THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES how the great Oneida tradition of flatware began, then outlines some of the major developments occurring in silverware over the next quarter century. Oneida cutlery originated in 1877 at Wallingford, a satellite branch of the Oneida Community numbering about 35 Perfectionists. Young Corinna Ackley was told that Wallingford “was another Community home way off in Connecticut and that quite a number of our people lived there all the time. Often when a member at Oneida needed a change of climate or work they could go to Wallingford and change places with someone there who wanted to visit Oneida” (C. A. Noyes 2011:74).

Silverware was started at Wallingford to take advantage of facilities already in existence. That was because an earlier enterprise, the manufacture of silk thread, had been heavily capitalized, then discontinued. A factory building for that purpose had been purchased, renovated, and equipped with machinery in 1869 (Circular, January 10, 1870). To provide power for the factory, a major waterworks project was completed in 1872. This—“the largest and finest water power in the valley of the Quinnipiac”—was accomplished at a staggering cost of $100,000, according to participant George E. Cragin whose account is attached. The Wallingford silk thread industry grew to employ more than forty hands by early 1873 (Circular, March 17, 1873). Judging by its disappearance from the documentary record, thread-making ceased a short time later. What remained was an empty manufacturing facility with idle power on which $5,000 had to be paid in annual interest. “In the minds of the leaders,” George Cragin reported, “the question kept intruding itself ‘What shall we do to earn our living?’”

A possible answer was all around

Cont’d. next page
them in the form of silverware. The American flatware industry was then centered in the Meriden-Hartford-Waterbury region of Connecticut next to Wallingford. The great water system of Wallingford was, in fact, employed chiefly in the service of one such firm. All of this came together in the mind of Charles Cragin early in the summer of 1877:

Brother Charles was sitting on the bridge abutment looking at the rush of water through the waste gate that he had just raised to supply the Wallace tableware factory a quarter of a mile below with water until the flow of the river from the ponds above reached our Community Lake; he could hear the noisy crescendo of the factory as it started into its daily toil: the muffled crash of the “drops” mingled with the steady hum of the polishing wheels, all indicating that R. Wallace & Sons were making tableware at a great rate. Suddenly the thought came to him, “Why couldn’t we make spoons as well as Wallace?” Here was the power and the empty factory only waiting for someone to start a busy hum of our own. (attached document)

Charles Cragin got the spoon business running almost immediately, the first examples rolling off the line before the end of the summer. When he died soon after, his place as superintendent of the spoon business was taken by the indefatigable Myron Kinsley. The enterprise Kinsley oversaw manufactured tin-washed spoons of iron for the Meriden Britannia Company.

Wallingford, however, was more than a sub-contractor. The Connecticut Perfectionists were making and promoting their own products: silver-plated steel spoons and forks in several patterns including “Oval Thread,” “Tipped,” and, according to Edmonds (1948:24), “Lily.” This Oneida flatware looked promising. “The spoon business,” Charles Joslyn observed, “is the best business the Community has; and it is capable of almost unlimited expansion as fast as we want to put capital into it, which is true of none of our other businesses” (Robertson 1972:238).

However, the Oneida Community was breaking up. In June 1879, John Humphrey Noyes fled the Mansion House for Canada. His self-imposed exile in that country eventually took him to Niagara Falls. There, he asked the Community to buy him a house and that was done in February 1880. From his new residence, the Stone Cottage, Noyes somehow convinced the deeply divided business council back in Oneida to move the spoon industry in his direction. In July 1880, the council at Oneida recommended that the business be transferred to Niagara Falls (Robertson 1972:282). In September 1880, Oneida (now the Oneida Community, Ltd.) leased buildings, land, and power from the Niagara Falls Hydraulic Power Company. The move from Wallingford to the Falls was completed by early 1881. Silver-plating apparatus was up and running by the end of the year.

Oneida had received offers from at least two Connecticut silverware firms to buy out the Wallingford operation. These were rejected as inadequate. But, given the decision to retain the nascent flatware industry, why not leave it in Wallingford? Why did the spoon business have to be moved?

George Miller’s answer, at the time, was: “Wallingford is, on account of its unhealthiness, a very expensive station...According to our present experience, it will be more and more difficult to find people willing to live at Wallingford” (Robertson 1972:266). George Cragin remembered that the spoon business was crippled by “fever and ague.” Both referred to the fact that Wallingford had been rife with malaria since about 1870. Malaria destroyed the silk thread business and was likely to end the spoon business. About sixty Perfectionists, including John H. Noyes and Myron Kinsley suffered from it. Others, including
George Noyes, Charlotte Miller, and Charles Cragin, died from it. Wallingford was a death trap.

Kinsley oversaw the transfer to Niagara Falls and long continued to direct silverware operations there. Under him, flatware, probably stamped “1877 N. F.,” consisted mostly of special-order ware thinly plated with silver. A few higher quality goods, according to Holton Noyes, were produced in a line called “N. F. Plate,” which, with its “10% nickel silver base and a fairly heavy silver plate, attained a limited success; and a line called OC A. 1, having an 18% nickel silver base and a very heavy silver plate (for those days) made only in the Tipped and Windsor patterns, was sold to some extent.” In 1886, Oneida added knives to the cutlery lineup, specifying that they be stamped “Triple Plate N.F.” if silver-plated in the proportion of 3 1/2 pennyweight of silver per 100, and “Oneida Community” if plated with 12 pennyweight per 100. The best of the silver-plating was very light by later standards, perhaps a third of the future Community Plate (H. V. Noyes ca. 1930:58. 63).

From his Stone Cottage aerie, John Noyes played an important role in the Oneida Community, Ltd. during the early 1880s. “The officers and most of the directors of the company were of his selection,” it seemed to his son, Pierrepont Noyes, “and any important move, whether business or social, always awaited his sanction” (P. B. Noyes 1937:215). The company ran smoothly enough with Noyes at the helm, his governance resulting in “a reasonable prosperity--and 6 per cent dividends” (P. B. Noyes 1958:44). When Noyes died in 1886, control of the company passed to a group claiming that Noyes, from the grave, was advising them. These “spiritualists” ushered in a period of acrimony and peculation which carried the company to the brink of disaster by about 1895.

The grown-up children of the Oneida Community who succeeded the spiritualists faced the challenge of restoring fiscal health. Their leader, Pierrepont Noyes, then superintendent of the Falls Tableware works, saw what Joslyn had sensed years before. Flatware offered the best chance for prosperity. Accordingly, the younger Noyes and his peers formulated plans to restructure the company around silverware, silverware better and more attractive than anything else available.

The “better” part boiled down to the technological problem of inventing a new high-end category of silver-plated cutlery. In 1895, the best-selling grade of silverware contained two ounces of silver per gross of teaspoons. Often marketed under the name Rogers, the product was made by Meriden Britannia and a number of other Connecticut firms. In 1900, the Oneida Community, Ltd. came up with a new plated ware containing about seven ounces of silver per gross of teaspoons—a higher content of silver than anything else in existence (P. B. Noyes 1958:189). They called it “Triple Plus,” then “Community Silver,” and finally, about 1914, “Community Plate.”

The more complicated “attractive” part would require more time. The initial step, upgrading the styling, was taken by Pierrepont Noyes, in consultation with factory die-makers in 1900. The result was the pattern “Avalon,” characterized by rococo curly-cues said to be better looking than anything available in Connecticut silverware. Avalon was
reinforced by two floral offerings—“Cereta” in 1901 and “Flower-de-Luce” in 1903—created by Oneida’s Grosvenor Allen and Chicago sculptor Julia Bracken. Since this suite of new patterns might fairly be called artistic, Oneida now laid claim to high aesthetic standards (P. B. Noyes 1958:186-92, 200; Allen 1994). “You can see for yourself,” Noyes would say flourishing a competitor’s spoon in a customer’s face, “just a lot of lumps and sausages thrown together by a diemaker! Now—look at this! The work of an artist!”

References
FOR TEN YEARS WE HAD FOUGHT the malaria fever at Wallingford. We were loath to give up and abandon the great scheme of founding a great Religio-Educational Publishing College on the sunny slope of Mt. Tom. We had sent our young men to Yale College. We had invested a hundred thousand dollars in creating the largest and finest water power in the valley of the Quinnipiac. The “Circular” had indeed gone back to Oneida, but only that we might have more room for developing the book publishing business. We had printed the “American Socialist,” a magnificent specimen of the printers’ art; we were starting a bindery; we were doing high-class catalogue work; and we were looking forward with bright hopes to the realization of J. H. N.’s life purpose of founding a Publishing House devoted to spreading the truths of Bible Communism and establishing the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. But it was not to be.

The “Dweller of the Threshold,” the malaria monster was implacable. One after another of our strongest workers had felt the blight of this pitiless invader and had left this beautiful home for a clime that knew no malaria. Our brilliant editor and father of the Wallingford family, George W. Noyes, had fallen before this disease. His sister, Charlotte A. Miller–Mother Miller of both Wallingford and Oneida had also left us, a victim of this insidious foe; and finally J. H. Noyes himself was attacked.

To meet this invisible enemy we had started a Turkish Bath sometime before, and with a strong faith in its efficacy, it did seem for a while to check the rush of new cases, and to help those afflicted with the endless chills and fever. But it did not cure, and we finally realized that we were steadily losing ground. In this emergency J. H. N. with his usual practical good sense said: “We have tried both faith and the Turkish Bath and they do not win the fight, we will now try Quinine.” This new departure did, indeed, check the ravages of the disease, but it kept everybody dosing with quinine and kindred things that left us but little better off while we remained on the ground.

In the fall of ’75 Mr. Noyes at last gave up the fight and brought on up to Oneida a bus-load of what he called “A refuse lot;” A lot indeed! Pale, anaemic, shivering with daily chills, half dead with quinine, but glad enough to escape anywhere away from that pest infected region, fair to the eye but deadly to the health.

In 1876, J. H. Noyes announced the appointment of his son, Dr. T. R. Noyes, his successor, as leader and head of the Oneida Community. Dr. Noyes had escaped the fever and ague epidemic at Wallingford and, undismayed by the dismal tales of the returning victims, proceeded to build a new dwelling at Wallingford in place of the old Allen House that had sheltered the Wallingford family for twenty-five years. In planning this work he had a devoted assistant in Charles A. Cragin who had but recently graduated from the Sheffield Scientific School at New Haven as a mechanical engineer.

The house was built, and a very attractive one both inside and outside it proved to be, and then in the minds of the leaders the question kept intruding itself “What shall we do to earn our living?” Lectures, classes and educational

Charles Cragin

Cont’d. page 6
generally was all right, but they cost something and gave us no income. The Job Printing business had disappeared. It never had paid a profit anyway, and our one hundred fifty horse power plant was practically idle, to say nothing of five thousand dollars annual loss in interest.

One morning, it must have been in the early summer of 1877, brother Charles was sitting on the bridge abutment looking at the rush of water through the waste gate that he had just raised to supply the Wallace tableware factory a quarter of a mile below with water until the flow of the river from the ponds above reached our Community Lake; he could hear the noisy crescendo of the factory as it started into its daily toil: the muffled crash of the “drops” mingled with the steady hum of the polishing wheels, all indicating that R. Wallace & Sons were making tableware at a great rate. Suddenly the thought came to him, “Why couldn’t we make spoons as well as Wallace?” Here was the power and the empty factory only waiting for someone to start manufacturing. Mr. Bassett, who was then out of a job, a significant fact that we remembered later, readily agreed to help plan the new spoon plant with the understanding that he would be hired as factory foreman. To this Charles promptly agreed without any special inquiry as to Bassett’s antecedents. We also remembered this later on, and the two pitched at once into the details of getting the cost of a plant equal to one thousand gross per week of ungraded tinned iron spoons.

By mid-July or thereabouts the first spoon was cut out of the “Oval Thread” pattern. This humble forerunner of our “N. F.” and “Community Silver” was given to one of our young women by Charles who made a hurried visit to the Oneida Community Home in September, ’77 and can be seen in our show case. Other patterns were made and the business started off with a pretty rosy outlook. Our first salesman in this line was W. R. Bristol who was hired October 15th, 1877.

We now come to the sad event of Charles’ death just at the onset of what proved to be our greatest venture in the manufacturing world.

Of an ardent temperament in whatever he undertook, Charles was reckless of his own health if the business emergencies seemed to demand it, and with him was emergencies pretty much all the time. Early in 1877 he was attacked by the fever and ague then so prevalent in Wallingford, but he refused to either give way to the disease or to take any rest from his day and night devotion to the new business. Only by saturating his system with quinine could he manage to keep the pace he had set for himself. At Christmas, ’77, he finally took to his bed with what soon proved to be brain fever and died on Jan. 2nd, 1878.

For a few weeks after Charles’ death things were in a sad way with the infant industry.
He had carried most of his contracts for material in his head and for a time more or less confusion and uncertainty prevailed. The position of Superintendent went begging for nearly a month. Finally M. H. Kinsley was appointed January 25th, 1878. Under his vigorous personality the business grew with great rapidity. One of Myron’s first moves was to buy out and get rid of H. W. Bassett who had proved a failure as a shop manager. It took just three weeks to come to an agreement and he was discharged February 15th, 1878. During ’78 and ’79 we made large quantities of these iron spoons of various patterns for the Meriden Britannia Company. But the fever and ague still crippled us and in 1880 we accepted an invitation from the Niagara Falls Hydraulic Power Company to locate on their premises at Niagara Falls, N. Y.

An agreement was made and signed September 9th, 1880, for leasing power, land and buildings, and one year more saw the Tableware business of Oneida Community at Wallingford, Conn., under the new name of Oneida Community, Limited, moved into a new factory on the banks of the great Niagara Gorge a short distance below the upper Suspension Bridge. Here we will leave the history of the “Iron Spoon” and its successors to those who took an active part in the long struggle through the “Carbon” Spoon; the rush into brass goods; the Wanzer lamp; the advent of the “N. F. 1877” line; the timid start into 18 per cent goods, and the final growth into Community Silver and the exhibition of a few patterns at the Pan American Exhibition in Buffalo in 1901, the beginning of a new Era in the Tableware business. The Iron Spoon had served its end.

Oneida Community price list, about 1879
"Brooklyn" pattern, Oneida Community, Ltd., 1881 (Davis and Deibel 1981:194)