts, how was this liberating? What is essential to understand is the fact that sexual relations appeared to be by and large *consensual*.<sup>3</sup> Sexual intimacy (or what they termed an “interview”) was most often initiated by a male but the request was mediated by a third party, inevitably an older woman, so that the person being asked had the right of refusal without embarrassment. Women had “agency”: they not only operated within a rhetorical-context in which their sexuality was openly accepted but they also had the right to choose their sexual partners to a degree perhaps unparalleled in the mid-19th century.

Women also were masters of their own sexual destiny in the sense that the purpose of sexual intimacy was not to produce children except when the community believed it could afford a new child and when a specific union was seen to yield a particularly good result. It was for this reason that the Community developed a rigorous form of birth control. Termed male continence, their form of birth control involved the lack of male orgasm (“coitus reservatus”). This practice involved an extraordinary amount of self-discipline. For that reason alone, it is truly remarkable that the practice was as effective as it was and that so many of the children were planned.<sup>4</sup> What this meant for women was at least four things: they were not under the sexual domination of men (legally, culturally, personally); they were not under economic or other forms of pressure to have children; their sexual satisfaction was emphasized over the male; and they were not responsible for birth control. All of that was liberating (and can be seen to be liberating even by modern standards).

Let us now turn to a second arena within which the role and status of women in the Oneida Community can be assessed: work.

Before examining the specific place of women within this facet of Community life, it's important to establish the larger context. First and most important is the fact that the Oneida Community was an economic success.



*Oneida Community School. A wood-engraving for Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper (April 1870). The original caption read: "O.C. Primary School Children at Their Studies" (OCMH Archives)*

These people were Yankee entrepreneurs as well as religious radicals. Recognizing that their Perfectionist vision could not be realized if the Community couldn't sustain itself (which was a real possibility in the early days when it tried to be self-sufficient), they brought their striving for excellence (what they called OCQ, or Oneida Community Quality) to the production and marketing of several manufactured items: animal traps, dyed silk thread, preserved fruits and vegetables, travel bags, and in later days, silverware. Signs of their success came not only in the form of having enough capital by 1862 to start building the 100,000 square foot Mansion House with central heating and indoor plumbing but also in the fact that the Community became the area's largest single employer.

The emphasis always was upon the collective. Everyone worked: men, women, and children. This was a central Bible Communist principle. However, it also was anchored in the practical belief that collective labor was more efficient and would reduce the average length of the workday, thereby freeing up more time for Perfectionist self-improvement and leisure pursuits.

The collective also was emphasized by the fact that everyone enjoyed equally the fruits of their labor. Oneida was a moneyless society internally. There were no wages and hence no wage differentials. Nor were there any other distinctions (such as the rooms they lived in or the food they were given to eat) that would privilege one person over another.

The Community's constant search for excellence, whether it was in production or in other facets of communal life, was clearly grounded in Perfectionism. However, in many ways, it was made possible because of the Community's major emphasis upon good health and extensive education for all of its members. The Community could produce world-renown products because it consciously created a healthy and well-educated workforce; it emphasized the development of *human capital* as the underpinning of its commercial success.

How did this work out for women?

Broadly speaking, I'd argue that it was quite liberating. Let me provide some examples.

The Community emphasized a form of *job rotation*. At a minimum, this meant not only that certain jobs were always done communally (such as at harvest time) but also that no one was forced into a job more or less permanently. People rotated in and out of jobs. But even more importantly, there was job rotation across gender lines: men did so-called women's work, women did men's work. Men worked in the kitchen and in the laundry, to take just two examples, and women did traditionally men's work in several arenas (such as light manufacturing, publishing and accounting). Certain jobs remained exclusively divided along gender lines (such as clothes making and darning for women, heavy duty manufacturing for men) but, overall, women



Drawing by Milford Newhouse about 1870 (OCMH Archives)

worked across the entire spectrum of Community jobs and, based upon individual talents, many women held important managerial positions.<sup>5</sup>

This reality (which was highly unusual for the time) had the virtue not only of making women feel important to the Community's well-being but also of giving them a great deal of self-confidence. They knew that they were critical to Community success in every field and at every level. And based upon the fact that they were fully educated along side their male counterparts up through secondary school, they knew they had well-developed skill sets that were being brought to the Community's business enterprises.



These were well-read and well-informed women who had a sure sense of their place within the Community and of their critical importance to the Community's business success as well as their overall utopian mission.

The women also were liberated from Victorian dress codes, which literally made it much easier for them to work. Pantalettes freed women from corsets and crinolines and bustiers; short hair liberated them from fussiness as well as the heat. In addition, job rotation led to labor-saving inventions (mop wringers, Lazy Susans, laundry machines, apple peelers etc.) and this eased so-called "women's work" for everyone. Finally, women were released from sole responsibility for child rearing. After a child was weaned (which was anywhere from 12 to 18 months), s/he became a Community charge and was cared for by specially designated members as s/he moved up through different age groups. Children had frequent (and loving) contact with their parents but they were strictly prohibited from developing any kind of "special love" relationship with them. This system had several benefits. Among the most important of these, perhaps, was the fact that women were freed to pursue other tasks and to have a great deal more time for self-improvement or leisure pursuits.

Having reviewed the position of women in the Oneida Community, it's time to draw some conclusions from this bold venture into largely uncharted waters and try to relate those findings to today's world.



*O.C. child-care providers and children, about 1866 (OCMH Archives)*

Perhaps the first and most important conclusion is that the Oneida Community was not a utopia. And it certainly was not a paradise for women. This was not just because the Community ultimately failed but also because of the several patriarchal elements that were built into the Community. There was a definite glass ceiling for women in the Community.

Still, I remain deeply impressed by how liberating the Community must have seemed for all members, but perhaps especially for the women. Even if the Community did officially disband in 1881, I believe it got a number of things right and that it provides a number of lessons for us today. Let me be specific:

- The overarching culture of the Community was what might be termed a feminist culture. In other words, in contrast with the larger, male-dominated American culture which stressed individuals in hierarchical competition with one another, the Community's culture emphasized the group as a whole, the deep relationships that existed among its members, and their mutual responsibilities in the pursuit of the common good. Such a culture is worthy of emulation.<sup>6</sup>
- Women were active, self-confident partners in the Community. I would argue that their strong position was anchored in the fact that they were well-educated, had equal access to the wealth and resources of the Community and, when freed in critical ways from the gender-based roles of dependent spouse, housekeeper and childcare giver, they became fully engaged in all facets of the Community's overall mission and daily life. That history is relevant for us today because it has been a combination of formal equality with changing gender role definitions that has underwritten major advances women have achieved within recent decades.
- Having everybody work and redefining what the larger society labeled "men's and women's work" created economies of scale. In other words, the Community's practices not only led to a high level of production but also did this quite efficiently. This in turn, gave rise to a shortened workday and allowed



for a great deal more leisure time. Women especially benefited from the altered workday



*O.C. women on the lawn, circa late 1860s. Standing (left to right): Ellen Miller, Helen Miller, Fidelia Burt, Mrs. Waters. Seated: Hannah Mallory, Lily Hobart (OCMH Archives)*

because, unlike in the larger society, it encouraged them to take advantage of leisure time, to pursue life-long learning, and to develop their individual talents. Replicating such a learning environment seems very relevant to today's challenges.

- Community doctrine required that everyone

avoid "special love" relationships at all costs. This was clearly difficult at every level but we know from diaries and other materials that one of the most wrenching relationships to give up was that between a mother and her child. Frequent contacts were certainly allowed but these couldn't be exclusive or divert the mother's attention from all of the other children. Thus, there was a clear psychological cost to communal living. At the same time, however, diary-based and other evidence indicates that the Community's dramatic move away from the nuclear family and direct parental childcare didn't seem to negatively affect the children themselves. To the contrary: they seemed well- (if not exclusively-) loved, well-cared for, well-educated, and closely supervised as they passed through different stages. What this experience indicates is that it's not so much the formal structuring of the family or childcare as it is the nurturing environment that helps to

develop healthy, caring and well-adjusted adults and children. Once again, that is something we can learn from today.

- The Community had a well-developed and highly self-conscious sense of public and private space. They recognized that every society needs public spaces within which people are brought



*Cornelia Worden in costume for the O.C. theatrical, "A page of Jute," circa 1870s (OCMH Archives)*

together; this is how communities not only reinforce their social bonds but also govern themselves and make collective decisions. At the same time, however, they recognized that individuals have lives of their own and they need private space if they are to lead healthy, well-adjusted, self-actualizing lives.

Everyone needs such private space away from the demands of the collective. However, once again, it was the women who seemed to benefit most dramatically from having this right to one's own life. In this sense, the Community not only anticipated Virginia Woolf's famous essay about the necessity of having "a room of one's own" by roughly 80 years but also supported what has come to be a wealth of contemporary research on personal development.

In conclusion, it is for all of these reasons that I believe the Oneida Community was an unusually supportive place for women and that, even if it was forced to disband in 1881, the mirror it held up to the world provides many insights we can learn from.



1. St. Paul's assertions that "The husband is the head of the wife" (Ephesians 5:2) and "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men" (1 Timothy 2:12) were, in this sense, not taken lightly.

2. Judy Wellman documents the extent to which women had few if any legal rights in her path-breaking book, *The Road to Seneca Falls* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004): no right to vote, to property or inheritance, to divorce or child custody, to certain professions, or when employed, to equal pay, etc.

3. It is naïve to believe that patriarchal pressure, particularly related to the dominant role of John Humphrey Noyes, did not play a role in the sexual life of the Community. However, the formal policy was clearly to underwrite consensual relations, and the Community likely would have broken up earlier had there been wide-scale abuse of this principle.

4. There were just 102 children born into the Community. However, six of them were conceived outside the Community and four were still-births. Of the remaining 92 children, thirty-four were born in the 1849-1868 period (or an average of 1.7 per year) and fifty-eight were born during the Community's eugenics program ("stirpiculture") in the eleven-year period from 1869 to 1879 (or an average of 5.3 a year). The vast majority of the children born were "intentional" (67%), although there was a major difference between the intentional rate during the first twenty years (41%) and the stirpicultural period (83%).

5. For example, squares in the Community's "Best Quilt" (1873) illustrate several positions headed by women which would have been unthinkable for middle-class women in the larger society: factory supervisor, head bookkeeper, machine operator, silk skeiner, typesetter/compositor, journal editor, archivist/curator.

6. This argument is much more fully elaborated in Ellen Wayland-Smith's article, "The Status and Self-Perception of Women in the Oneida Community" (*Communal Studies*, v. 8, 1988), which draws upon the work of Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

## WOMEN'S WORK ON THE BEST QUILT

By Tony Wonderley & Walter J. Lang, Jr.

When the Best Quilt first emerged from private ownership to public display in the Mansion House in 1909, it impressed everyone as a relic of Community days, outstanding for both its "beautiful needle-work and as a true monument of communism" (*Quadrangle* 2, No. 5, 1909). A hundred years later, it continues to make a powerful impression partly because viewers are struck by its aesthetic and technical excellence. In this article, however, we will examine two different dimensions of the Best Quilt. Read as a historical document, the quilt tells us about the jobs women performed in the Community in 1873. In addition, and something else that is little remarked upon, the Best Quilt testifies to the capacity of O. C. women to carry out major collective projects independently of the committees and departments running most aspects of Community life.

Reminiscing about the 1850s, Harriet Worden casually mentioned how Oneida Community women engaged in pleasant quilting-bees (*Old Mansion House Memories*, p. 94). Though otherwise undocumented, quilting undoubtedly took place in the Community during the early years as part of what was seen as women's normal domestic responsibilities: that is, doing textile work and preparing bedding materials for the family in addition to child-care, house-cleaning, kitchen work, and laundry.

Then, for reasons unknown, a major upsurge in quilt-making apparently occurred in the winter of 1865-66. That year, O. C. women made 52 quilts and 27 "comfortables" and they made 30 quilts and 10 comfortables in the following year. The demand for quilts, it was noted at the time, required an expansion of quilting space to include two public spaces. When the existing quilting frames proved to be inadequate in 1868, Charles Ellis devised a new supporting matrix called the "white horse."

Thereafter, quilt-making was a major activity of the women during the winter, much of it probably done in work groups. The quilts

they made were utilitarian bed-warmers that must have been very plain-looking. When, in 1867, Harriet Noyes (John Noyes's wife, often called "Mother Noyes") introduced the "Hard-times" style of quilt composed of panels assembled from calico scraps, it created a sensation. It was said to be "quite beautiful, resembling Mosaic work." That year, all the quilts were made of that



Harriet Noyes at Niagara Falls, about 1885 (OCMH Archives).

material, "about an equal proportion of new and old calico" (*Oneida Circular*, June 24, 1867; *Daily Journal*, September 12, 1867 and February 26, 1868).

"For the last month the feminine part of the O. C. has been busily engaged in a unitary plan," it was announced in the *Oneida Circular* on March 24, 1873. "They resolved themselves into an impromptu school of design, and some astonishing works of art have been produced." Harriet Noyes, then living in the Wallingford branch of the O. C., suggested that the Oneida women "each contribute a block ten and one half inches square to a bed quilt she proposed to make. It was suggested that each one follow her own fancy in the pattern she adopted and make the dissimilarity as wide as possible."

A number of blocks involved collaboration between the panel-maker and a Community member with drawing ability, most frequently Charlotte Miller, John Noyes's sister. But "some of the women, with creditable independence, made their own patterns." Probably there was considerable working in groups. "Aggregation lends enthusiasm, and as [Eliza Burt], who is skilled in needle-work, and was hourly sought for advice, spent her time in the Back-Parlor, that room became the general rendezvous."

One hundred completed panels were set out for the Community's inspection. Some bore "various designs taken from carpets, paper-hangings, oil-cloths, stoles, etc., to which we can give no name." Many, however, were representational. The *Oneida Circular* article focused on panels that were realistically rendered, pieces showing "many things which we scarcely believe were ever before attempted in needle-work." At the time the panels were laid out for public viewing, one quilt-maker wrote, "I guess Mother Noyes will be astonished at some which are quite elaborate. They looked beautiful" (OCMH Quilt Typescript A, one of two brief manuscripts from about 1940 and both possibly by Hope Allen).

"Those who used to be active at 'quiltings' forty and fifty years ago, say they never heard of a quilt like this," according to the 1873 article. "It is an 'album bed-quilt' with the wildest variations." Album quilts were composed of blocks individually signed by their makers. Elsewhere in the country, women working in bees had long been making them. Although a number of styles are now distinguished, almost all album quilts were composed of simple, repetitive motifs. Such designs were drawn from a stock repertoire of geometric figures as well as flowers, fruits, and American flags, these latter categories being rendered with variable realism. Even so, the overall presentation was decorative.

Pictorial quilts, on the other hand, were rare (See, for example, Jacqueline Marx Atkins, *Shared Threads: Quilting Together, Past and Present*, 1994, and Cathy Rosa Klimaszewski (ed), *Made to Remember: American Commemorative Quilts*, 1991).

By contrast, the quality that "astonished" people about the O. C. quilt was its pictorialism, that is, its considerable and varied representational content. This was something



Eliza Burt with brothers Abram (left) and Leonard, circa 1860s (OCMH Archives).

special, a "unique creation of quilt-making," "a new type" (OCMH Quilt Typescript B).

Nothing further was documented at the time. Some years later, it was remembered that the women of both Oneida and Wallingford Communities had contributed panels sufficient for more than one quilt. "Enthusiasm rose greatly during the making." (H. Allen's journal, September 11, 1912). At some point, the panels were sorted according to their "quality," the finest being selected for this one—the "Best Quilt" as it came to be known later in the twentieth century.

We do not know how the 45 panels comprising the work were selected although representationalism clearly was an important criterion. The "Second Best" quilt, composed of blocks not used in the "Best Quilt," is almost entirely geometric. Nor do we know whether Harriet Noyes was the one who finished the quilt. One person certainly involved in laying out the final design was Charlotte Miller, the artist who contributed floral designs holding the composition together on all sides.

"We imagine," concluded the 1873 article, "that half a century hence it will be an interesting memorial of the industries and aspirations of the year 1873." Like album quilts everywhere, the O. C. example contained signature blocks and, as elsewhere, many panels show flowers, fruits, geometric designs, and American flags. Other blocks depict aspects of life and belief—"aspirations"—in the O. C. at that time. These include a few scenes of recreational activity and several religious designs.



Charlotte Miller, circa 1850s (OCMH Archives).



But the topic most clearly and frequently represented on the quilt is work. At least fourteen panels illustrate or allude to eleven jobs performed by the quilters, their “industries” in 1873. The blocks illustrating work are described below along with commentary about them from the 1873 article and later.

**1. Children’s Care-Provider** Three blocks represent work with children. One shows objects in the Children’s area including a cradle and a rack for hanging clothing (row 4 from the top, number 2 from the right). One shows children playing leap-frog (row 6, number 2). The third depicts three girls playing with a toy horse (row 6, number 3). Of the latter, the 1873 article notes, “Mary [Whatley], who helps take care of the babies, has represented some of them at their play.”

**2. Housekeeper** (row 4, number 4). “Lavinia Kelly depicts the mop-wringer, a machine which has contributed to ‘the emancipation of women’” (1873 description). Much was made of this device invented by O. C. member John Leonard in 1868. The Perfectionists believed it attested to the benefits of their communistic labor system. Rotating men into the realm of women’s work resulted in the invention, by men, of labor-saving devices that would benefit women.

**3. Kitchen Supervisor** (row 7, number 2). Margaret Langstaff’s duties included dealing with the local Native Americans, Oneidas, who came to the back door seeking food scraps. Her panel shows two seated Oneida Indian women asking, “Where’s Margaret?” The 1873 description reads: “One of the most interesting blocks exhibits a striking similitude of two squaws as they sit at our back-door waiting for Margaret to take their baskets in exchange for broken victuals.”

**4. Typesetter or compositor** (row 2, number 2). “Here is a type-case; this was made by [Elizabeth Mallory], who is one of our chief typos” (1873 description). This block, it is later stated, “depicts realistically the brown type box of the printing office, thus recording a kind of woman’s work that was very popular among some community women.” (OCMH Quilt Typescript B).

**5. Phonographer** (row 8, number 2). “[Olive Nash], who is a phonographic reporter, depicts her table, with pencils, note-book and copying press” (1873 description). “Phonography” was the system of stenographic shorthand employed in the Community to record meeting proceedings. The copying press was the photocopy machine of the day. “A letter was written with special copying ink, then placed in a press with a dampened sheet of tough tissue paper on top of it and squeezed. The written words were of course reversed on the copy, but the tissue paper was so thin that you could read through it from the front.” (Jessie Mayer, “When Handwriting Had Value,” *Oneida Community Journal*, June, 2004).

**6. Clerk/Archivist/Curator[?]** (row 6, number 1). “The elderly woman in charge of ‘community publications’ made a neatly geometrical pattern of colored lines with initials representing all of the items in her charge” (OCMH Quilt Typescript B). This square, by Sophia Nunns, makes reference to such publications as the Handbook and to the weekly magazine by each of its three names.

**7. Silk-Skeiner** (row 2, number 4; Figure 2). “Mrs. Smith, who works at the silk, makes a very good likeness of the standard and pin with a bunch of silk at the left, while at the right are hanging the bright-colored skeins, all neatly knotted and ready to be made into hanks” (1873 description). Silk-skeining was the production of threads used in hand-sewing as opposed to thread for sewing machines (“machine twist”). This manufacturing activity was carried on by O. C. women in the Mansion House after 1869.

**8. Factory Supervisor** (row 3, number 3). “Mrs. [Conant], who superintends the silk-spooling at the factory shows us what she does, by a variegated pyramid of spools filled with machine-twist” (1873 description).

**9. Head Bookkeeper** (row 5, number 4). “Helen [Miller], who is a financier, portrays her desk, with its drawers, pigeon-holes, ink-stands and ledger” (1873 description).

**10. Journal Editor** (row 4, number 1). Tirzah Miller, editor of the *Oneida Circular*, probably described her own block: “Here is the editorial table, with books, clip and ink-stand.”

**11. Machine Operators** Two blocks make reference to working in the machine shop. A lathe is depicted in one (row 1, number 1). In the other (row 10, number 2), Mrs. New-house “shows her industrial implements—the hammer, the calipers, oil-can, wrench, etc.” (1873 description).

Several jobs referenced on the quilt took place in the female domestic sphere as traditionally defined. Food-preparation and house-cleaning are represented. Child-care is most frequently attested to and apparently most important. Four panels relating to youngsters—all the blocks illustrating child-care or children—are at the center of the quilt: the three child-care panels described above and one by a pair of twelve-year-olds showing young girls playing badminton (at row 4, number 3). Everything else on the quilt literally radiates outward from this maternal-looking center. Other tasks shown here, such as type-setting

and phonographic reporting, probably were considered female work in the Oneida Community.

However, the quilt also testifies to the fact that Oneida Community, women were working in non-domestic capacities well beyond the traditional place of women. With respect to the occupations described above as numbers 8-through-11, the O. C. set high standards for women’s equality in America during the 1870s.

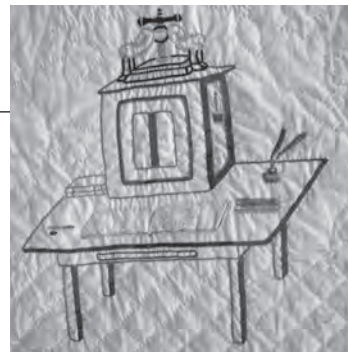
Making the Best Quilt was essentially a spontaneous effort in which the participants socialized and worked together as much as possible. One hundred blocks means that almost every woman and girl in the Oneida Community was involved in the project for about two months. This, then, was a major collective endeavor of the Community women. It was ad hoc, egalitarian, and conducted cooperatively as a bee. And it resulted in what is perhaps the single most important artifact of Community times.



*Mary Whatley's childcare block for the Best Quilt (Courtesy Walter J. Lang, Jr.). "The figures of persons drawn in India ink (as of groups of small children, some of them portraits) were supplied by Mrs. Miller" (OCMH Quilt Typescript A).*



*Margaret Langstaff's block of Oneida Indian women for the Best Quilt (Courtesy Walter J. Lang, Jr.).*



*Olive Nash's phonographic block for the Best Quilt (Courtesy Walter J. Lang, Jr.).*



*Sophia Nunns' archivist block for the Best Quilt (Courtesy Walter J. Lang, Jr.). Publications referred to are (clockwise from top): The Circular, Salvation from Sin, American Socialist, Scientific Propagation, Oneida Circular, Male Continence, and Hand-book of the Oneida Community.*



## ONEIDA COMMUNITY WOMEN IN THE MATERIAL WORLD

*By Tony Wonderley*

This is the title of a new exhibit which will open in July in Room 115 of the Mansion House. The guiding idea is that useful information can be inferred from things as well as from written sources. People who handle material culture (such as archaeologists and curators) understand that objects express the lives and values of those who use and create them. It is especially important to look to such evidence when the subject of inquiry is hidden from the historian's gaze in the privacy of the household. So, in this exhibit we highlight artifacts evoking the logic and character of women's lives in the Oneida Community. The presentation will be organized into three categories: two devoted to women's work (needlework and silk work) and one to women's furniture.

Needlework: In the O. C., as in the outside world, the making and mending of clothes was thought to be the work of women laboring in the home. Nevertheless, the Community insisted on such labor-saving devices

as the Singer sewing machine to lighten the burden of needlework. They insisted also on freeing women from the constricting fashions of the day. Properly outfitted in their new reform costumes, Community women mingled with the men in work outside the domestic sphere. In addition to O. C. clothing, we will exhibit Harriet Noyes' needlework scrapbook and a textile composition made by Libbie Hutchins for John Cragin "when they were lovers."

One kind of needlework was quilting, the quintessential collective activity of women everywhere during the winter. Quilting in the O. C. greatly increased during the mid-1860s and reached a crescendo in the early 1870s. In 1873, virtually every woman and girl in the O. C. participated in making the quilts we know today as the "Best" and the "Second Best." We will show the latter quilt so that, for the first time in many years, both of the 1873 creations can be seen at the same time.

Silk Work: In 1866, the Community began to manufacture "machine twist" thread for sewing machines. (See, for example, Jessie Mayer, "Silk-Manufacturing in the O. C." in the March 2001 Oneida Community Journal.) This industry opened a new world of industrial employment for O. C. women who were involved in starting up the factory and then running it. A spin-off from industrial production was the invention, by O. C. women, of a new business called silk-skeining, the production of threads for hand-sewing. It was a "home industry" carried on in the Mansion House (not in the factory) and by Community women (not by "hirelings"). All of the women, including the elderly and infirm, could skein silk and, for all of them, skeining meant contributing to the O. C.'s economic welfare. On exhibit will be basic implements of silk-skeining: a silk reel and a clock reel.



*The Circular (Aug. 6, 1853) proudly announced the Community's new Singer sewing machine in a wood engraving by Edward H. DeLatre (OCMH Archives).*



Furniture: Apparently unique to the Oneida Community, miniature bureaus were portable containers for the personal belongings of Community women. Most date to the late 1870s and, at that time, almost every Community woman had one. As relics of the Community's final years, they imply an increasing sense of private property and, perhaps, of individual privacy. Visitors will be able to examine about a half dozen examples.



*The silk reel on Mrs. Smith's block for the Best Quilt (1873) shows "a bunch of silk at the left, while at the right are hanging the bright-colored skeins, all neatly knotted and ready to be made into hanks" (Courtesy of Walter J. Lang, Jr.).*



*A gift to the OCMH from Cynthia Gyorgy, this may be the first miniature bureau ever built. If so, it was made by Ann Bailey and Charles Burt, probably in the 1870s (OCMH Archives).*



## SPRING ADULT ENRICHMENT SERIES: FEMININE EXPRESSION IN CRAFT

*By Patricia A. Hoffman*

**H**ow do women use craft to express their inner life and the world around them? This topic provides the focus of the spring adult enrichment series, which will be presented at 7 p.m. in the Big Hall on three successive Wednesdays in April.

On April 14, Dr. Kheli R. Willetts, Executive Director of the Community Folk Art Center in Syracuse, will present "African American Women and the Craft Tradition." Dr. Willetts is an Assistant Professor of African American Art, History and Film in the Department of African American Studies at Syracuse University where she received her Ph.D. in Education and a B.F.A. and M.A. in Museum Studies.

"The Oneida Community's Best Quilt," a textile masterpiece created by the women of the commune in 1873, will be presented by OCMH Curator Anthony Wonderley on April 21. Focusing on pictorial content, the talk will survey images on the quilt that illustrate the activities and interests of the quilt's makers. The Best Quilt itself is on permanent display

in the Mansion House. On this occasion, other quilts and quilt pieces of the Oneida Community will be exhibited. Dr. Wonderley (Ph.D., Cornell University) is the author of two books, *At the Font of the Marvelous*, and *Oneida Iroquois Folklore, Myth, and History: New York Oral Narrative from the Notes of H. E. Allen and Others* and he was recently named a Fellow of the New York State Archaeological Association.

On April 28, Pody Vanderwall will speak on the art tapestries of Jessie Catherine Kinsley (1858-1938). Born in the Oneida Community, Jessie Kinsley created textile "paintings" out of silk braidings, a body of work unique in the art of the early twentieth century. A great-granddaughter of the artist, Vanderwall will review Kinsley's life and art, and how her artistic themes relate to her personal circumstances and concerns. Many of Kinsley's works are on exhibit in the Mansion House. Others will be set out especially for this talk.

All talks are free to the public and followed by a light reception.



## NEWS

Long-time Mansion House resident **Florice Sanderson** has moved to Indianapolis to live near her daughter.

**Merry Leonard** and her husband **Ed Pitts**, who spent the better part of the last two years living in St. Louis, MO, have moved back to their home in Syracuse. Both Merry and Ed are prolific bloggers currently. When they lived in Kenwood in the 1990s, they were active OCMH volunteers and tour guides.

Over Christmas, **Judy Noyes** went to Koh Samui, Thailand, in connection with the Brackett Refugee Education Fund. She had made a previous trip to Thailand as a Trustee Representative for this foundation. On this trip she was accompanied by her daughter, a pediatrician, and two grandchildren. They also visited Bangkok in Thailand, and Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Judy's husband **Paul Noyes**, meanwhile, spent Christmas in Newton, Iowa, with his daughter **Laura**, her husband **Kevin Engel** and their son **Griffin**; Paul's other daughter, **Jeannette Noyes**, joined them from Indianapolis.

**Trine Vanderwall** and her husband, **Eric Conklin**, who live in Philadelphia, built a luge down the slope of their backyard with the overwhelming snowfall in early February ("Snowmageddon"). Their children **Kit** and **Tate** enjoyed the sliding. Trine is currently a nearly full-time volunteer at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in her old office, covering for a staff member who is on temporary leave.

**Abigail Campanie**, who graduated from Brooklyn Law School in June and was admitted to the bar in January, has joined the firm of Campanie & Wayland-Smith in Sherrill as an associate attorney. Abby recently became a member of the YWCA Mohawk Valley board of directors. She is also on the board of trustees for OCMH.

**Alan and Josi Noyes**, who live in Truckee in northern California, keep busy in retirement. They ski, or go kayaking, depending on the season, volunteer in the Emergency Room at their local hospital, and attend meditation classes weekly. They also take trips in their Roadtrek, which Al describes as "a van on steroids," to visit their numerous children and grandchildren.

**Eric R. Noyes** and **Mimi Gendreau**, of Washington, MI, continue to raise funds for the Pommern Water Project in central Tanzania [see the September 2008 Journal]. They have recently been taking horseback riding lessons, after a visit to an Equestrian Center in Ireland to celebrate Mimi's 50th birthday.

**Ruth Wixted**, who worked mornings in the OCMH office for the past nine and a half years, has retired. She will be missed. Ruth was very accomplished at putting the Journal into the computer, among other things.



*Singers from the non-profit KEYS (Kids Educational Youth Services) entertained more than 100 visitors during the Open House.*

## NEW & RENEWED MEMBERS

**Benefactor:** Mr. & Mrs. Hugh Bradford, Mr. & Mrs. Stewart Hill, Mr. & Mrs. Walter Miga, (In Honor of Jessie Mayer)

**Donor:** Ms. Katherine Garner, Dr. & Mrs. Scott Gayner, Eric R. Noyes & Mimi Gendreau, Mrs. Jane Rich, Mr. & Mrs. Robert Wayland-Smith, Mr. & Mrs. Richard H. Wood

**Contributor:** Mr. & Mrs. S. John Campanie, Mr. & Mrs. Amir Findling, Mr. & Mrs. Ronald Kemp, Ms. Amanda Larson, Mr. & Mrs. John T. Tuttle

**Associate:** Mr. & Mrs. Wilber D. Allen, Mr. & Mrs. Robert A. Bloom, Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Bogan, Mr. Jeffrey Hatcher, Mr. & Mrs. H. Ernest Hemphill, Ms. Patricia A. Hoffman, Mr. & Mrs. Hugh C. Humphreys, Dr. Ellen P. Kraly, Mr. & Mrs. P. Geoffrey Noyes, Mr. & Mrs. William Pasnau, Mr. & Mrs. Peter Sanderson, Mr. & Mrs. Robert Sanderson, Mr. Dan Strobel & Ms. Robin Vanderwall, Ms. Jennifer Wayland-Smith, Mr. & Mrs. Marc Wayland-Smith, Mr. & Mrs. Paul Wayland-Smith, Ms. Tina M. Wayland-Smith

**Family/Household:** Mr. & Mrs. Richard L. Applebaum, Mr. & Mrs. Howard I. Astrachan, Mr. & Mrs. John C. Bailey, Mr. & Mrs. Jeffrey Barnard, Mr. & Mrs. Ivan S. Becker, Jr.,

Ms. Abigail N. Campanie, Colleen Chippewa & Holly Jones, Mr. & Mrs. Timothy A. Crofton, Mr. & Mrs. Robert S. Ellin, Mr. & Mrs. Randall Ericson, Mr. & Mrs. Dwight Evans, Mr. Jeffrey S. Garner, Mr. & Mrs. Dean F. Gyorgy, (Gift from Cynthia H. Gyorgy) Mr. & Mrs. Mark H. Gyorgy, (Gift from Cynthia H. Gyorgy) Mr. & Mrs. James S. Hill, (Gift from Mr. & Mrs. Stewart Hill) Mr. Peter Jamison & Ms. Cynthia Williams, (Gift from Sean Hart) Mrs. Evangeline Jubanyik, Dr. & Mrs. John R. Kelly, Mr. & Mrs. Glenn Kimball, Mr. & Mrs. John F. King, Mr. & Mrs. John Kuterka, Mrs. Kirsten C. Marshall, Mr. & Mrs. John Nicholson, Mr. & Mrs. James Nogawa Mr. & Mrs. David Nouza, Ms. Barbara M. Nurnberger, Mr. & Mrs. Jeffrey Prowda, Mr. & Mrs. John A. Reinhardt, Mr. & Mrs. Richard Simberg, Mr. & Mrs. Jeffrey Stone, Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Wayland-Smith, Ms. Valerie Wood

**Individual:** Mrs. Jennifer Allen, Mr. Steve Blair, Ms. Maren Lockwood Carden, Ms. Pearl Gradwell, Mrs. Josephine R. Inslee, Mr. Beal Marks, Mr. Alan Parkhurst, Mr. Robert G. Reid, (Gift from Josephine Inslee) Ms. Barbara Rivette, Mrs. Cheri Sewall, (Gift from Patricia Stevens) Mrs. Patricia Stevens, Mrs. Zane Zounek

## ADDITIONS AND SUBTRACTIONS

**John and Margaret Bloom Martin** of Oneida are the parents of a son, Charles Matthew, born on December 10, 2009. Maternal grandparents are Bob and Pat Bloom; great-grandparents, the late Dick and Vi Bloom.

**Connelly and Beth Jones** of Sherrill are the parents of a daughter, Juliette, born on December 12, 2009. Paternal grandmother is Melinda Noyes Cross; great-grandparents, the late Pete and Phyllis Noyes.



*Administrative Assistant Rachel Smeltzer and Building and Grounds Director Michael Colmey at the annual tree decorating party.*



## RECENT GIFTS TO OCMH

**Journal Subscription:** Ms. Elizabeth Hill,  
(Gift from Mr. & Mrs. Stewart Hill)

**General Operating Fund:** Ms. Abigail N. Campanie, Mr. & Mrs. Dwight Evans, Mr. Jeffrey S. Garner Ms. Pearl Gradwell, Mr. Jeffrey Hatcher, Mrs. Josephine R. Inslee, Mr. & Mrs. Glenn Kimball, (On behalf of Wanda Herrick, In Memory of Crawford M. Herrick, Jr.), Dr. Ellen P. Kraly, Jonathan Pawlika, Planned Results, Inc., Ms. Jennifer Wayland-Smith, (In Memory of Dard & Carol Wayland-Smith)

**Northeast Facade Restoration:** Mr. & Mrs. Ronald Kemp, Mr. & Mrs. Walter Miga

**Cemetery:** Mrs. Wanda J. Herrick, (Xmas Wishes to Mr. & Mrs. Michael Allen, Mr. & Mrs. Glenn Kimball and Ms. Leslie Herrick all in Memory of Crawford M. Herrick, Jr.), Kenwood Benevolent Society

**Library:** Kenwood Benevolent Society

**Lawns and Gardens:** Dr. & Mrs. Scott Gayner, (In Honor of Jeff Hatcher at Christmas), Mr. John Hatcher, (In Honor of Betsy Gayner), Kenwood Benevolent Society, Mr. & Mrs. Walter J. Lang, Jr. (In Honor of Kathy Garner)

**JCK Braidings:** Mr. & Mrs. John Kuterka, (Christmas Wishes to Jane Rich, Thomas Rich, Nick & Pody Vanderwall and Dan Strobel & Robin Vanderwall), Mr. Thomas Rich, (Christmas Wishes to Mr. & Mrs. John Kuterka, Mrs. Jane Rich, Mr. & Mrs. Nick Vanderwall, Robin Vanderwall & Dan Strobel & Family, Drs. Dirk & Allison Vanderwall & Family, Eric Conklin & Trine Vanderwall & Family)

**Gifts-in-Kind:** Oneida Ltd. (Desk)

**Grants:** The Rosamond Gifford Charitable Corporation

**Business Partners:** Planned Results, Inc.



*Greg and Kate Owens hosted the annual Volunteer Reception at their home in February.  
(That's Maria Skinner in the back).*

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FROM THE PAST



*Six young women by Harold Noyes, about 1902 (OCMH Archives). Standing (left to right) are Edith Noyes, Edith Newhouse, Viola Miller (Sattig), and Norma Barron (Wayland-Smith). Edith Kinsley stands outside while Winifred Herrick (Hamilton) sits in the doorway.*

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